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Experience report

Outcome harvesting for climate justice evaluation in the Brazilian Amazon

Colheita de resultados para avaliação de justiça climática na Amazônia brasileira

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Abstract

The article shares a practitioner's experience of Outcome Harvesting (OH)methodology for a movement-building and advocacy program evaluation in the context of climate justice narratives in the Brazilian Amazon. The article outlines the rationale for choosing OH, its application process in the specific program context, and its outcomes in terms of empowering local narratives on climate change impacts. The article discusses the advantages, limitations, and biases of Outcome Harvesting and the overarching realm of story-based methodologies and programmatic learning. Overall, this article contributes to the discussion on democratizing MEL processes within CSOs in Brazil and the Global South, aiming to enhance learning cycles, facilitate access to climate finance, and achieve intended outcomes systematically.

Keywords: Outcome harvesting. Story-based evaluation. Climate justice.

Resumo

O artigo compartilha a experiência de aplicação da metodologia Outcome Harvesting (OH) de avaliação de programa de construção de capacidades e advocacy no contexto de narrativas de justiça climática na Amazônia brasileira. O artigo descreve a justificativa para a escolha da metodologia,seu processo de aplicação no contexto específico e seus principais resultados em termos de empoderamento de narrativas locais sobre os impactos das mudanças climáticas. O artigo discute as vantagens, limitações e vieses do Outcome Harvesting dentre outras metodologias de story-based Evaluation. No geral, o artigo contribui para a discussão sobre a democratização dos processos de MEL dentro das OSCs no Brasil e no Sul Global, visando aprimorar os ciclos de aprendizagem, facilitar o acesso ao financiamento climático e atingir os resultados pretendidos sistematicamente.

Palavras-chave: Colheita de resultados. Avaliação baseada em histórias. Justiça climática.

Introduction

Civil society organizations (CSOs) share a perception that monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) processes are necessarily long, complex, and expensive. Small-size and grass-roots organizations have low access to MEL processes, especially in the context of programs with diffuse intended impacts, such as the evaluation of public goods, the construction of shared narratives, and advocacy initiatives.

Thousands of CSOs, community-based associations, and local movements are active in environmental and human development in the Amazon, some of which are thriving in protecting the forest and its people in remote locations. However, very few of those organizations can present those stories of change due to budget, staff and knowledge contraints. The process of registering, documenting, and critically assessing achieved outcomes remains even more challenging when it comes to reporting to an international donor. In this case, I share my experience as lead evaluator for a climate justice program worldwide, with an emphasis on my experience in the Brazilian Amazon.

The challenges those organizations and movements face are two-fold: first, how to register their achievements in a standard that is acknowledged and well-accepted by international donors, offering credibility on contributions and additionality. When semi-experimental impact measurement is not feasible, Amazonic CSOs face challenges in assimilating highly structured methodologies as top-down Theories of Change (ToC), especially in a rapidly changing environment, as the Brazilian Amazon during the Bolsonaro administration (2018-2022).

The second challenge lies in a more entrenched reality. As it has been widely acknowledged in the field of international evaluation, many authors have criticized that top-down international development monitoring programs tend to reinforce neocolonial ties that link access to climate finance conditional to the donor's agenda.

In a more profound sense, these challenges reinforce structural dependence, as the challenge to build local narratives on climate change impacts, undermining CSOs potential to protect rights of traditional people from the Amazon, including Indigenous, *quilombola*, and riverine communities.

This article aims to share the experience of the application of Outcome Harvesting (OH), a story-based, qualitative methodology used for mapping outcomes in the realms of advocacy evaluation.

One of the main reasons why the donor has selected OH, among other methodologies, is the program's focus on reframing the Global North- Global South power dynamics, seeking to unleash local narratives on climate change impacts on traditional communities in endangered biomes.

The methodology captured outcomes within several dozen CSOs operating in the Brazilian Amazon and over three hundred in the six other countries in which the program operates. The application of OH allowed an enriched engagement process and valuable lessons learned. Additionally, it turned the Theory of Change (ToC) revision process more tangible, resulting in clear-cut, bold programmatic recommendations. Results captured significant changes in environmental public policy, blocking pervasive environmental legislation, establishing climate policies in municipalities in the Amazon, and enabling the creation of local narratives that incorporate the Amazonic view of the current negative impacts of climate change and a native vision of climate justice.

Program context and power dynamics

The evaluated program is funded by international cooperation and is focused on capacity strengthening for co-creating alternative scaled climate solutions, agenda-setting, and movement in climate action through amplified storytelling and advocacy to make policy and financial flows responsive to locally shaped climate solutions. In the Amazon, one of the key outcomes was the creation of bottom-up narratives on climate change and climate justice.

The funder acknowledged that power dynamics at various levels are early on, as the program governance works in a complex, multi-layered structure. At the regional level, the program is steered by an alliance of three or more global or regionally structured international NGOs. In the second layer, coalitions were usually coordinated by a local NGO that convened a pool of (usually) smaller-size CSOs, grass-roots organizations, associations, or social movements.

In this context, disparities in power often stem from differences in capacity, where one organization serves as the knowledge provider and the other as the recipient. Historically, this was common in partnerships between organizations in high-income countries and those in low-income, lower-middle-income, and upper-middle-income countries. However, over recent decades, the capacities of organizations and movements in these latter countries have seen substantial growth.

The governance structure offered enormous challenges due to the heterogeneity of organizational geographies across Amazon states and regions, with contrasting levels of institutional maturity in general and accountability, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting in particular.

To address power dynamics and ensure access to climate finance for grassroots organizations, regional teams worked for an entire year to engage with local organizations and stimulate the formation of bottom-up coalitions. The program invested considerable effort to reach small and emerging organizations and collectives in isolated areas in the Amazon. The experience shows that it would be tough to include grassroots organizations if a proactive, intentional search effort were not put in place from the start. The methodological path of stimulating local organizations to form bottom-up coalitions paid off. The process was valuable in empowering CSOs to write their own narratives of climate justice.

Power asymmetry was addressed. Some organizations were critical of the level of effort demanded for compliance to donors. The challenges of meeting international donors' lengthy and time-consuming reporting templates were discussed, signaling local adaptation and limitations. Partners at multiple levels had a voice in the decision of what and when to monitor and report. This process led to a revision of the reporting process and renegotiation with funders. Brazil showcased a successful example of process optimization by consolidating reports, integrating products to locally adapted timeframes, and simplifying the reporting forms and methods. This effort has eased tensions and released valuable time for programmatic activities.

The mutual learning and understanding of the local context of CSOs in the Amazon – an incipient level of monitoring and evaluation capabilities, limited personnel and time, violence and threats against activists, and hardships to keep operations under the Bolsonaro administration played an essential role in allowing adaptations in the monitoring and evaluation structure, including the adaptation of the ToC.

After one year of engaging in eliciting the formation of coalitions, dividends paid off: coalitions allowed local organizations to join the program. They became active players in climate justice movements, activities, and narratives. Coalitions included unexpected alliances. Women, youth, Indigenous people and organizations, *quilombolas*, rural and urban, and family farm holders all joined to advocate for climate justice.

Outcome Harvest in the context of "story-based" methodologies

During my career as an evaluator, I sensed that there is a persisting confusion between *qualitative methodologies* and *qualitative data collection techniques*. Qualitative methodologies focus on delving into intricate subjects, such as attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors, aiming to grasp the underlying meaning and context of observed realities under study. To reach this goal, qualitative research employs *techniques* like interviews, observations, case studies, and focus groups to gather qualitative data. Those techniques are *means* to reveal nuanced realities that augment the interpretation of the social reality.

Qualitative *methodologies* describe how collected data should be processed, trimmed, validated, and made accessible to various audiences. Therefore, *qualitative techniques* are a means to an end – to operationalize methodologies and make them useful in the context of programmatic learning and evaluation.

Story-based methodologies are qualitative methodologies that focus on capturing changes in the environment or actors' behaviors *presumably* generated by a program or intervention. Common examples include Narrative Inquiry (Clandin and Rosiek, 2007), Narrative Assessment (van Wessel et al., 2021), and Outcome Harvesting (Wilson-Grau and Britt, 2013; Wilson-Grau, 2018).

I sustain that Outcome Harvesting is a valuable and simple story-based methodology to be applied in low-resource scenarios. Story-based evaluation can unveil the specifics of what influenced changes and the underlying reasons. They recount crucial aspects, such as the decision-making processes, strategies pursued, even in the face of uncertain consequences and the ever-evolving contextual dynamics. However, everything comes at a price: Story-based methodologies usually demand highly trained and skilled consultants, who are not always available in local settings.

Narrative Inquiry, for instance, is used to provide insights into stories as expressions of participants' values, world visions, and experiences, thus providing essential insights into the significance of intervention outcomes and how change is perceived in daily life. (Clandin and Rosiek, 2007). In turn, *Narrative Assessment* uses stories to elucidate the intricate workings of advocacy and its connection to the resulting outcomes. (van Wessel, 2018).

Following the guidebooks, Outcome Harvesting is a qualitative methodology used in program evaluation, especially in complex settings where it is difficult to predict in advance what the outcomes will be. This approach focuses on identifying, formulating, verifying, and making sense of outcomes, whether intended or unintended, positive or negative, achieved by an initiative. It has gained popularity in various fields for its ability to capture and evaluate outcomes in dynamic and unpredictable environments. (Wilson-Grau and Britt, 2013; Wilson-Grau, 2018).

Ricardo Wilson-Grau - an experienced evaluator of social change and international development – structured the methodology under the commission of the Ford Foundation (Wilson-Grau and Britt, 2013), influenced by Michael Quinn Patton, among others. Wilson-Grau found that Patton's *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* was handy in politically tense evaluations, situations where power dynamics largely influence evaluation findings and results. The methodology was so intuitive that Wilson-Grau enjoyed using a blank sheet of paper to start, with absolutely no preconceived structured form or requirements[1].

The methodological choice of "story-based" methodologies answers the need for international development and multilateral funds to consider the perspective of program participants, to see the world with their eyes and what is really important to them, what they consider to be valued in life, its *capabilities* settings, thus enriching a results-based evaluation approach, that can, for instance, focus on public programs goals towards local priorities.

In my view, this application of OH allowed for a more "landed" approach, more accessible to adapt to low-resource, quick-changing environments, as in the case of the local adaptation to voice climate justice. Therefore, it is worth presenting the methodology and local adaptation to help in future evaluations of climate justice, advocacy, and movement-building programs.

Differing expectations on program outcomes among donors and fund recipients were eroding the efficiency of international development aid. Critiques on the imposition of particular worldviews and specific funder agendas were generating friction among program participants and activists. The mindset that the evaluation had to serve participants' ("aid recipients") needs as the primary intended users of the evaluation was a vital watershed both for Patton and Wilson-Grau. (Wilson-Grau, 2018).

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[1] Learning from the Outcome Harvesting training by Carmen Wilson-Grau, held in 2021. The source of this information is her own memoire of his fathers' work.

In Outcome Harvesting, outcomes are understood as changes in the behavior, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of the people, groups, and organizations with whom a program works directly or indirectly. This method is beneficial in evaluating complex initiatives where cause-and-effect relationships are not straightforward, and it allows for the identification of contributions to these changes without claiming attribution. (Wilson-Grau, 2018).

The application of OH in the Amazon amplified the emergence of local narratives of climate change impacts. Local narratives incorporated feelings, perceptions, and observations of local stakeholders, allowing for a new narrative that places climate justice and neocolonialism at the center. In the Amazon, local communities that rely on agriculture already identify extreme rainfall concentration and expanded drought periods as perverse effects of climate change.

They also realized that they have not benefited from the material progress brought up by the fossil fuels economy. The creation of narratives allows causal networks to emerge – the change in climate is severely affecting harvest timing and crop output, causing food insecurity. Pervasive environmental law is moving against it, as more and more hectares of the Amazon are being deforested every day. All those elements prove a much more solid base for social action than the traditional North imagery of a polar bear floating on chunks of melting ice. Therefore, participants can relate interactions with program activities and donor support as ways of expanding their local understanding of their historic role as climate justice advocates, inverting the North-South power dynamics.

Methodology adaptation

Given the program's emphasis on outcomes that are often intangible or linked to 'soft power' elements like narrative shifts, campaigns, movement building, and advocacy, a qualitative approach was selected. Qualitative methodologies provide greater flexibility and depth compared to strictly quantitative tools and metrics, which can sometimes restrict the scope of research questions by focusing narrowly on quantifiable data. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the impacts and changes brought about by the program, especially in areas where traditional quantitative measures might not be as effective in capturing subtle yet significant outcomes.

Under this adaptation, the first step is to delimitate the scope and the focus on the evaluation, draft evaluative questions and investigation priorities, and then choose what critical information must be collected. A sketch structure would include the following elements:

- Title
- Name and date
- Reporting organization
- Outcome Description
- Contribution
- Significance
- Evidence
- Disclosure level

Descriptions should be clear, direct, and precise, informing what happened, when, and where the change occurred. The Contribution is the description of the activities and products that were delivered, leading to the reported outcome. It focuses on clearly illustrating the causal chain between the contribution and the outcome. The role of the significance level refers to how vital the achieved outcome was in the context of the program ToC.

Evidence should be documented materials from diverse sources that provide evidence on the description, contribution, and significance of the outcome harvested. The disclosure level is essential to protect participants from being exposed to foreign audiences, which is sometimes critical to protect activists or other classified information.

- Desired/Undesired

- Expected/Not expected

- Significance Scale

- Contribution Scale

After the outcomes are drafted, they are validated them with key informants, as stakeholders or participants, who play a critical role in reviewing, adding to, and modifying these draft outcomes, ensuring that they accurately reflect the program's impact.

The next crucial step involves substantiating these outcomes, where both internal and external experts are engaged to validate the outcomes, adding a layer of credibility and reliability. Once validated, these outcomes are organized into a database, and qualitative methods are employed to analyze them, aiming to answer specific evaluation questions thoroughly.

After outcomes were harvested, they were reviewed by the outcome harvest coordinator and inserted into a database. The outcome-harvesting team evaluated individual outcomes' significance levels by contrasting them with the ToC program. The database also classified outcomes according to fourteen country-level goals divided into the three program pillars.

A simple *counting method* was applied to measure adherence with the ToC. Although counting methodologies present severe mathematical limitations due to the incommensurability of outcomes (Atkinson, 2003), they can provide a raw measure of alignment with the ToC.

The final stage involves sharing the evaluation results with relevant stakeholders, emphasizing key insights, best practices, and recommendations derived from the analysis. This comprehensive approach ensures a participatory, inclusive, and thorough evaluation process, capturing a nuanced understanding of the program's impact.

Findings and recommendations

Despite challenges, the choice of OH was fortunate, capturing a few dozens of expected, unexpected, desired, and undesired results. Positive unexpected outcomes also happened, evidencing that unfolding context opportunities were captured. Those included blocking pervasive environmental law from being approved and the halting of new mega-infrastructure licensing projects with severe negative consequences for Amazon's biome.

The first noticeable finding was that harvested outcomes were concentrated under few program targets, the ones most related to diffuse results, as building narratives, campaigns, and innovative partnerships. Other important areas, such as advocacy at the federal level, linking the program with Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) enforcement, and most importantly, access to climate finance itself, were missing from the harvest.

As a result, recommendations were shared with participants to increase awareness of overall program efficacy to reach its goals. Organizational priorities should be renegotiated to capture more synergies among joint efforts. To achieve program results, new priorities addressing outcome gaps in the ToC should be prioritized. The activity planning for the coming years was also revised to identify high-impact opportunities by contrasting which activities have yielded tangible, essential results. The process of accountability adaptation and process simplification was valued and deemed crucial to reduce transaction costs.

The evaluation assessed missing links and leaps of faith in the program Theory of Change, providing adaptative management recommendations, as a reassessment of the effectiveness of capacity-building activities on enhancing access to climate finance, orienting the program to revise causal links and focus on gaps and opportunities. Moreover, efforts should be made to facilitate civil society organizations' access to climate finance by creating connections between donors and grassroots recipients and developing more accessible mechanisms for funding. On advocacy, while successful outcomes - campaigns, media actions, and *artivism* (art + activism) are vital in promoting local climate justice narratives, it's also significant to explore the context opportunities between those outcomes and broader program goals, rethinking

advocacy strategies in the context of Brazil's new political landscape under President Lula's administration from January 2023.

Biases and limitations

Outcome Harvesting cannot provide general population estimates, as there are no provisions to create sampling strategies. If the program requires drawing population estimates with confidence intervals, OH is not suitable. Still, critical outcomes can and should be complemented and triangulated with quantitative tools that are most capable of answering the evaluative questions.

Outcome Harvesting is also not focused on estimating individual organizations' additionality or quantifying change. As a "story-based" methodology, OH is not focused on isolating individual organizations' attribution on changes; it is not concerned with generating counterfactuals to assess program contribution. Even if selected outcomes can be "substantiated" with additional in-depth interviews with other stakeholders, the focus is quite distant from the semi-experimental notion of additionality. Instead, OH is effective in settings where traditional linear cause-and-effect models do not necessarily apply, such as in programs involving advocacy, policy change, or behavioral shifts. The method emphasizes flexibility, participatory approaches, and a deep understanding of the changes that a program or intervention has influenced. It is helpful for both planned and emergent outcomes, capturing the complexity and multifaceted nature of real-world interventions.

Outcome harvest results typically reflect the views of people engaged in the program. Therefore, there will inevitably be some level of bias, as with any research method. The critical factor, then, is to assess if the level of bias can be estimated and controlled at a level that does not jeopardize program reporting and learning.

The harvester is *par excellence*, a person that belongs to the social ecosystem that changed, where the outcome was produced, and invariably holds positionality in regard to this environment. Hence, impartiality is not really feasible, as harvesters were people working at CSOs engaged in the program. The closeness of the harvest presents the advantage of incorporating nuanced information that provides contexts for the outcome description and significance that could otherwise be unnoticed. On the other hand, since the harvester holds both relational and positional power both to program participants and from coalitions and larger organizations that are pressed to show concrete results, some augmentation bias (i.e., overclaiming) could be expected.

Contrary to expectations, augmentation bias was not detected. My assumption is that collective construction of the outcomes where several program players restrained potential attempts to augment stories and impacts. The possibility of substantiation of a sample of outcomes with in-depth interviews also played a role in avoiding the risks of augmentation and overreporting. Organizations were conscious of the limitations of the legitimacy of claiming outcomes achieved through coalitions as their own. In all cases, the outcome contribution narrative clearly mentioned all the coalitions and partners that contributed to the outcome. Finally, since the OH form included an authorization to publish the result to external audiences, organizations were very mindful to mention other organizations that jointly achieved the outcomes.

Underreporting, meaning that not all outcomes achieved were reported, was the most significant challenge in this process. The team is aware of underreporting because some outcomes celebrated in social media later on, or even detected by team members were not included in the harvest. At least three factors contributed to that: the context, the heterogeneity of organizations' experience in MEL and donor-recipient power dynamics.

The outcome harvesting process was carried out in the last critical months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when many organizations had shortfalls in meeting basic needs or were concerned about their close relatives and beneficiaries' basic needs. In addition to the pandemic, as the program spread over many states and regions in the Amazon with low access, interactions were online only. I believe that in-person, full-day activities would generate better

results in terms of number and quality of outcomes. The OH also reflected the final years of Bolsonaro's government, which were particularly daunting to environmental activists and indigenous populations that faced constant challenges and menaces.

Amidst this context, grass-roots limitations and shortfalls were amplified. Coalition leaders had, in general, a high level of understanding of monitoring and evaluation, and this heterogeneity proved to be a barrier since there was limited time to level skills. As a result, some organizations focused on describing activities and contributions rather than outcomes. Many causal links were missing, and hard assumptions were made, demanding additional efforts to make sense of outcomes.

Most organizations have a limited view that OH process was exclusively oriented towards donor reporting, despite of the program efforts to convince that the methodology is a general monitoring and reporting skill, that could be useful in other programs, indirectly helping to retain grants and with donor attraction. I believe that this was a consequence of the intrinsic donor-beneficiary power dynamics. It was challenging to bring about the element of collective learning and capacity-building, as organizations were jumping from report to report to meet administrative, legal, and financial obligations. I hope we can collect evidence that a part of the organizations incorporated OH methodology practice for self-empowerment, unleashing the power of local narratives to bolster climate finance.

Final remarks

The article reviewed the adaptation of Outcome Harvesting to a climate justice program with an emphasis on creating local narratives of climate change from the perspective of Amazonic CSOs. We learned that OH is adequate for unpredictable and rapidly changing contexts due to its light demand on data collection, as primary informants are organizations and collective participants in the program. It can be made accessible by training harvesters locally.

Story-based methodologies can be instrumental in advancing long-inherited south-north power dynamics by enabling CSOs to write their own stories of change. OH workshops proved to be valuable in helping organizations recover protagonism to tell their own history. A rich mosaic of experiences, knowledge exchanges, formation of networks, and new forms of collaboration emerged.

Local narratives on climate change's emerge, focusing on denouncing the immediate negative impacts of climate change, promoting a deeper level of connection with people's feelings and anxieties from today and not from a somewhat "intangible" dystopia, when the average temperature will be several degrees higher, which hardly translates into daily life events and challenges of people in the Amazon.

I hope this experience can contribute to the overall debate on how the MEL process can be democratized within CSOs in Brazil and the Global South through story-based evaluation, contributing to learning cycles, improved access to climate finance, and systematically achieving intended outcomes.

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