Learning from Complexity: The International Development Research Centre`s Experience with Outcome Mapping[a]

By Sarah Earl and Fred Carden

Abstract

This short article introduces the major concepts of Outcome Mapping and discusses the International Development Research Centre's experience in developing and implementing Outcome Mapping with northern and southern research organizations. It explores how the fundamental principles of Outcome Mapping relate to organizational learning principles and the challenges associated with applying theory to practice. It presents cases where planning, monitoring and evaluation processes have been used to encourage learning and improvement. It discusses the potential of Outcome Mapping as a tool for evaluative thinking to build learning into development programs.

Introduction

In its conceptual and practical work over the past few years, the Evaluation Unit of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has encountered four fundamental challenges in assessing and reporting on development impact which inhibit learning by development research organizations.[1] First, while development research organizations are under pressure to demonstrate that their programs result in significant and lasting changes in the well-being of large numbers of intended beneficiaries, such "impacts" are often the product of a confluence of events for which no single organization can realistically claim full credit. Therefore when an organization sets out to demonstrate that its programs are the "cause"of development improvements, they run into serious measurement difficulties. Second, in order for change to truly take root, ownership and control must have shifted from the external organization to exogenous actors and organizations. In other words, ideas and approaches have integrated with a range of events, activities, customs, laws, and policies within the local context and fall outside the purview of the external organization.   As noted by Terry Smutylo,

> *[A] paradox exists for external agencies under pressure to take credit for results at the "outcome" and "impact" stages; for it is at these stages where their influence, if they have been successful, is low and decreasing relative to that of other actors. Attribution for results which naturally goes to the dominant influences associated with those results, may empirically overlook antecedent project components. (Smutylo 2001: 5)*

Third, assessing long-term development impacts does not usually provide the kind of information and feedback that programs require to improve their performance. It provides "clueless feedback", which neither tells the organization about its specific contributions to development change, nor provides data on how to improve its efforts. (Smutylo 2001: 6) Fourth, the heavy emphasis on demonstrating the impact of programs has meant that the development of learning capacities within organizations themselves has been ignored.   Consequently, assessing development impacts, especially from the perspective of an external agency, is problematic both methodologically and in terms of the value of the findings for learning organizations. Nonetheless, many organizations continue to struggle to measure results far beyond the reach of their programs.[2]

To address this problem, IDRC has been working with a number of organizations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to develop and field-test a methodology called Outcome Mapping which takes account of the complexity of development processes and focuses explicitly on learning.[3] It establishes a vision of the human, social, and environmental betterment to which a program hopes to contribute and then focuses monitoring and evaluation on factors and actors within its sphere of influence. The richness of a program`s performance story is told using systematically collected qualitative data. Although outlining a complete case of a program's use of Outcome Mapping go beyond

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the scope of this short article, it will present how the fundamental principles of Outcome Mapping relate to organizational learning theory and discuss some of the challenges associated when applying theory to practice. Our experience with a number of applied development research programs has demonstrated that, despite the best intentions, learning does not happen naturally but it can be built into work practices through data collection and reflection processes. Outcome Mapping has proven to be a robust methodology to help program teams think holistically and strategically about the results they want to help bring about and to learn from their experiences.

This article presents Outcome Mapping as it pertains to development programs[4], but it can also be used, with adaptation, at the project or organizational levels. Regardless of the level, the fundamental "learning agenda" of Outcome Mapping remains the same -- to encourage evaluative thinking, participatory decision making, open sharing of successes and failures, and a willingness to engage in regular processes of thoughtful reflection and learning.

Outcome Mapping is based on three principles which we view as essential to encourage learning: 1) planning for and assessing both external results and internal performance; 2) the cyclical nature of planning, monitoring, and evaluation; and, 3) systematized self-assessment as a consciousness raising, consensus building, and empowerment tool for those working directly in a program. Each of these principles encourages a program to think holistically about its work in order to improve. These principles offer more generalizable lessons about encouraging learning and reflection that may be of value to others, whether or not they are using Outcome Mapping.

What is Outcome Mapping?

Maps are cognitive guides. They locate us, helping us figure out where we are now in relation to where we have been and where we are going.
<div style="text-align:right">Michael Quinn Patton (Earl et al. 2001 : Foreword)</div>

Outcome Mapping is an integrated planning, monitoring, and evaluation methodology. It takes a learning-based and use-driven view of evaluation guided by principles of participation and iterative learning. As a process, it is embedded with organizational learning principles and offers strategies for increasing a program`s ability to improve its performance. It fosters program learning by incorporating self-assessment and reflection processes throughout the planning, monitoring, and evaluation stages. It begins with a facilitated workshop to design a program and monitoring system, followed by a series of self-assessment workshops to monitor change and refine strategies, with periodic evaluation studies implemented as required.

In terms of results measurement, the originality of the methodology lies in its shift away from assessing the development impact of a program (e.g., poverty alleviation, reduced conflict), to a focus on behavioral change. Outcome Mapping is built on the premise that behavioural change is fundamental to sustainable development. Outcomes are defined as changes in the behaviour, relationships, activities and/or actions of the people, groups, and organizations with whom a program works directly. By using Outcome Mapping a program will not be claiming the achievement of development impacts but rather contributions to the achievement of outcomes. These outcomes, in turn, enhance the possibility of development impacts but the relationship is not necessarily one of direct cause and effect. This shift significantly alters the way a program understands its goals and assesses its performance and results. A program's contributions to development are planned and assessed based on its influence on the partners with whom it is working to effect change. Focusing monitoring and evaluation on changes in partners illustrates that, although a program can influence the achievement of outcomes, it cannot control them because ultimate responsibility for change rests with its partners. At its essence, development is accomplished through changes in the behaviour of people. This is the central concept of Outcome Mapping.

Planning For and Assessing External Results and Internal Performance

Outcome Mapping recognizes that development is a complex process that is made up of three parallel processes: first, the changes in the behaviors, actions, activities, and/or relationships of the people, groups, and organizations with whom a program works directly; second, the strategies that a program employs to encourage change in its partners; and third, the functioning of a program as an organizational unit. It builds an understanding not only of changes in the development setting in which a program is working, but also monitors and assesses its strategies and activities and whether the program is learning and adapting to new conditions. As such, Outcome Mapping assesses a program holistically and is based on the premise that a program needs to know not only about development results, but also about the processes by which they were attained, and about its internal effectiveness. It is through the combination of information and knowledge in these three areas that a program can build a better understanding of what it is achieving and how it can improve its levels of success.

Through assessing these three elements of a program, Outcome Mapping unites process and outcome evaluation. Therefore, Outcome Mapping is well suited to the complex functioning and long-term aspects of international development programs where outcomes are intermeshed and cannot be easily or usefully segregated from each other. By considering the myriad of actors and factors that contribute to development processes, it focuses on how a program facilitates change rather than on how it causes change and looks to assess contribution rather than attribution. Outcome Mapping encourages a program to link itself explicitly to processes of transformation and provides a program the information it requires in order to change along with its partners. Looking at how the

three elements interrelate and the context in which change occurs is essential to program learning. A program does not operate in isolation of other factors and actors therefore it cannot plan and assess as though it does. Systems thinking is not simple and straightforward, however, and requires a commitment to on-going reflection and analysis. As Peter Senge points out,

> *Seeing interrelationships, not things, and processes, not snapshots. Most of us have been conditioned throughout our lives to focus on things and to see the world in static images. This leads us to linear explanations of systemic phenomenon.* (Senge 1990: 15)

International development programs are particularly prone to excluding themselves from the system in which development change occurs. By separating themselves from development processes (i.e., something "we" help "them" accomplish) and explaining change using linear reasoning, programs lose the opportunity to explore their full potential as change agents. Outcome Mapping encourages a program to think of itself as part of the change process and to embrace complex reasoning and multiple logic systems. Raj Verma, of the Nagaland Empowerment of People Through Economic Development program, described the change in the program team's understanding of their role after using Outcome Mapping for a self-assessment of their first phase and the planning of their second phase. "The often repeated and echoing question in Outcome Mapping "what or who needs the change?" raised us from being providers of development, achieving outputs, to actually believing we were agents of change". Raj Verma.

The Cyclical Nature of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation

> *[T]he key differentiating factor in the success of an organization is not just the products and services, not just its technology or market share, but the organization's ability to elicit, harness, and focus the vast intellectual capital and goodwill resident in their members, employees and stakeholders. When that intellectual capital and goodwill get energized and focused, the organization becomes a powerful force for positive change in today's business and societal environments. (Kaner 1996: viii)*

Outcome Mapping is a process in which program staff engage; it is not a product that is provided to them.   In it, planning, monitoring, and evaluation are not discrete events but are designed to be cyclical with each feeding the other. Monitoring and evaluation considerations are introduced at the planning stage of a program and all program staff are encouraged to think evaluatively throughout the program cycle. That is, they are encouraged to think critically and ask questions about what they want to achieve and how they will know whether they are successful. The cyclical nature of planning, monitoring, and evaluation is important because development programs are a part of an open system. The context in which a program operates is continuously changing therefore it needs to

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be engaged in ongoing reflection and learning in order to remain relevant and appropriate. It is impossible to plan for all eventualities; therefore, a successful program is one that assesses and adapts to changing situations in an intelligent way based on thoughtful reflection. This idea resonates well with those engaged in international development programs because they have often experienced a well-thought out plan being thwarted by an unexpected "external factor" -- war, natural disaster, or a change in government -- and therefore are adept at thinking about how to work in complex environments.

A key challenge is that despite the enthusiasm for iterative learning and active engagement in the planning processes, many programs have difficulty putting in place an effective and consistent monitoring system. The problem does not appear to be a lack of commitment, sense of utility, or ownership of the process. Rather, it is time-constraint as other work demands take over and there is no time for group reflection. This poses a fundamental challenge for those supporting the incorporation of reflective practices in programs, because it is unavoidable that learning takes time. Furthermore, it cannot be outsourced! Outcome Mapping attempts to address this problem by encouraging program teams to be realistic about what they can manage in terms of monitoring and evaluation and to prioritize their information needs based on intended use. Prioritizing information needs is a difficult exercise because program staff genuinely want to know about many aspects of their work and tend to be overly ambitious about what is feasible given available resources. For example, a program supporting tobacco control research using Outcome Mapping to plan its second three year phase, chose to focus data collection on only one of its partners – researchers in developing countries. They felt that understanding changes in the researchers' behaviours (e.g. engaging marginalized groups in the research process, publishing articles in peer reviewed journals, influencing tobacco control policies and programs in their countries, etc.), and the factors and actors that contributed would best reflect the development outcomes this program was helping to bring about in this nascent field. Furthermore, the program team could use the data collected both to fulfill reporting requirements and to provide themselves with credible information and knowledge on which to improve their own activities and interventions.

Systematized Self-Assessment and Group Learning

Outcome Mapping is based on principles of participation and purposefully includes the program implementers in the design and data collection so as to encourage ownership and use of findings. It is premised on the belief that those engaged in the program can benefit from working as a group to systematically collect, analyze, and interpret data. It is intended as a consciousness raising, consensus building, and empowerment tool for those working directly in a development program. By actively engaging the team in the monitoring and evaluation process, Outcome Mapping empowers them to articulate, with accurate and reliable data, what they do to support outcomes and to harness group wisdom to improve their performance. In essence, it tries to implant the passion and

enthusiasm of programming into the assessment process. Recognizing this emotional element of learning is crucial to encouraging programs to engage in learning and reflection processes. As noted by Peter Senge, "People's natural impulse to learn is unleashed when they are engaged in an endeavor they consider worthy of their fullest commitment." (Senge 1990: 13) Outcome Mapping moves away from the notion that monitoring and evaluation are done to a program and instead actively engages the program team in the design of a monitoring framework and evaluation plan and promotes self-assessment. For example, a women's health and empowerment program in India is using Outcome Mapping to document and assess their own capacity development in the areas of gender, monitoring and evaluation, and applied research. They have identified behavioural markers that indicate progressive change and are using these to negotiate expectations amongst themselves, assess progress, and determine future strategies. Their self-assessment findings are not intended to be shared with others but will serve their own purposes as the program implementers.

Outcome Mapping is usually initiated through a participatory workshop led by an internal or external facilitator and then regular monitoring workshops are held in which the program team collects and analyses data in order to plan new, or refine existing, activities. Group learning is an essential component of the methodology because of its power to harness organizational knowledge. Michael Doyle states that the key to engendering learning in an organization is,

> *By creating psychologically safe and involving group environments where people can identify and solve problems, plan together, make collaborative decisions, resolve their own conflicts, trouble-shoot and self-manage as responsible adults. Facilitation enables the organization's teams, groups, and meeting to be much more productive. And the side benefits of facilitated or self-facilitated groups are terrific: empowerment, a deepening of personal commitment to decision and plans, increased organizational loyalty, and the building of esprit du corps. (Kaner 1996: viii)*

Outcome Mapping workshops are intended to be participatory and, wherever feasible, can involve the full range of stakeholders, including the partners in whom behavioural change is sought. Nonetheless, genuine participation is not simple (especially in the context of an externally funded development program) and hierarchy and politics can affect learning. A program using Outcome Mapping needs to carefully consider who should participate and ensure that participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences (positive and negative), engaging in self-assessment, and brainstorming how to move forward. In their desire to use participatory approaches, donor agencies sometimes ignore the power imbalances that necessarily exist between the organization funding a program and its beneficiaries. In order to create the optimum space for critical assessment and learning by a program team, participation needs to be considered in each instance and should be requested in a spirit of equitable collaboration acknowledging the

complexity of existing relationships.

Outcome Mapping has been developed in organizations where monitoring and evaluation are primarily intended to help program learning and improvement. An organizational priority on reflection has proven to be a perquisite for the successful integration of the learning processes associated with Outcome Mapping. When incentives and rewards have instead been directed towards accountability reporting, Outcome Mapping has proven to be an inappropriate approach to monitoring and evaluation. Outcome Mapping can only be as empowering, participatory and learning oriented as the organizational context in which it is implemented.

Conclusion

Outcome Mapping helps a program be specific about the actors it targets, the changes it expects to see, the strategies it employs, and its effectiveness as an organizational unit. It is particularly valuable for monitoring and evaluating development programs whose results and achievements cannot be understood with quantitative indicators alone but also require the deeper insights of a qualitative, contextualized story of the development process. Outcome Mapping will not help a program create generic lists of "lessons learned" or "best practices". Instead, it will help it weave the plots of the three elements related to its work: first, the changes in the behaviors, actions, activities, and/or relationships of the people, groups, and organizations with whom a program works directly; second, the strategies that a program employs to encourage change in its partners; and third, the internal effectiveness of a program. Outcome Mapping provides a program with processes to collect data and to reflect on the change processes in order to guide its actions knowledgeably.

Footnotes

1. IDRC is a public corporation created in 1970 by the Parliament of Canada. Its mandate is to initiate, encourage, support, and conduct research into the problems of the developing regions of the world and into the means for applying and adapting scientific, technical, and other knowledge to the economic and social advancement of those regions.

2. For a full discussion of problems associated with measuring attribution and impact see Terry Smutylo`s *Crouching Impact, Hidden Attribution: Overcoming Threats to Learning*

in Development Organizations Block Island Workshop on Cross Portfolio Learning 22-24 May 2001 at http://www.idrc.ca/evaluation/crouching_impact.pdf.

3. Dr. Barry Kibel, Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, was instrumental in introducing his Outcome Engineering approach and working closely with us to adapt some of these ideas to the development research context. Methodological collaboration with the West Africa Rural Foundation (FRAO) and testing with the Nagaland Empowerment of People Through Economic Development Project (NEPED) and the International Model Forest Network Secretariat (IMFNS) have greatly informed this adaptation process. Ongoing testing with a number of other initiatives continues to enrich the process.

4. For the purposes of this article, a program is defined as a group of related projects and activities with a specified set of resources (human, capital, and financial) directed to the achievement of a set of common goals within a specified period of time.

References

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