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USING OUTCOME HARVESTING TO ASSESS UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF MARKET SYSTEMS PROGRAMS

There is a growing interest in monitoring systemic change. However, a recent literature review ([Fowler & Dunn 2014](#)) found no consensus on how to define a system and no comprehensive framework for evaluating systemic change in market systems interventions. In response, the [BEAM Exchange](#) and the [Leveraging Economic Opportunities](#) (LEO) project identified a list of tools and approaches to monitor systemic change – and set about a series of trials to test these with market systems development programs.

Outcome Harvesting is a utilization-focused evaluation tool that scans the environment for the intended or unintended consequences of an intervention. In 2016, MarketShare Associates, through the LEO and BEAM Exchange projects, worked with the Alliances Lesser Caucuses Programme (ALCP) to apply Outcome Harvesting to identify and analyze unintended outcomes arising at least partially from ALCP's efforts to facilitate improvements in the Georgian dairy industry. The trial also evaluated the Outcome Harvesting approach as a technique for understanding systemic change related to market systems programs. The full report is available at www.microlinks.org/leo; a summary of the findings is presented here.

The Program

ALCP began in March 2014, building off of several smaller predecessor programs that began in 2008, and is set to run until February 2017. The program's goal is to contribute to poverty alleviation and the transition to a durable market economy for the livestock sector in three regions of Georgia. It aims to achieve this goal by creating sustainable changes in the dairy, beef, sheep and honey market systems for the ultimate equitable benefit of small, poor farmers, regardless of gender or ethnicity. The program employs a market systems development approach, which facilitates key market players in the relevant value chains to address constraints in core markets and supporting functions to exploit pro-poor opportunities for growth. Sustainability is built in through a minimum co-investment of 35% from the market players with whom it invests. In the dairy sector, ALCP had invested in the improvement of several cheese processors that collected milk from nearby households and supported the improvement of information services that helped dairy producers meet increasingly stringent food safety and hygiene standards. The analytical focus of the outcome harvest was on those households that had successfully met the standards and seen an increase in income from sales to cheese processors as a result in Kvemo Kartli, Georgia. We were interested to understand positive and negative unintentional outcomes that may have resulted, at least partly, from that success.

The Tool

Outcome Harvesting is a qualitative technique for gathering narratives about intended and unintended changes related to an intervention, then verifying and analyzing those changes. Its six steps include:

1. Designing the harvest, including clarifying the outcome question and identifying information sources, users and uses of the harvest;

2. Gathering data and drafting outcome descriptions;
3. Engaging change agents in formulating outcome descriptions, involving the knowledge of people with first-hand experience to refine outcome descriptions into objective statements that can be substantiated;
4. Substantiating the outcomes through an investigative process (that also surfaces other contributing factors to outcomes);
5. Analyzing and interpreting the findings; and
6. Supporting the use of the findings by the harvest's intended users.

As there is not necessarily anything systemic about outcomes identified during the Outcome Harvesting process, the research team incorporated a systemic lens to the analysis in Step 5.

Trial Findings

The research team found that Kvemo Kartli had witnessed a broad increase in prosperity with several fundamental changes to quality of life and the perception of opportunity. By looking at the timing and patterns of behavior associated with these changes, the evaluation confidently found that ALCP made a significant contribution to bringing them about. In the course of the analysis, we also explored numerous other contributing factors, including the employment generated by a large pipeline project and the government's construction of a new road from the Marneuli-Tbilisi highway to Tsalika town in Kvemo Kartli.

The analysis found four instances of systemic changes, or evidence of changes in underlying norms, among the outcomes. Two systemic changes – change in expectations of quality of life and changes in business diversity – do not easily fit into existing systemic change frameworks but are clearly important. Additionally, we noted a manifest change in women's agency over revenue from milk collection (contributing to a change in expectations of quality of life and women's self-esteem), as well as a change in institutional biases around milk collectors' solution-seeking versus extractive practices.

Uses and Limitations of Outcome Harvesting

Shifting to the tool of Outcome Harvesting, the evaluation yielded a fruitful trial with several useful points market systems practitioners should consider if attempting to apply it. Outcome Harvesting yields a collage of many images: a tapestry woven together by the testimony of the individuals, documents and other sources consulted during the process. In this case, we collected data through nearly 30 initial interviews, identified 16 broad outcome areas, then returned to the field to substantiate and identify multiple contributing factors for each outcome through targeted interviews with knowledgeable individuals. Outcome Harvesting turns out to be a very useful tool for helping mature programs understand the range of intended and unintended consequences to which their work has contributed. It is also a very useful tool for identifying (and evaluating the significance of) other contributing factors to observed outcomes.

However, Outcome Harvesting does raise questions about the degree to which findings are representative of an entire population: a quantitative follow-up survey could be useful for that purpose. It should probably not be the centerpiece of a program's monitoring and evaluation regime, but should be included as a regular scan of the environment, giving insights into broader trends. It should also probably be applied by more mature market systems programs, with a significant volume of both intended and unintended outcomes.

In sum, we found it to be quite relevant to collecting and analyzing intended and unintended outcomes for a market systems program. An additional step to assess the systemic nature of outcomes is required, as there is nothing inherently systemic about the process, itself. During the process, ALCP staff learned the methodology and intended to apply it in several other regions where its programming had already run for multiple years, lending weight to the idea that it is not so technically challenging as to require on-going expert support. For more details on the methodology, itself, see Wilson-Grau and Britt’s “Outcome Harvesting” (Ford Foundation, 2012).

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