Outcome harvesting as an adaptive evaluation methodology for evidence-based policy making in complex governance environments: lessons from cee, caucasus, and beyond

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Abstract: Traditional evaluation methodologies often fall short in capturing the dynamic nature of policy outcomes in complex governance contexts. This paper introduces Outcome Harvesting (OH) as an evaluation methodology with particular relevance for Central and Eastern Europe including South Caucaus, Central Asia and beyond-around the globe, regions experiencing rapid institutional reforms and evolving governance systems.

Countries across the region face common evaluation challenges: political and institutional changes that alter policy priorities during implementation, weak or evolving monitoring systems lacking baseline data, reform initiatives operating amid organizational transitions, and limited evaluation capacity. Traditional results-based frameworks, designed for stable contexts with mature data infrastructures, often prove inadequate when complexity and change are the norm. Outcome Harvesting represents a paradigm shift from linear frameworks to learning-oriented approaches that acknowledge complexity and capture unintended outcomes. Unlike conventional methods relying on predetermined indicators and baseline data, OH works backward from outcomes to identify what changed and how interventions contributed. This proves especially valuable where generating credible evidence for policy learning is critical yet constrained.

Drawing on implementation experiences in the South Caucasus region, supplemented by comparative insights from humanitarian and development sectors, this paper examines how OH adapts to the institutional, political, and capacity constraints common across the region.

The paper addresses three questions: First, how does OH address evaluation challenges in contexts experiencing institutional reforms or evolving policy priorities? Second, what makes OH particularly suited (or unsuited) for complex governance environments where policy directions may shift? Third, what organizational and technical capacities are required for effective OH implementation?

In particular, the paper covers OH's applicability across diverse governance contexts. Where evaluation systems face resource constraints, data gaps, or rapidly changing priorities, OH's emphasis on stakeholder engagement and evidence-based outcome documentation offers practical advantages. The analysis explores how OH's participatory nature can strengthen institutional learning and policy adaptation, while examining implementation challenges related to maintaining methodological rigor and managing stakeholder expectations. Key findings reveal OH proves valuable where institutional memory is limited, monitoring systems are developing, or organizational changes disrupt data collection. However, successful implementation requires securing sustained institutional commitment, building local evaluation capacity with constrained resources, managing stakeholder expectations where participatory approaches may be unfamiliar, and ensuring findings inform organizational learning rather than merely satisfying reporting requirements.

The paper demonstrates how OH's flexibility makes it adaptable to various institutional contexts while acknowledging this flexibility requires strong methodological discipline to maintain credibility. The research identifies practical strategies for balancing methodological rigor with resource realities, engaging diverse stakeholders effectively, and translating evaluation findings into actionable policy insights.