

Outcome Mapping: a realistic alternative for planning, monitoring and evaluation

By Harry Jones and Simon Hearn

Outcome Mapping (OM) is an approach to planning, monitoring, and evaluating social change initiatives developed by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada (Earl et al., 2001). At a practical level, OM is a set of tools and guidelines that steer project or programme teams through an iterative process to identify their desired change and to work collaboratively to bring it about. Results are measured by the changes in behaviour, actions and relationships of those individuals, groups or organisations with whom the initiative is working directly and seeking to influence (Smutylo, 2005).

Despite the dominance of the logical framework approach (LFA) in international development for structuring the planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME) of projects and programmes, it has significant limitations (Bakewell and Garbutt, 2005). There are a growing number of alternatives, with 24 tools and methods summarised in a recent report by ACT Development alone, and more listed by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and the Barefoot Guide to working with organisations and social change. Many could be more appropriate than LFA approaches in many development and social change situations.

This paper reviews OM principles to guide donors considering support for projects using OM, and other decision-makers seeking methods to improve the effectiveness of aid policies and practice. It asks:

1. What makes OM unique and of value?
2. For which programmes, projects, contexts and change processes is it most useful?
3. How can donors facilitate its use, and what are the potential barriers?

This paper is based on research from case studies of OM application in Ecuador, Kenya, Indonesia, Madagascar, Zimbabwe and the UK. These cases

represent applications of OM in varying contexts, for various purposes and to various extents. Each study included semi-structured telephone interviews, reviews of project documents and other literature, and feedback and debate with project teams. Practitioner discussions hosted by the Outcome Mapping Learning Community and literature reviews complemented the analysis.

Choosing the appropriate PME framework

The usefulness of planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME) frameworks depends on how and where they are used in practice and their characteristics and values can shape practice, depending on the extent to which they are institutionalised. Because different tools are based on different principles and assumptions about the change process and the role of the programme in generating change, the role of knowledge and information in these processes can differ.

The choice of PME framework for a project or programme can influence the values and practices embedded within the project or programme, so the choice requires an explicit focus on what is needed in the specific context. The decision matters, as it may influence whether or not a project or programme is effective.

The principles of Outcome Mapping

Interviews with OM practitioners identified four guiding principles that underpin the Outcome Mapping framework:

1. Actor-centred development and behaviour change:

OM recognises that people and organisations drive change processes. The problem to be tackled, the aims of the project and the indicators of success are defined in terms of changes in behaviour of these actors. Understanding and influencing change requires engaging with these actors, their role, their relationships, their mindsets and motivations. This is crucial, as they have different visions and perceptions of change. OM is sensitive to this, allowing dif-

ferent actors to explore their own perspectives.

2. **Continuous learning and flexibility:** OM emphasises that the most effective planning, monitoring and evaluation activities are cyclical, iterative and reflexive. They aim to foster learning about the actors, contexts and challenges involved in influencing social change. OM enables this learning to feed back into adaptations to the project as it proceeds, and can be used by project partners to influence their actions.
3. **Participation and accountability:** By involving stakeholders and partners in the PME process and emphasising reflection on relationships and responsibilities, participation incorporates valuable perspectives and fosters a two-way accountability that is often missing in frameworks oriented towards upward accountability. It could help agencies work towards commitments in the Paris Declaration on mutual accountability and ownership.
4. **Non-linearity and contribution, not attribution and control:** With OM, processes of transformation and change are owned collectively; they are not the result of a causal chain beginning with ‘inputs’ and controlled by donors, but of a complex web of interactions between different actors, forces and trends. To produce sustainable changes, projects should contribute to and influence these processes of social change, rather than focusing on controlling specific outcomes and claiming attribution. A more honest approach can generate a more meaningful picture of the actual contribution and role of a project/programme in achieving results.

Adopting OM will not embed these principles into practice automatically. It provides a framework that allows project and programme staff to systematise discussions around these principles and tools to incorporate these perspectives in practice. Staff should be thinking about such principles from the outset or need to be persuaded to do so as part of the implementation effort.

When does Outcome Mapping work best?

The principles and assumptions underpinning OM make it more suitable in some contexts and purposes than others. There needs to be a certain fit between principles and context, and between the strengths of OM and the requirements of different areas of development. Decision-makers need to assess this fit on a case-by-case basis, starting from an understanding of where OM could add value. Our research has highlighted several contexts where OM’s strengths come to the fore.

When working in partnership. OM helps to clarify the roles of different stakeholders – beneficiaries, partners, strategic allies or implementers – letting them explore the most relevant (and sustainable) set of activities on which to focus. OM is suited to ensuring that projects and programmes work through local partners and institu-

tions, rather than through parallel structures. OM fosters greater ownership and commitment, and enables more sustainable change by unifying the visions and coordinating the work of multiple actors. One example is the Secondary Teacher Training Environmental Education Programme (St²eep) programme in Zimbabwe, where OM has helped to restructure the programme by shifting the emphasis to working through college administrations, ministries of education and universities. The open questioning of donor representatives in monitoring meetings helped to balance skewed power relations. The Eastern Indonesia Knowledge Exchange (BaKTI) project found that OM helped to justify and mitigate the risks of a partner-centred approach to managing the project and helped to embed cultural sensitivity into the project, ensuring that the culture of the beneficiaries had the same weight as that of the donors.

When building capacity. OM is ideal for projects where capacity building is (or should be) an important aspect. Capacity building is a complex process, and it can be difficult to produce meaningful monitoring data. By presenting the overarching objective as a series of progressive behaviour changes of the actors involved, programme staff can track progress towards the goal and learn as they work. For example, the Vredeseilanden Country Office (VECO) Indonesia project used OM to systematise the way it built the capacity of local NGOs, farmer organisations and networks to promote sustainable agriculture. In the Rural Development Support (SAHA) project in Madagascar, OM was used to facilitate a shift in focus from managing grants to building partnerships and capacities.

When a deeper understanding of social factors is critical. OM is particularly useful where the focus is on human-centred development and the actors involved, rather than technical and scientific factors. For example, in the Ceja Andina project on natural resource management in Ecuador, the framework facilitated a shift in mindset and ways of working for a team comprised largely of natural scientists. It helped them understand the human dimensions of resource use and orient their programme towards their improvement.

When promoting knowledge and influencing policy. OM was designed initially to increase understanding of the influence of research, and its logic suits changes at the level of knowledge, ideas and decision-making. In this type of work, changes are a long way ‘upstream’ from ground-level impacts on poverty, and they involve an interactive and iterative causality rather than a linear logic. By focusing on people’s behaviour, mindsets, attitudes, relationships, decisions and actions, the framework is naturally sensitive to crucial aspects of these problems and processes. In 2006 the Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme at ODI adopted elements of OM to monitor such processes of influence. International Livestock Research Institute’s (ILRI’s) experience of using OM in a research context

in Kenya also demonstrates its value in measuring the success of research outputs that had relied previously on quantitative analyses to measure economic impacts. Researchers could demonstrate success in terms of downstream outcomes – observable behaviour changes – which, rather than glossing over complexity, disentangled the processes that generated impact level changes.

When tackling complex problems. OM is also well suited to guide projects facing complex problems: where there are a number of inter-connected issues, where progress relies on the interactions of many different actors, and where causality and future changes are hard to forecast. By integrating learning and reflection, and highlighting the need for projects to be flexible and adapt to lessons learned as they go along, the framework puts in place processes to help address such large challenges. For example, the Ceja Andina project used OM to catalyse a process of collective learning by bringing different actors together on a regular basis. This helped to harness local creativity and interest. The application of OM by the BaKTI project, in a context where stakeholders tend to skate over problems, gave the project team the space to be explicit about their desired outcomes.

To embed reflection and dialogue. OM was developed in response to the increasing need for greater learning and reflection within development programmes – a need that was not met through existing PME approaches. It encourages the building of the space that project teams and partners need to reflect on their progress. While this is always valuable, there are times when it is the top priority. In these cases, OM can be a very powerful communication tool, ensuring better knowledge management and understanding among team members and partners. For example, the SAHA programme found that OM built natural feedback mechanisms into everyday work, rather than imposing additional practices. Reflection, exchange, teamwork and ‘questioning’ became part of the culture of the programme rather than a set of procedures. Another example is the BaKTI programme in Indonesia where staff began to integrate monitoring activities into their day-to-day work and could, therefore, chart their progress in relation to their outcomes on a daily basis, adjusting if necessary.

How to support Outcome Mapping

The introduction of any new management tool is always tricky, and this holds true for OM. Among the many factors that influence how it is taken up by project staff and integrated with activities, the case studies found that the most crucial is the support and buy-in of donors and senior management. The following are other factors that must be considered by those supporting the application of OM.

Focus on timing. Timing is critical when introduc-

ing OM practices. In many of the case studies, the introduction of the framework coincided with strategic reviews or programme planning processes. In addition, the uptake of OM was facilitated where it coincided with rising awareness among project staff of the need to adopt a new approach. Learning new concepts and developing an OM framework takes time, but it is time well spent. The process is more intensive because it requires meaningful participation, and it aims to provide knowledge that is of direct relevance to the running of the programme, but this is time well spent, especially when contrasted with common experiences of the LFA where PME activities relate to writing reports for donors, rather than the real work of the project (Bakewell and Garbutt, 2005).

Foster capacities and mindsets. Adopting OM often means getting to grips with new concepts, approaches and terminology. This can be challenging where staff are comfortable with other tools (e.g. LFA). A shift in mindset is often required. Carrying out self-evaluation, for example, may go against normal practice. It can also mean collecting and valuing a different kind of knowledge, and a different dimension of change, in the recognition that factors that are further ‘upstream’ than traditional quantitative data may be able to capture. The case studies show that the introduction of OM is eased when facilitated by individuals with practical experience of the methodology.

Use OM to work together. Because OM is flexible and can be applied in many ways in a given context, it is often necessary for users of the methodology to share experience and learn together. This is built partly into the methodology in the participatory and reflective spaces, but it can also encourage a community of practice for those carrying out the work so that they can collaborate to develop tools, establish a common language and set up common practices. Connecting with other OM users is also beneficial and networking on a global scale, through initiatives such as the Outcome Mapping Learning Community, should be encouraged.

Manage shifts in organisational culture. The history of PME in an organisation shapes the uptake of new approaches. Where staff are familiar with LFA, it may take time to explain the new approach, but an existing culture of M&E and organisational learning can help the uptake of OM. In cases where there is little experience of PME frameworks, this ‘blank slate’ can be an opportunity to incorporate OM. Where there is dissatisfaction with the log frame, staff may be willing to adopt new approaches. More generally, the willingness of decision-makers to allow experimentation with new tools and approaches is important, and may be limited where institutional demands restrict projects, such as finance departments demanding particular data.

Apply OM flexibly. OM is a flexible approach, which is reflected in the variety of ways in which it has been applied. It is important to be aware of this flexibility from

the outset to ensure that OM does not become a burden, but complements existing practices, particularly those that are established or mandatory. Even where there are institutional barriers to applying OM, there are still ways to incorporate elements of the approach. OM has been adapted to fit a wide variety of contexts, including situations where existing frameworks, such as the log frame, already exist (as in the case study on VECO Indonesia and in Ambrose and Roduner (2009)), or where the specific tools and language of OM cannot be used explicitly, or where OM is required only for a small part or stage of a project or programme.

Conclusion

Adopting OM for appropriate projects could help development agencies increase their effectiveness. OM can assist a project or programme in adopting an actor-centred, learning approach to development problems, helping projects work towards agency commitments to principles in the Paris Declaration such as mutual accountability and ownership. There is also evidence that OM will help agencies and organisations meet commitments to managing for results:

- First, OM is more suited to with projects and programmes in areas that require capacity building work, which involve knowledge and decision-making processes, or where technical concerns can obscure the crucial human dimensions of development challenges. It is more likely to provide an environment conducive to beneficial results in these areas.
- More generally, OM is well-suited to areas involving complex change processes. In these contexts, results-based management frameworks, or manage-

ment by objectives, has been shown to be counter-productive, hindering projects and programmes by focusing PME activities too narrowly, and demanding higher levels of certainty in planning than is possible in reality (Bakewell and Garbutt, 2005; Ramalingam and Jones, 2008). This hinders innovative approaches, learning and flexibility – a strong marker for failure in complex situations.

To facilitate the uptake of OM, donors need to focus on timing, capacities, and organisational imperatives. In contexts where decision-makers find it hard to integrate OM, it is important that they advocate for its core principles to achieve the required shift in mindset. They should also look for opportunities to apply aspects of OM within existing constraints. These could include integration with log frames (Ambrose and Roduner, 2009), or using elements of the framework, such as structuring planning discussions around partners and challenges to the outcomes. Shifting PME to a more learning-oriented mode requires the donor to adopt a more realistic view of the nature of change and what is possible in the project being funded, and dispense with the idea of ‘controlling’ the change processes.

Above all, attempts to implement OM must be underpinned by real trust between the donor and project implementers and partners – a test of the much-vaunted principles of accountability and ownership.

Written by ODI Research Officers Harry Jones (h.jones@odi.org.uk) and Simon Hearn (s.hearn@odi.org.uk). This paper is an output of the Outcome Mapping Learning Community, coordinated by ODI and funded by the International Development Research Centre.

References and useful resources

References

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- Earl, S., Carden, F. and Smutylo, T. (2001) Outcome Mapping: Building Learning and Reflection into Development Programs, Ottawa: IDRC.
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- Smutylo, T. (2005) Outcome mapping: A method for tracking behavioural changes in development programs, ILAC Brief 7.

Case studies from the Outcome Mapping Learning Community:

- Ecuador: Ceja Andina – <http://bit.ly/EC-case>
- Indonesia: VECO Indonesia – <http://bit.ly/IS-case>
- Indonesia (Eastern): BaKTI – <http://bit.ly/BaKTI-case>
- Kenya: ILRI – <http://bit.ly/KN-case>
- Madagascar: SAHA – <http://bit.ly/MS-case>
- UK: RAPID Strategy 2005/06 – <http://bit.ly/UK-case>
- Zimbabwe: StzEEP Zimbabwe – <http://bit.ly/ZB-case>

Other useful resources:

- A guide to assessing our contribution to change, ACT Development, 2009 (<http://bit.ly/ACTguide>).
- The Barefoot Guide to working with organisations and social change. The Barefoot Collective, 2009 (<http://bit.ly/bfguide>).
- Tools and methods for M&E. Institutional Learning and Change Initiative, 2008 (<http://bit.ly/ILACtools>).

