20 years of
Outcome Mapping
Evolving practices for
transformative change

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OutcomeMapping
LEARNING COMMUNITY

SUMMARY

To mark 20 years of Outcome Mapping, this paper explores the core principles and concepts that are foundational to using the approach. It also presents a set of guiding practices to support transformative change.

Three principles inherent in Outcome Mapping

1. Social, policy & systems changes depend on changes in human behaviour
2. People contribute to their own wellbeing
3. Sustained improvements in people's lives or environments depend on relationships

Four core concepts necessary for effective use of Outcome Mapping

1. Outcomes understood as changes in behaviour
2. Spheres of influence
3. Contributions to outcomes, not attribution
4. Setting actor-centred boundaries

Five guiding practices for using Outcome Mapping to support transformational change

1. Facilitate inclusive & equity-focused participatory change processes
2. Be accountable to learning at individual, team and organisational levels
3. Grow a complex adaptive system view, & embrace uncertainty & experimentation
4. Commit to iterative, collective sense-making with inductive & data driven reasoning
5. Lead from context & combine Outcome Mapping with other approaches as needed.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

2021 marks 20 years since the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) published *Outcome Mapping: Building learning and reflection into development programs* (Earl et al, 2001). Outcome Mapping (OM) remains an approach that is both innovative and supports innovation. Globally, practitioners continue to adapt and advance the approach to improve human and ecological wellbeing.

Outcome Mapping was first incubated by research organisations in West Africa and South-Asia in partnership with IDRC. It was developed by IDRC as an open-source method and toolkit for design, learning and evaluation practitioners and change makers around the world to use and adapt. In 2006, an online Outcome Mapping Learning Community of practice was formed, also with initial support from IDRC. Its purpose is to facilitate learning and knowledge sharing to help community members to collectively define and contribute to the changes they want to see in the world. Today, our diverse community has become an independent community-governed network with nearly 2000 members, from 127 countries, working on difficult social, political, and environmental problems.

In 2012, the Outcome Mapping Learning Community published *10 years of Outcome Mapping adaptations and support* (Smith et al, 2012). The publication presented vignettes of how and where Outcome Mapping was being used, and how the practice had evolved. Now, to mark 20 years of Outcome Mapping, this paper explores some of the core principles and concepts that are foundational to using the approach.

This paper reflects on the Outcome Mapping Learning Community journey. The community's Stewards present the approach's guiding practices that demonstrate how it has both evolved and can remain relevant for the world that is needed in the next decade and beyond. In fact, there may be even more appetite and opportunity for the approach now as the need for collaboration and collective action to address systemic problems (poverty, inequality, racism, the global climate crisis, migration, and the Covid-19 pandemic) becomes more urgent.

This is because Outcome Mapping gives change makers a practical way to look at how the world works; a set of categories to identify the elements and the relationships between them in all systems. The approach is a way to organise, partner and move forward in complex contexts. Our experiences have shown us that to create deep and sustainable societal transformation, individuals and groups need to act and interact together differently. By using the OM approach, change makers become increasingly aware of the dynamic contexts, people, organisations, institutions, and boundaries of their interventions.

Outcome Mapping practices for advancing transformative change are explored throughout this paper. Transformative change can be defined as making specific choices that are guided by considerations of gender, equity, anti-racism, anti-oppression, inclusion and by addressing power imbalances. It is focused on building ally relationships with people and groups experiencing barriers. Transformative change requires inclusive teams and organisations and growing collaborative initiatives that seek to disrupt the status quo to influence social and environmental wellbeing. Even within our programmes' or initiatives' direct spheres of influence, Outcome Mapping guides change makers to make clear choices about who to include and with whom to work.

> The Outcome Mapping approach can help to understand complex change in practical ways. The organising framework can be adapted and combined with other aligned methods as directed by the evolving system contexts, purposes and needs.

Outcome Mapping helps change makers to understand and navigate complexity and human behaviours and how they interact with social, economic, and ecological systems. When referring to *systems* and *complexity,* we adopt the definitions from the Canadian social innovation leader, Brenda Zimmerman. Brenda defines systems as 'a great number of connections between a wide variety of elements or interdependent things', and complexity science as 'the study of complex adaptive systems, and the patterns of relationships between the parts, how they are sustained, how they self-organise and how outcomes emerge' (Zimmerman et al, 1998, p.5).

In 20 years, the practice of Outcome Mapping has moved beyond its international development roots and is recognised as an innovative approach that can enhance organisational learning and adaptive management. On every continent, you can find core concepts of the approach used by publicly funded agencies, not-for-profit organisations and networks, as well as governments.

Outcome Mapping has inspired new methods, such as Outcome Harvesting[1], and continues to be adapted and adopted in creative combinations with a growing number of complexity and system change approaches[2].

Outcome Mapping is not practiced as it was 10 or 15 years ago, and we will explore this further in this paper. Today, it is generally understood both as an approach to understanding change in complex systems, and as a practical framework for navigating complex change using all or some of the 12-steps for design, monitoring and evaluation. Outcome Mapping is a way of shifting our thinking and practices, with many nuanced benefits, from increased trust among partners, to setting more time aside to collectively analyse and learn about the system using rigorous trustworthy data and collective sense-making.

By exploring Outcome Mapping at 20 years old, and by surfacing some of the guiding practices that make the approach particularly useful to advance transformative change, we hope to increase common ground across systems change evaluation practitioners. Outcome Mapping is part of a growing family of systems change and adaptive management approaches.

With this paper, the Outcome Mapping Learning Community Stewards seek to expand the opportunities for learning, collaboration, and innovation with a diversity of change makers and evaluation practitioners around the world.
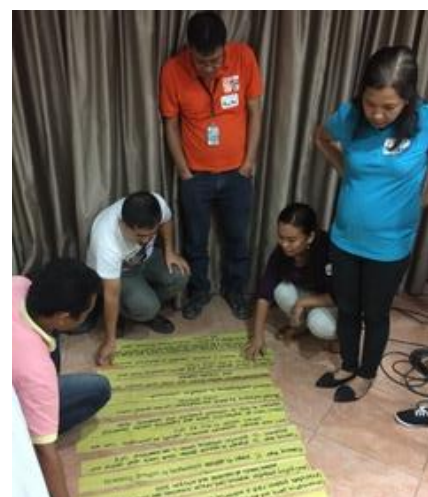
A group in the Philippines developing Progress Markers for smallholder women farmers in 2017

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[1] For more on Outcome Harvesting & Outcome Mapping, see: www.outcomemapping.ca/outcome-harvesting

[2] Examples include: Hargreaves et al, 2010 Hummelbrunner & Jones, 2013

Outcome Mapping's inherent theory of change

The Outcome Mapping approach is grounded in a particular way of thinking about social and institutional change. In essence, Outcome Mapping recognises that all change is about human behaviour. Change makers influence systems by working with the people in the system, paying attention to the relationships, and participating in mutual and continuous learning and collaboration.

> "The Outcome Mapping approach comes with an organising framework, steps and tools that helps you to see and categorise what is going on in the context where you are working. The steps and tools help you ask questions and organise the answers. It helps you surface assumptions in the system: Who influences whom? And who has to have support from what? As you are using the steps and making choices about the system actors to collaborate with and the strategies, and how you will engage with the actors, it turns into your theory of change." (Terry Smutylo, January 2021)

Outcome Mapping's framework includes seven intentional design steps and five monitoring and evaluation steps with tools that integrate learning into the way change makers implement their work. Just as the sub-title to the original manual suggests - *building learning and reflection into development programs*.

It is easy to focus on Outcome Mapping as just a set of steps and tools, however the use of its framework and choice of tools is completely driven by context and purpose and is not a fixed recipe to follow. Outcome Mapping steps are meant to be dynamic and continuously adapted through learning. Outcome Mapping practice adaptations have been consistently shared and expanded over the years through the Outcome Mapping Learning Community.

What is essential for adopting Outcome Mapping is to align with the underlying way of thinking about change through the lens of human behaviour. We will explore this further through the principles built into its inherent theory of change and the four core concepts that clearly define the approach. Without these, the steps and tools are blunt instruments, which can be unwieldy at best, and inappropriately used at worst.

Principles in Outcome Mapping

Outcome Mapping embeds a way of understanding how change happens and how interventions can support, influence or contribute to those changes, whether you are trying to change people's wellbeing, the institutions that govern them or the systems in which they live and work. The three principles below are not unique to Outcome Mapping, but they are essential in any application of the approach. If you are using Outcome Mapping, then you inherit these principles.

1. **Social, policy and systems changes depend on changes in human behaviour**

If our interventions are to contribute to transformative changes, then those interventions must consider changes in actions and relationships (human behaviours) through the eyes and experiences of all participants. Outcome Mapping frames a theory of change from diverse perspectives, asking whose behaviour needs to change, or has changed, and in what ways.

2. **People contribute to their own wellbeing**

Sustainable change is built by people and their self-driven, self-determined and on-going actions and interactions. This means for people's lives to improve, a diversity of people should be involved in processes to make things better. People need to have ideas and visions for what better can look like. Most importantly, they need to have access to power, knowledge and resources to participate in the actions that affect them and the systems in which they live and work. This is the basis for many participatory, empowerment[3] and gender-transformative[4] approaches, in which Outcome Mapping is firmly rooted.

A young man in Kenya proudly shows off 'policy documents' painted by his group of street youth where they sleep. New policies (rules groups make for themselves) are outcomes.

3. **Sustained improvements in people's lives or environments depend on relationships between diverse people, groups, and institutions (the actors) in the systems in which they live and interact**

There is an essential imbalance in power, knowledge, and resources of the actors in any system. They will have different perspectives, motivations, incentives, and capacities. Efforts aimed at sustainable improvements must pay attention to the relationships between actors. They must facilitate sharing power as needed and provide spaces for inclusion, integration, and respectful and evolving relationships.

Core concepts of Outcome Mapping

Connected with the three principles are four core concepts that define the Outcome Mapping approach. Understanding these concepts is essential for practicing the approach.

1. **Outcomes understood as changes in behaviour**

Outcome Mapping defines outcomes as the behaviour changes of the people, groups or organisations within our sphere of influence. That is what the design, monitoring and evaluation of programmes using Outcome Mapping is focused on. In Outcome Mapping, questions of how a

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[3] For more on empowerment approaches, see Fetterman et al 2017

[4] For more on OM and gender & equity, see Zaveri 2017

system is, or is not, changing are answered in terms of the actions, activities, or relationships of the main social actors, also known in Outcome Mapping as Boundary Partners.[5]

2. Spheres of influence

Setting the boundaries of the areas of change, or system boundaries, is essential to clarify whose actions and what circumstances are included and excluded. Outcome Mapping starts with an intervention's limited sphere of influence. It sets system boundaries by identifying the areas of concern the intervention intends to influence. Depending on its scope, resources, credibility, context, relationships, and history, an intervention can only expect to influence certain individuals and organisations. Other actors in the system may be influenced indirectly through other actors in the intervention's sphere of influence. The sphere of influence is almost always much smaller than the change makers' vision.

Sphere of influence has become a commonplace term. 20 years ago, this concept denoted a shift away from conventional planning, monitoring and evaluation approaches, which were largely linear, and reductionist in terms of understanding cause-and-effect. Outcome Mapping shifted the conversation and the mindset from attribution and accountability for downstream impacts, to focusing on learning through social change efforts and shared contributions to outcomes (observable actor-centred behavioural changes). Attributing change to your programmes' influence alone is often unrealistic. Simply asking "did what we want, happen?" restricts learning from on-going change and prevents deeper understanding of system dynamics, interactions, and perspectives.

Participants identifying Boundary Partners at the OM Learning & Exchange, Bangkok, 2018

3. Contributions to outcomes, not attribution

Our interventions are never the only reason for changes in our partners/Boundary Partners and social actors. There are always other influences. Outcome Mapping therefore looks for change influenced by an intervention but never ascribes attribution. Some outcomes are more significant when they indicate progress toward the intended expect to see, like to see and love to see changes.

Appreciating and looking for contributions within and beyond our sphere of influence leads Outcome Mapping change makers to modify and hone their strategies and become more effective at adapting and supporting emergent change. This does not down-play the importance of a program's accountability to those it seeks to support and those from which it receives support. Rather, it challenges the notion that accountability requires programs to attribute real-life impact to their work.

In recent years, many donors and development agencies recognise that socially sustainable development occurs when multiple and diverse actors and factors converge to support local organisations to determine and lead planning and implementation. Today, the concepts of

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[5] In OM, Boundary Partners are defined as those individuals, groups, or organisations with whom the programme interacts directly and with whom the programme can anticipate some opportunities for influence.

complexity and systems thinking that underpin Outcome Mapping are more widely accepted. There are many examples of donors adopting Outcome Mapping-based approaches to manage accountability for contributions to observable, behavioural outcomes.

4. Setting actor-centred boundaries

Outcome Mapping supports change makers to more easily apply systems thinking and complexity in multiple ways.[6] When change makers decide partners/Boundary Partners[7], they include certain actors and exclude others. The evolution of systems thinking[8] has continued to influence Outcome Mapping practice. Since the original manual was published, the approach has evolved to include an explicit system mapping pre-step before beginning the intentional design steps. This pre-step includes developing a contextually grounded picture of system actors, their roles, relationships, perspectives and motivations that are central to viewing systems through the lens of complexity.

Outcome Mapping encourages change makers to continually analyse their context to identify the people, groups and organisations they would like to include, interact directly with, and can hope to influence (the Boundary Partners). This way the change initiative maintains a focus on supporting partners within its sphere of influence.

Guiding practices to support transformative change

Outcome Mapping has continued to evolve and adapt to strengthen design, monitoring, evaluation and learning in complex contexts. A set of practices have emerged to guide use of Outcome Mapping for advancing transformative change. They are presented here as an evolving list. These guiding practices provide insight for understanding how the approach is practiced and has evolved and matured over the past 20 years.

1. Facilitate inclusive and equity-focused participatory change processes

Outcome Mapping grew out of the people-centred and rights-based sustainable development movement in the 1990's. The heart of Outcome Mapping is people or groups of people changing their actions and interactions and contributing to their own wellbeing. The approach values people as self-determining participants in processes to make their lives better. Outcome Mapping for transformative change requires identifying the actors (people, groups, and institutions) in the system with special attention to including and integrating people and communities with less power and influence in interventions. Transformative change requires continually seeking to identify ideal/desirable and observable behavioural changes by privileging the perspectives, experiences and leadership of people and communities who have been excluded, marginalised and discriminated against.

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[6] See the Outcome Mapping Practitioner Guide for more detail on this: www.outcomemapping.ca/outcome-mapping-practitioner-guide

[7] The term *Boundary Partner* is not always intuitive and so the term is sometimes replaced with other terms such as partners, people, change agents, stakeholders or social actors, depending on the context.

[8] For more on systems thinking, see Williams & Hummelbrunner, 2010

2. Be accountable to learning at individual, team and organisational levels

Outcome Mapping was designed to learn from continuously evolving contexts and especially relationships with and across the actors in systems in which we operate. It supports learning from changes wherever they lead; this is not just what occurs in progress marker pathways (expect, like and love to see) but also what has not changed or changed backwards, and in ways we did not want to see.

An essential requirement of the approach is to take time to reflect on the context and sufficiently imagine practical changes with your Boundary Partners. Outcome Mapping for transformative change demands two-way learning through ally relationships with integrated Boundary Partners. This builds the capacity for self-reflection and a learning-oriented and adaptive approach.

In a study conducted by the Outcome Mapping Learning Community in 2014, practitioners reported that Outcome Mapping builds more trust among partners, more learning about the context, strengthened relationships, and more internal organisational practice changes (Van Ongevalle & Peels, 2014). It can be used to advance a learning culture that is grounded in transformative change with commitments at individual, team, and organisational levels.

3. Grow a complex adaptive system view and embrace uncertainty and experimentation

Outcome Mapping as a framework for planning collaborative interventions for transformative change requires us to embrace uncertainty and a complex adaptive systems (CAS) view of our world. While engineers can confidently predict the response of titanium to mechanical stress, change makers cannot calculate how people will engage with social and environmental stress. When change makers work from a CAS view, they are less likely to rely on technical solutions to complex challenges. Instead, change

Using OM to develop a child-centred vision for a families organisation in Ottawa, Canada, 2017

makers' creatively embrace adaptive and collaborative ways of working that value continuous experimentation and see the whole as greater than the sum of its parts.

Outcome Mapping is a practical framework that can be used to grow inclusive (by which we mean gender equity, anti-racist and anti-oppressive) and adaptive collaborations with partners/Boundary Partners that work to disrupt the status quo and to influence social and ecological wellbeing. To fully shift practices to support transformative change using the Outcome Mapping framework, change makers can combine a CAS view of interconnected relationships between people and groups (organisations and institutions) with actions that are emerging and evolving, and collaborations that seek to disrupt the continuous flow of change.

4. Commit to iterative, collective sense-making with inductive and data driven reasoning

Outcome-centred work, designed to contribute to changes in human behaviour, encourages Outcome Mapping change makers to embrace complexity, surprise and non-linearity. Inevitably, some strategies will not work, while others will contribute to unimagined changes. Change makers must be able to assimilate lessons learned about actors in their programme's systems and modify

planned strategies accordingly. They accept emergent changes and become nimbler at working adaptively. Change makers know that they will need to adapt and evolve progress markers and strategies on an on-going and periodic basis, based on learning rhythms and periodic spaces created for reflection.

Outcome Mapping, grounded in a CAS view, does not come with a pre-set programme logic model. Progress markers provide a direction for change, but they are not intended to be predictive. With Outcome Mapping, you seek a balance between goal setting, and accountabilities related to planned progress, with experimentation, probing and discovery. You interpret changes collectively and from the perspectives of people directly impacted.

> 'Progress markers are a relatively flexible and unpretentious way of illustrating actor-based contingencies. They are guideposts designed to help us keep our eyes open during the journey, whichever specific direction the journey takes us.' (Aston, 2020)

In Outcome Mapping, change makers monitor for outcomes (behaviour changes). They ask questions about why observed changes emerged, or did not, and the significance of these changes, before inductively developing strategies to further advance changes based on the analysis. This is quite different from predictive approaches which come with pre-set theories about what changes will happen and only look for evidence to confirm strategies that have already been developed and used.

It is not always clear to change makers why behaviour is changing – or not changing. To make sense of what is happening and why, change makers need to involve the partners/Boundary Partners in collective sense-making. And to do it again and again to keep understanding the system as it evolves. Regular reflection on progress markers to understand who is changing, to what degree and what has contributed to the change can support learning and adaptation of progress markers and strategies. Outcome Mapping users have reported the benefits of setting aside adequate time for data collection and analysis, and learning from unexpected change.

5.   Lead from context and combine Outcome Mapping with other approaches as needed

Transformative change is nested in complex interrelated, interacting systems, rather than isolated events achievable along linear pathways. Interventions may or may not produce results and possibly may produce a number of results to varying degrees and importance. Our actions may contribute to the changes we planned for and hoped for (progress markers) or may result in unpredictable changes that could not have been planned.

Mapping actors OM-style at the start of an OH evaluation to bring clarity on whose behaviour changes matter

A transformative and complex adaptive system view requires that change makers combine and privilege different ways of seeing and knowing the challenges. They need to use multiple strategies and methods at many levels that are grounded in the context and purposes. A common example is to use Outcome Harvesting and Outcome Mapping together as they share core concepts. Outcome Harvesting can be used before Outcome Mapping to show how system actors are already changing,

including in unplanned and unpredictable ways. Outcome Mapping can then support the change makers to reflect on how to build on the harvested outcomes and co-design for intentional collective outcomes. Or, as depicted in the photo, Outcome Mapping can be used to inform an Outcome Harvesting evaluation.

In an Outcome Mapping Learning Community survey in 2019[9], practitioners reported combining Outcome Mapping with multiple methods and approaches to advance equity-focused and gender-transformative evaluation practices including: Outcome Harvesting, Contribution Analysis, Logical Framework, Most Significant Change, Social Network Mapping, Vulnerability Assessments, and Power and Interest Stakeholder Mapping.

> "The Outcome Mapping approach has shown promise in evaluating gender and equity-related change in behaviour of a wide variety of stakeholders, or using Outcome Mapping terms, boundary partners and strategic partners. The approach, combined with gender impact tools, is flexible, adaptable, and able to meaningfully evaluate gender and equity-related transformative change." (Sonal Zaveri, January 2021).

One area of evolving Outcome Mapping practice is the use of aligned methods to support data collection. One of the limitations in iteratively adapting a programme based on observed changes is the sheer volume and complexity of behaviour change data. The growth of information technology and affordable and accessible qualitative research software tools makes this much more realistic. Increasingly Outcome Mapping practitioners use electronic tools to identify patterns of change and the reasons for them, making an actor centred, outcome focused approach to change achievable.

What is next for Outcome Mapping?

The need to advance transformation for ecological and social wellbeing has become increasingly urgent. The unequal impacts of both the climate crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic on marginalised people and communities serve to highlight the need for systemic change. This paper builds a case for appreciating the strengths and guiding practices that make Outcome Mapping effective for contributing to disruptive and potentially transformative change interventions. These guiding practices demonstrate how the approach has evolved for, and remains relevant to, change makers seeking to transform the world in the next decade and beyond.

Outcome Mapping continues to be successfully applied to a range of subjects at a range of scales. Users include modest grassroots organisations to multi-country programmes supported by Global Affairs Canada, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Swedish International Development Agency and Swiss Development Cooperation, the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, among other large donors, as well as Regional Health Authorities and Indigenous Cultural Safety in health

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[9] For a summary of survey results, see https://www.outcomemapping.ca/resource/evolving-om-for-equity-focused-and-gender-transformative-change-processes

care in Canada. This range of applications by learning focused change makers ensures Outcome Mapping's ongoing evolution and relevance to the field.

As an evolving approach to understand and support transformative change, Outcome Mapping is a way of thinking and a practical framework with steps and tools relevant to changing any system that depends on the behaviours of its human actors. As this paper demonstrates, Outcome Mapping thinking and practice is being continuously questioned, adapted and added to by a highly engaged community of change makers working in different ways and in many specialties all over the world. This community - the Outcome Mapping Learning Community - is connected via an interactive platform, webinars, educational events, conference presentations and by sharing cases. The community interacts at the ideas level and through very practical tools and tips. And we share experiences and collaborate with systems thinkers and change makers in aligned fields. Just like the social and ecological changes that we hope to contribute to, Outcome Mapping is itself dynamic and emergent.

The Outcome Mapping Learning Community is a generous and inclusive place to learn, share, teach and relate to others who are working toward global transformation. With this paper, the Outcome Mapping Stewards aspire to expand collaboration and innovation with change makers, evaluators and networks around the world focused on transformative change for human and ecological wellbeing. If this sounds like you or your organisation, Outcome Mapping, and the Outcome Mapping Learning Community may be just what you need. Join our learning community. Contact us for more information at OMLC.

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