



Chiefs from different ethnic groups in Wau, South Sudan, work differently – together – to promote peace. Photo: M Perkins

## DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

Rethinking monitoring and evaluation to understand change

Over the past four years, Saferworld has put in place a way of monitoring, evaluating and learning from our work focused on behaviour and relationship change. This paper outlines the process we have gone through to adapt, embed, and embrace an approach inspired by Outcome Mapping<sup>1</sup> and Outcome Harvesting (OH)<sup>2</sup>. We hope it shows other interested parties how we have transformed the way we understand, monitor and collect evidence of change in our work.

*“This is a beautiful, exemplary case of an organisation taking Outcome Harvesting, and customising it to specific needs and context. The danger is that the essence of OH can easily get ‘lost in translation’, but Saferworld has retained the essential principles while making the approach their own.”*

– Ricardo Wilson-Grau

<sup>1</sup> See Outcome Mapping <http://www.outcomemapping.ca/>

<sup>2</sup> See Outcome Harvesting [http://www.betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/outcome\\_harvesting](http://www.betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/outcome_harvesting)

### Key messages

Our approach is centred on collecting and analysing evidence *together* about *what others do differently* – and determining how far that is because of our work. The approach is different because it is flexible and straightforward enough to be used in complex, rapidly-changing contexts. It empowers front-line staff, communities and partners to ‘monitor’ what matters to them.

#### Key benefits:

- It is simple, but promotes complex discussion and analysis.
- It allows conflict- and gender-sensitivity to be built into programmes; it promotes analysis of and adaptation to context.
- Bringing front-line staff and partners into wider conversations with others substantially increases cross-organisational learning.

#### Learning points:

- Like most change processes, using the approach requires leadership, guidance, and practice – one-off trainings don’t work.

## Dedication

In 2012 Saferworld appointed its first MEL coordinator based in a country team. Ramesh Nidhi Bista (*pictured, right*) had spent many, many years in Nepal working on M&E, and had tried pretty much everything to support partners in dealing with the language of goals, objectives, outputs, outcomes, indicators, targets, and milestones that donors and international NGOs are so fond of. Not much seemed to work to help them to understand, measure and report on changes. However, he had hit on this definition – “*an outcome is something that others do differently*” – and found that it made sense. The minute he said it to me, I thought – that’s just what I’ve been looking for. Ramesh, dear colleague and friend to the Nepal programme, died suddenly in November 2013. This paper is dedicated to him.

*Madeline Church*



## Introduction

*“An outcome is something that others do differently (individuals, groups, institutions, parts of institutions)”*

– Ramesh Nidhi Bista

In 2011, Saferworld had one Planning and Evaluation Adviser. She was the sole staff member in a rather grandly titled Organisational Development Unit (ODU), which was tasked with driving a big institutional push towards better Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) approaches. Our new Strategic Plan provided the impetus and leadership that the organisation needed to systematise its accountability and learning, so we could know whether we were meeting our ambitious plans. And a new Programme Partnership Agreement (PPA) with the Department for International Development (DFID) (over three years) provided strategic funds to support these new commitments.

Saferworld works in complex, conflict-ridden environments, with fast-changing dynamics, alongside communities that have historically been abandoned, marginalised, or ignored by their local authorities and security providers, and feel a profound sense of insecurity. The organisation prides itself on linking this community-level work (primarily Community Security<sup>3</sup>) with an ‘evidence-gathering’ agenda, to show that things can change for these communities if they are empowered to lead constructively on what’s important for them. It also helps to demonstrate positive change to authorities and policy-makers. We were, therefore, seeking a MEL approach that would reflect this organisational agenda and concentrate on meaningful evidence, by listening to and valuing communities’ own definitions of what constitutes success.

We wanted the approach to be appropriately focused on what Saferworld actually does – influence

behaviour- and relationship-change, by and between certain ‘actor categories’<sup>4</sup>. It had to be straightforward enough for communities, partners, and front-line staff (some with English as a second, or even third language) to use to learn about their work, build on and improve it, and be able to communicate about it effectively to others. We know from experience that the worst type of instrument for tracking the effect of our work in complex and changing environments is a complicated set of things to measure that are hard to interpret. What we were looking for was something that focused on demonstrable change, and that was simple enough for all staff to work with.

*“MEL was an area I had difficulty to follow and have a picture in my head of all the statistical data, log frame, framework and so on. The outcome harvesting approach makes MEL easier for people like me to understand and plan activities better. I am glad that we have this process beside the data gathering for the log frame.”*

– Khirad Kargasov, Area Programme Manager, South Sudan team

## Rethinking ‘M&E’

In determining how to move forward to meet our MEL commitments, we looked at our current practice and tried to understand what the organisation really meant when it talked about ‘M&E’ (as it did then). In particular we looked at whether this was understood exclusively as an ‘enforcement’ or ‘accountability’ exercise or whether we were *learning* from what we did in a structured way that went beyond reporting to donors and commissioning external reviews or evaluations.

We noticed that in the main, staff understood ‘M&E’ to mean ‘reporting to donors against indicators in the log-frame’. We found that most staff and partners didn’t really understand what was meant by an indicator, often because different donors used the

<sup>3</sup> See our Community Security Handbook <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/806-community-security-handbook>

<sup>4</sup> Saferworld works to influence four actor categories: individuals and communities; civil society; authorities; external actors. See our Change Model, <http://saferworld.org.uk/images/saferworld-change-model.png>

term differently, or because indicators had been chosen or written by others. Many early hours of the ODU were spent clarifying the difference between an indicator, milestone, target, and ‘objectively verifiable indicators of achievement’.

Some of the elements we found least helpful about the ‘status quo’ were:

- **the focus on activity reporting.** This meant that many staff were largely reporting on what they and their partners had spent their time *doing*. We had plenty of data on the ‘what?’, but not enough on the ‘so what?’, i.e. what difference did it make?

*“[Outcome monitoring] has helped us focus more on the changes we are trying to achieve over activities.”*

– Shelagh Daley, UK Advocacy Coordinator

- **the static and linear nature of log-frames,** which doesn’t fit with Saferworld’s work on complex social change in shifting and evolving conflict contexts. While log-frames were intended to be ‘tools for thinking and strategising’ they had become rigid project implementation templates, which failed to take into account the systemic nature of many conflicts. Almost all our funders had log-frames attached to agreements (the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs being a notable exception), which meant that ‘delivering on the log-frame’ and ‘checking off the indicators’ had become the central purpose of monitoring.
- **the largely unhelpful nature of quantitative measures,** given that so much of our work focuses on behaviour and relationship change, *in a particular context*. These quantitative indicators tended to be default, as counting is considered to be somehow more revealing and/or easier, despite the wealth of alternative qualitative approaches that would make more appropriate bedfellows. On the whole, counting often can’t answer the important questions that Saferworld, its partners, and the communities we work with, want to ask. Lack of reliable data is common in many conflict contexts, so long-term changes or wider effects are often hard to understand without huge investment in expensive research. Teams were either collecting lots of data that were of questionable use, often because that data was easy to collect, or not collecting any data at all. Few were asking themselves what constituted reliable evidence of change.
- **confusing language used by the sector, and by funders.** This included the mixed use of ‘goal’, ‘purpose’, ‘objective’, ‘outcome’, ‘indicators’, ‘targets’, ‘results’, ‘outputs’, and ‘evidence’, combined with a new fascination with ‘theory of change’. This was a particular challenge as Saferworld employs largely local staff in programmes, and/or works primarily in local partnerships, with English as a second or third language in all instances. ‘Results’, ‘outputs’ and

‘outcomes’ are, for instance, all translated as ‘results’ in Arabic and Russian, showing just how difficult it is to differentiate between them. It was more useful for us to distinguish between what we and our partners do (activities) and what others *do differently* as a result of these activities (outcome).

- **the lack of capacity in MEL at the right level in Saferworld** – i.e. near to the partners, to the communities, and to the national offices.

In sum, we needed an appropriate MEL approach for our change agenda, which allowed for flexibility, a focus on behaviour and relationship change, and the ability to adapt to quickly changing environments with many political dynamics at work. We needed something that would build in conflict- and gender-sensitivity and support adaptive management.

And in line with the projected growth of Saferworld – working at a greater level of scale and intensity – we had a vision of a devolved organisation, with more country offices, country managers, and increasing numbers of national staff. That needed national MEL advisers in teams working closer to the action.

### **What is Outcome Harvesting?**

We came to Outcome Harvesting through the Outcome Mapping community.<sup>5</sup> Outcome Mapping was designed to rethink the way in which behaviour-change work is designed, planned and described. The focus of Outcome Mapping is on hoped-for *changes in behaviour* any programme is working to achieve through its influence, using outcome challenge statements to describe what these are.

Outcome Harvesting is an *evaluation* approach inspired by Outcome Mapping and Utilization-Focused Evaluation. Unlike other evaluation methods it doesn’t start with predetermined outcomes, and measure progress towards them, but rather collects evidence of what has been achieved in the programme or project area, and works backwards to determine whether and how the project or intervention contributed to the change.

At its most elegant, it is really simple. It asks a few core questions for data-gathering about the change in behaviour:

- Who did what, when and where?
- How significant is this change?
- What contribution was made by the programme to this change?

<sup>5</sup> for a full description of the approach see [http://www.betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/outcome\\_harvesting](http://www.betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/outcome_harvesting)

In particular it works well when you want to focus on outcomes, rather than activities, and it is suitable for evaluating in complex programming contexts ‘where relations of cause and effect are not fully understood. Conventional monitoring and evaluation aimed at determining results compares planned outcomes with what is actually achieved. In complex environments, however, *objectives and the paths to achieve them are largely unpredictable and predefined objectives and theories of change must be modified over time to respond to changes in the context*’ (emphasis added)<sup>6</sup>.

## Adapting and using Outcome Harvesting

Given Saferworld’s primary focus on behaviour and relationship change in complex contexts – by and between social actors, working through on-the-ground programming, policy and advocacy – Outcome Harvesting offers a way for us to get to the heart of what matters. It particularly appeals as a straightforward and easy-to-understand way of shifting attention away from activities (what did we do?), onto the practical, observable shifts in actions by the actors our programmes are seeking to influence (what did they do differently?).

*“It helps me determine whether an activity implemented is relevant to the context or not.”*

– Peter Machar, Project Coordinator,  
Wau, South Sudan

Although Outcome Harvesting is largely practiced as an evaluation approach, we wanted to see if it would help us in our regular monitoring. We wanted teams to be able to discuss ‘outcomes’ with their partners and communities regularly, document them, review them, understand them, and build on them. Our Community Security theory of change is founded on using joint action-planning to create trust, through which change occurs to relationships, and behaviours, which in turn creates more trust, confidence, agency, ownership, and transparency. At the same time, common action creates tangible changes. This work is highly reliant on skilled, knowledgeable staff and partners working with key stakeholders to create the conditions for this to flourish. To do so, they need to be able to identify and codify the changes they are seeing in a manner straightforward enough to stimulate learning and adaptation.



*Outcome harvesting is flexible enough to be used in complex, rapidly-changing contexts. Political violence in Bangladesh in the run up to the 2014 elections changed action group priorities in some project sites.*  
Photo: Saferworld/Altaf Hossain

*“The approach helps us to tell a story of how our actions have prompted changes in behaviour and improvements in relationships.”*

– Luke Errington-Barnes, Funding Coordinator

*“This approach makes it possible to more clearly explain our goals and to justify interventions and our responses on specific local community security needs. For beneficiaries (Local Crime Prevention Centres – LCPC) it is easier to understand the relationship between analysis they conduct and to select effective measures that will have an impact on the situation. We introduced outcome statements in the LCPCs plans, and this helps them to understand the direction and nature of response that could result effectively in a change in the situation.”*

– Stefan Stoyanov, Project Manager, Central Asia

At the same time we wanted to focus our attention on evidence, and to find a way to present our claims in a way that could be tested and verified by other external reviewers or evaluators. Most external evaluations Saferworld had commissioned in the past relied on paid consultants reading strategies, plans, project proposals and donor reports, and then being expected to collect primary evidence. We wanted to be able to provide a review or evaluation team with a package of verifiable claims and evidence that they could then put to the test by interviewing key informants and focus groups, rather than having to do all the work uncovering results and evidence themselves.

So, as part of our new framework for MEL, we constructed a mixed approach around a central core focus on *what others do differently as a result of our work*. It is – and is meant to be – pretty straightforward.

<sup>6</sup> ibid

# Outcome harvesting step by step



## STEP 1: Who did what differently?

**You're trying to record something that another person did differently.**

Start with naming the person, institution or group. Use as much detail as possible.

**Q** Who, or which institution or group, is this outcome about?

**A** Dr Manga, The Minister of Interior for Zang, from the Union of People party.

Follow with recording exactly what they did. Use active verbs to describe this. 'He instructed', 'she provided'. Limit yourself to describing the action.

The Minister of Interior for Zang instructed the Chief of Police for Maple County to introduce a monthly meeting with communities across Maple County.

Date: July 2014  
Place: Mobo Capital City.

### Where and when did this happen?

Be as specific as possible about where and when. The date, or time period is really important, so don't miss this out. Your outcome should now look like this:

**Q** What did he do differently?

**A** He instructed the Chief of Police for Maple County to introduce a monthly meeting with communities across Maple County.



## STEP 2: How significant is the change?

**Highlight why this change is worth noting, important or significant.**

You are seeking to record the connection between the context, and the change. For instance, if this is the first time the Minister has taken action it is probably significant. If he has given this instruction many times before, and nothing has changed, then it is not. If the Minister is powerful, and difficult to influence, then it might be significant. If the Minister is not the one with the real power in the situation, then it probably isn't.

This change is significant because this Minister has consistently refused to accept that the communities have anything meaningful to contribute (it is a change in his consistent practice).

The situation in Maple County is very bad when it comes to police-community relations. The police are often drunk and abusive. The clan relations mean that the communities don't want to complain, because the Minister of Interior comes from there, and his reputation could be at risk if he lets the communities say what is happening.

The communities have been saying for many months now that the local Chief of Police doesn't listen to their concerns, but the Minister has refused to talk to the partner.

So, to decide its significance, ask your team some questions:

- Is this the first time?
- Does it link into the conflict analysis you have?
- Is it big? Small?
- Does it seem to be a systemic change?
- Does it seem to be a policy change?
- Are there fruits of sustainability in there?



## STEP 3: What contribution was made by the programme to this change?

**What did Saferworld, our partners and/or the communities do to contribute to this change?**

Here you can start to record the activities or resources that the team, the partners and/or the communities put into making the change possible.

*"Saferworld made all the calls to encourage the Minister to meet with the partner. The partner trained the communities in advocacy. The communities wrote the paper that the Minister read to convince him".*

Keep an 'evidence box', physical or electronic, in which you can store emails, notes, phonecalls, etc, which demonstrate the changes that you are referring to. These can be added to the outcome forms as pieces of evidence to substantiate claims, by embedding them, or uploading them electronically.

## How does it get used in practice?

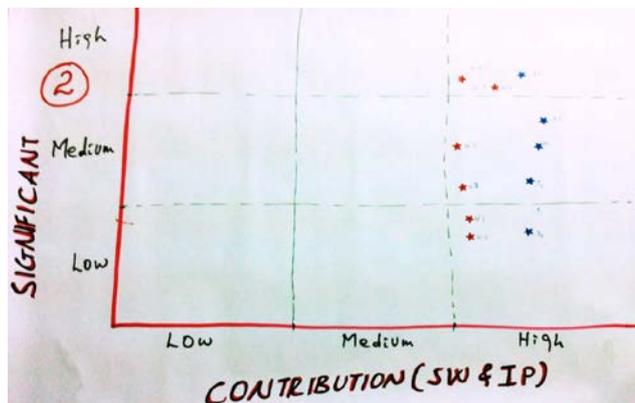
What this means in practice is that all teams are now expected to do the following as a matter of routine:

- keep records of who has done what differently as a result of our work (noting where they did it, and when). These are kept in notebooks, in evaluations of community action plans, in partner reports, in Word and on-line forms.
- hold review conversations with their partners at least twice a year, to discuss these and other outcomes.
- note down why they think these changes are significant, linked to the conflict and context analyses that form part of their strategies and which they update.
- bring all this information together at least twice a year in a face-to-face workshop setting with their programme/policy/advocacy colleagues. In this they discuss the meaning of the outcomes, and they record the significance of the outcomes in relation to context.
- rank the outcomes, as a team, according to levels of significance and the contribution made by Saferworld and partners to that outcome (low, medium or high). This is not a personal opinion, but a team agreement, and is a tool to stimulate discussion. Each team creates a 'smartie map' which displays this information visually (see picture top right).
- upload any outcomes, positive or negative, into Saferworld's intranet system, Karacel, where they can be seen by everyone in the organisation. All outcomes are displayed on relevant team pages, on the home page, and in the 'results' section of the system. They can also be exported as reports.
- include their 'outcome harvest' documentation in their twice-yearly internal reports (again done through our intranet system).
- use this material for their donor reports, and case studies, and for their part in our PPA reporting.

Staff have access to guidance materials, agendas and session plans for triannual or biannual reviews, on-line and off-line outcome forms, and every other team's outcomes via Karacel.

When a mid-term review or evaluation is being planned by a team, and will involve an external person, we encourage the team to undertake a documentation exercise to ensure that we have a dataset to provide for them to analyse and test. On top of normal documentation this can include:

- completing an updated outcome harvesting exercise with teams, partners and/or communities.
- completing extended 'outcome forms' which have more detail in them, and are used to gather



A 'smartie map' maps the significance and contribution of changes seen in one project in South Sudan.

evaluation data for community security action plans.

What we have found is that by attending to the detail of outcomes per social actor, at different levels of a social system, we can create more comprehensive theories of change for our work. We piloted this with our Central Asia evaluation in 2012.

*"The team and I went back over all our activity reports (partner reports, planning and review meeting notes, staff activity reports) and filled in 'outcome forms', which stated and analysed any changes in behaviour and relationships that we had noticed, for each community that we worked with and for each community security cycle that we had facilitated with them. We also attached all the evidence that we had collected. This was hugely enlightening for the programme (and also motivating!) in terms of us all seeing how each community had learnt to work on more sensitive issues and how difficult relationships had changed over time. This was a really useful process to go through and not only resulted in a very useful external evaluation that asked the right questions and gave us helpful recommendations, but also helped us to articulate our programme aims far more clearly to partners and everyone else we were trying to influence."*

– Maija Paasiaro, then Regional Conflict /Security Adviser

Since then we have created a comprehensive MEL framework for this and our South Sudan programmes, based on mapping desired outcomes per actor, theories of change, and a detailed plan for data collection. We have provided outcomes harvested through our monitoring to external consultants conducting reviews of our Central Asia, Bangladesh, South Sudan, Yemen, and Sudan programmes, for them to test and verify.

*"The... big thing for me was the M&E framework. It so clearly articulates all the intangible things we need to measure"*

– Katie Morris, Europe and Central Asia Team



*Ayak Mou Kuot, Deputy Chairperson of a community security working group in Warrap state, South Sudan, talks to group members about safety concerns and changes they are seeing in their community. Photo: Marcus Perkins/Saferworld*

However, as Saferworld does all its programming work with and through partners, any approach we use has to be something we can ask our partners to sign up to as well. This means another layer of people, organisations and understanding to develop when trying to systematise and institutionalise an approach to MEL that links up across communities, partners and staff.

*“It is a participatory tool that enhances quick identification of changes with less effort – no scratching the head when generating outcomes any more. It generates adequate information on complex behaviour change and relationship among many actors and serves as an analytical tool – by disaggregating outcomes per actors, and outcomes per level of influence (local, sub national, national, regional and international). As a process one cannot exhaust harvesting outcomes because staff become sensitive to any emerging, growing and mature in different actors during the project implementation, it triggers cross-learning among the team and across projects and it can demonstrate whether Theory of Change (ToC) is working at early stages of the project implementation.*

– Thomas Kimathi Nyagah, MEL Officer, Kenya Team

### **Learning from pioneers in South Sudan**

Our South Sudan programme has grown over the last four years from work in three locations in two states, to ten locations in eight states. The team has grown from a staff group of 6 in 2011, to over 40 staff, with eight project coordinators based in the field.

The first three locations have been running for two years longer than the most recently added, providing an interesting comparison between the two. This was not intentionally set up as a ‘phased approach’ but has turned out that way, as our funder has seen the fruits of the work.

All staff have now come together three times to ‘harvest’ outcomes. They spend up to two days looking at their conflict contexts, listing and refining their statements about what others have done differently, discussing the significance of these changes, highlighting the areas that have potential but are not yet outcomes, and those that have hints, or foundations of sustainability.

*“What was really noticeable this time was how the second ‘batch’ had really learned something about how to make bigger changes from the pioneers. While they still had to put in the early leg-work, developing trust and relationships with local communities, they all had a sense of what might be possible once the foundations were laid, because they could see how things had changed over the previous two years in the first states.*

*They had understood how the way of working significantly affects the outcomes, and had managed to build that in from the start.”*

*– Madeline Church, Head of Organisational Development*

*“Due to the follow up on actions/responses made by individuals or institutions like police for example, representatives/leaders of those institutions often think twice before pledging responses/actions for a community security/safety’s concerns as our outcome monitoring and harvesting mechanism requires us to make a follow on those pledges and changes registered by programmes.”*

*– Peter Machar, Project Coordinator, South Sudan*

In such a conflict-affected environment what seem like positive changes can easily generate additional unforeseen negative effects. The outcome monitoring approach allows Saferworld to surface these early, and discuss how to add in any further strategies to mitigate them, or adapt the work – building in an important conflict sensitivity lens.

*“What does it add to our cross-organisational learning? – “We have a tendency to get sucked into the places where we work, so when we come together and use this as a process to talk about change and about how we achieve those changes, ..to do that in a collaborative way then inspires other people to think about their work differently, and think about different approaches they might integrate into their work... it’s just been a really useful collaborative and facilitative tool that really engages people in those really important learning discussions.”*

*– Ariana Martini, Grant Manager*

## The benefits

A number of benefits from this outcome monitoring and harvesting approach have become clear over the last few years.

- It reinforces that regular MEL practice is a job that everyone needs to be involved in. It shows that it can contribute to improved programming, and that all staff have a role to play in collecting and analysing data and evidence that shows changes. It motivates staff, some of whom have actually been heard to say that they really like M&E, and finally see how it relates to their programme development.

*“It made me realise the absolute importance of M&E, and how it is really a key programmatic tool, rather than something that is added on for bureaucracy or for donors more broadly. And it’s only when people*

*don’t understand that point that M&E suffers. I think that comes from constant engagement and discussions, and the use of tools that show the value.”*

*– Katie Morris, Europe and Central Asia Team*

- It enables staff to become more expert at spotting change, and finding ways to increase potential. Our South Sudan team, for example, have started keeping notes about things that are not yet quite outcomes, but could be, a kind of ‘Outcome Watch’, which is a way of keeping an eye on things that have potential. The Nepal team discuss changes they are seeing at their weekly staff meeting, to ensure the whole team understands what the programme is seeking to achieve.

*“As a manager and mentor I believe that outcome harvesting has motivated and empowered my team members to more successfully implement their programmes and more effectively engage with partners and stakeholders at all levels of our intervention.”*

*– Tamara Duffey-Janser, Head of Programme, Great Lakes and Sudans*

- The approach is appropriate for our model of ‘community security’, which prioritises community empowerment, and the need for citizens to take more control of their own agenda through active involvement.

*“The outcome harvesting approach forces us to focus on the connections between what we are doing and how things have changed for communities. This means that we focus on what truly matters, which is how our work meets the needs of communities.”*

*– Deepti Sastry, Impact and Accountability Adviser*

*“I like it because it is very simple, it focuses on the community, and the impact of the project on the community, while the approach that I have used before it only focused on the numbers of trainings conducted, the number of participants attending, but our approach is really very good, cause it focuses on the changes that is taking place in the lives of the individual and the communities where we are working, that is really the aim of the project, to work with the local authorities, to reduce the incidences of insecurity happening in the community.”*

*– Phoebe Egbalia Manza, Project Coordinator, South Sudan Team*

- The straightforward approach, with in-built time for reflection and discussion, is critical for conflict- and gender-sensitivity. We use our conflict analyses to determine the significance of the outcomes. This allows for learning and adaptation by frontline staff.

*“I think one of the things that I really like about it compared to other systems is that it’s very easy to use, it’s not technical like other systems.”*

*– Bonita Ayuko, Project Coordinator, Kenya Team*

- In highly volatile environments, it enables the teams to take corrective action and understand where perverse incentives or negative effects might be occurring for some, from what look like positive results for others. This reinforces the importance of being context-and gender- specific.
- It challenges all staff and partners to think about evidence and evaluation, and not just leave it to ‘evaluators’ to work out whether the programme is making a difference or not. The format of thinking through the outcomes ensures that teams state clearly the claims we are making, and the evidence we have, which can then be verified or tested by outsiders.

*“I think it has definitely helped people to focus more on actual changes rather than outputs. That helps to make us more ambitious as we’re more aware that people just saying nice things about our work doesn’t constitute an outcome. At the same time it can be a bit demoralising as it makes you realise it takes ages sometimes for any outcomes to materialise, especially when you’re aiming for policy change.”*

*– Hannah Wright, Gender, peace and security Adviser*

*“It constantly reminds me to be on the lookout for changes in behaviour, content, patterns, etc. as opposed to assuming that the amount of work I do equates to success. It helps because having had to continually go through this process, I’m usually one of the people in the room who has a positive answer at hand when the question comes up ‘how do we know what we’re doing works?’ It’s amazing how much that sets us apart”*

*– David Alpher, Washington Associate*

- It provides useful documentation for our internal and external reporting, for identifying good material for case studies, cross organisational learning, and for external reviewers and evaluators. It is invaluable material for our cross-organisational grant reporting, such as for strategic funding, which requires an overview of the kinds of changes we’re seeing in very different contexts.

*“Outcome harvesting not only helps teams to identify the changes they are seeing, but also provides the starting point for wider stories of success and learning that we can share externally. If anything the challenge now is the sheer amount of material available – a very different situation to four years ago!”*

*– Simon Moore, Head of Communications*

## Identifying policy success

For our Advocacy and Policy work, the approach has been much easier to incorporate. These teams regularly review their outcomes together, and keep an ‘evidence box’ that helps to substantiate their claims.

As an initial foray into systematising reporting on our advocacy and policy work we developed a matrix to track six types of evidence linking to five stages of success. Our outcome harvesting approach then allows us to see how we are managing to move through these stages, from improved credibility, to relevance, access to decision-makers, increased support for our messages, to policy change.

*“Although the impact of such high-level advocacy can be difficult to measure, outcome monitoring allows us to reflect on whether the advocacy approach we have adopted and the activities we have carried out have been relevant and effective.”*

*– Kloe Tricot O’Farrell, EU Advocacy Officer*

## Our learning

Over the past few years we have learned a lot about how to implement the approach sustainably.

- Clear, simple language does wonders to kick-start meaningful conversations about change.

*“The definition of outcome here is very simple and everyone is able to think about the outcomes of their projects.”*

*– Posh Raj Adhikari, MEL Coordinator, Nepal Team*

- It takes a lot of repetition, and practice, rather than just ‘training’, to shift attention solely from activities, so that thinking about change and evidence in this way becomes natural. Establishing a routine and systems is really important – you can’t do this once and expect it to ‘work’.
- Staff training is also needed. It’s useful if this includes seeing the approach in action in other teams and participating in the reviews those teams hold.
- You need people in place who understand the approach, and work with and support teams, at the ground level, to make sure that the focus is right. This is hard to do from a distant HQ or centre. Having country-level MEL coordinators or advisers is essential – where we have them, the approach is much more systematically applied.
- Working through outcomes with partners, in conversation with them, rather than expecting them to complete reports in writing, produces much better material. Partners often have a clear understanding of what others have done



*Saferworld and Bangladesh partner BRAC at a joint advocacy workshop: understanding the outcome harvesting process has taken time, but BRAC is now using it within their strategic planning. Photo: Shoeb Ahmed.*

### **Partnership working in Bangladesh**

Saferworld works with 16 community groups in five districts in Bangladesh, with a very large partner, BRAC. BRAC has its own systems, and our challenge in this work was to influence the way in which they conceptualised their M&E in relation to this project. This involved engaging with and training the BRAC project staff, their M&E department, and the leaders of the Community Empowerment Programme. Their monitoring system focused almost exclusively on quantitative data collection at the level of activities and outputs, but didn't really have a process for capturing outcomes, discussing them, and deciding how to build on them.

We worked to adapt reporting mechanisms, train the project staff, conduct annual learning events, and draw in the senior management to understand, see the value and advocate for the approach. We worked intensely to develop extended outcome monitoring for all the communities, and build a dataset for each community action group that focused on the core changes the communities themselves wished to see. We made all this available to our external reviewer.

*"It took at least one year cycle to understand the whole thing, which was a very rigorous process. We were in the field first, we sat down beside the partners to support them, and then they did it on their own. At the end of this year, through practising, we identified that this is a really, really, powerful tool, to show what can be documented, what can be visible, and how people can at least understand how the change process is on-going. The partner BRAC also marketed it, sharing it internally, and externally to the donor. And now they're thinking about this in their strategic planning, so they'll replicate this. It's not an easy process, it needs time, and it needs both parties. But it's an empowering tool."*

*– Bibhash Chakraborty, Bangladesh Programme Manager*

differently, but they don't realise that that is important. They have been encouraged in the past to report mainly as an accountability exercise led by a need to ensure transparency about the money they've spent. This has led to an obvious link between activity and expenditure, with less of a focus on outcomes.

- Bringing front-line staff and partners into wider conversations with others in the organisation substantially increases what we can learn from our work. Saferworld's focus on working at several levels, and influencing multiple actors, means we need a way to bring evidence together from across our programming, policy / advocacy and communications work. Where we can, we encourage our policy and advocacy staff to join programming outcome harvesting sessions, and vice versa. It requires all staff to think 'MEL', and to make time for analysing and processing their work – something that can be a challenge.

*"I find it innovative. Many different MEL approaches that I've used in the past tend to stay at the output level, not really digging deeper into whether there are changes happening because of their work... the approach is essentially a qualitative tool to measure changes, and it also helps us as project coordinators in the field, to keep an eye on what we need to do in order to motivate our stakeholders in realising the changes that we'd like them to embrace. I find this more enriching, as many other models tend to stay on outputs."*

*– Galdino Joseph Sakondo, Project Coordinator, South Sudan Team*

We have also identified a number of internal and external factors that made the change in approach possible.

- The new strategic plan highlighted just how much our work is about influencing different sets of actors. This was a powerful catalyst to find a complementary approach in our MEL.

- PPA funding, and a commitment to institutionalising a ‘framework’, meant that the organisation set up an Organisational Development Unit, and employed dedicated MEL staff. This unit led on the development of Karacel (the intranet), and ensured that it had in-built potential to manage our MEL work and make data more widely available across the organisation. The ODU has also led on coordinating and facilitating our Community Security Learning and Practice Group.
- Cross-organisational grants allowed for experimentation, and enabled learning groups to run for long enough (four years).
- There was important buy-in and commitment from senior management to collect and use evidence to support learning. Core funds were allocated to support this learning among frontline staff. The Executive Director truly felt that this approach could have a transformative effect.
- A new communications team supported the focus on plain English and the use of uncomplicated language.
- Saferworld staff were open to trying new things.

## Looking to the future

The wider success of this approach into the future also relies on donors seeing us as partners, and using the evidence we provide them with to see the quality of our work; with evaluators able to test it.

Funders also need to enable peacebuilding and conflict prevention organisations to take a flexible, adaptive approach to programming, based on demonstrable changes linked to objectives and theories of change, rather than a predefined and linear activity, output, outcome framework. While the target-driven approach may work well in command and control input-output interventions, where strategies are known, and processes are known to lead to certain outcomes, this is generally not a helpful structure for peace-building and conflict prevention interventions working in conflict-affected states.

Saferworld needs to continue building on how we use this data and information actively to communicate and work with communities, our partners, and our donors to improve our programming, and to influence policy agendas both nationally and internationally.

We need to involve our community partners more in monitoring the changes they want to see, and encourage them to use their influence with decision-makers.

We need to continue to do things a little differently.



*Behaving differently: the chief of the district police addresses the community's local security concerns and the need for better police-public partnership in an event organised by a community security working group in Kalika, Bardiya, Nepal. Photo: Saferworld/Anil Poudel*

### **Stories of success in Nepal**

In Nepal, we have used the outcome harvesting focus to help us develop stories of success that communities themselves wish to communicate. The very simple focus on who, what, where, when, significance and contribution allows for groups of people to sit together and describe, in quite rich detail, the nature of the change and the importance they attach to it.

This ‘formula’ is something that USAID, our Nepal programme donor, is proposing now to learn from to improve the case studies that they ask all their partners to contribute (and is an ‘outcome’ for us!).

*“Oftentimes you can get boxed into the project and not have the whole team discuss what we’re really doing in Nepal, how we’re looking forward to change, or bringing about change in the communities, whereas this outcome harvesting process really forces us to think about that, it’s more than just a log-frame with indicators, it’s more about coming together and setting time aside, to really think about, ok, what’s the impact?”*

*– Ojaswi Shah, Project Manager, Nepal Team*

**For further information, discussion, input and feedback, please contact Madeline Church at Saferworld, [mchurch@saferworld.org.uk](mailto:mchurch@saferworld.org.uk)**

## ***How does this approach feed into and complement other MEL-related elements that Saferworld has put in place over this same period?***

During 2011-15, Saferworld has put in place a set of new components in our planning, content and strategy development, learning, and evaluation that complement the focus on behaviour and relationship change.

- **Theory of change:** we have had a number of goes at knitting theory of change approaches into our focus on key actors, and changes in behaviour and relationships. Through many iterations, we have found that teams find it easiest to examine their inherent assumptions about change by starting out articulating the changes that they wish to see in each actor category in the form of outcome (challenge) statements (adapted from Outcome Mapping). We then work outwards to investigate why what we do works to create such changes. The outcome harvesting approach helps us to see whether this ‘theory’ is born out in practice, and hopefully helps us to articulate our theory better.
- **Gender-sensitive conflict analysis, plus actor mapping:** our conflict and insecurity analysis is used not only for our own strategy development, but also to do assessments at community level for each community we work with. Mapping the influence different actors have in each environment is crucial for working for more sustainable, systemic change.
- **Policy/Advocacy Matrix:** this identifies five stages of success (improved credibility, improved relevance, improved access to decision-makers, increased support for our messages, policy change), using six types of evidence.
- **Our Community Security Learning and Practice Group** has had a significant learning effect across the organisation by bringing together our project officers, coordinators, policy, advocacy, and communications staff. We learn together about how best to work with communities on conflict, insecurity and empowerment. We have consolidated this learning into our *Community Security Handbook*.
- **Cross-organisational participation in evaluation teams:** we enable, where we can, those working in one region to join any evaluation team in another. We develop internal Terms of Reference for these staff, based on a focused aspect that we want to learn about, and share, from one location to another.

## **About Saferworld**

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Europe.

**Saferworld** – 28 Charles Square, London N1 6HT, UK  
 Registered Charity no 1043843  
 Company limited by guarantee no 3015948  
 Tel: +44 (0)20 7324 4646 | Fax: +44 (0)20 7324 4647  
 Email: [general@saferworld.org.uk](mailto:general@saferworld.org.uk)  
 Web: [www.saferworld.org.uk](http://www.saferworld.org.uk)

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