

Outcome Harvesting Substantiation Decision-Making Tool (August 2025)

Thank you for reviewing and/or testing this draft tool! Please add any feedback on the tool at [this link](#)

You may also send any questions to the tool authors:

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Introduction to the Tool

Why do we need this tool?

- Outcome Harvesting is a powerful qualitative method that centralizes project participants in telling and analyzing their stories of change. **Substantiation is one step of OH: it is when you engage with external/independent/third-party knowledgeable individuals (called ‘Substantiators’)¹ to validate outcome and contribution descriptions made by project/program participants.**
- Substantiation is meant to serve as a triangulation process and using third-party individuals is intended to maintain rigor and avoid bias. Some practitioners see substantiation as a key differentiator of OH compared to other qualitative methods, hence why it is important to do it well. Yet many struggle to know how or to what extent they should execute this step most faithfully to maintain rigor but within the limitations of their study/evaluation.

Purpose of the Tool:

- This tool provides simple guidance on deciding if and how to carry out substantiation (its purpose, its intensity) during your Outcome Harvest and depending on your specific context; it supplements Chapter 5 of Ricardo Wilson-Grau’s Outcome Harvesting book².
- This tool does not give you specific substantiation models; rather, you, as the harvester, need to make considerations and decisions (and justify/explain them).

Assumptions made about the Outcome Harvesting and substantiation process:

- Outcome Harvesting can be used for both monitoring and evaluations. In this tool we call the authors of the outcome statements the “harvesters”. When using this substantiation tool, it is important to recognize that the role of the harvester differs between monitoring and evaluation. In monitoring, the harvesting process occurs internally, typically led by MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning) staff members. Substantiation does not happen after each harvest but is often time-bound, and someone within the MEL team, internally, is responsible for coordinating the substantiation process (substantiation coordinator). In contrast, during evaluations, the external evaluator coordinates the substantiation process. The outcome statements to be substantiated by the latter stem *either* from a harvest overseen by the evaluator, *or* from harvests overseen by MEL staff (when monitoring results). To make this distinction throughout the substantiation tool, the terms “internal harvester” and “external harvester” will be used.
- We assume that the evaluator facilitated a process in which other people were the harvesters (the authors of the outcome statements).
- Substantiation with third-party individuals is always the gold standard. However, we acknowledge there might be some limitations to how you do this. Therefore, this tool gives you different options to work with.

¹ Substantiator = person who verifies information on outcomes harvested. Harvester(s) or study lead (analyst) = the person who does the substantiation consultations

² Note: for more information on Outcome Harvesting or substantiation, you can consult the book, outcomeharvesting.net or betterevaluation.com/outcomeharvesting.

How to Use the Tool

Step 1: Your substantiation purpose

First, answer if you are using OH for monitoring or for formative/ summative evaluation purposes. **This may determine whether you substantiate at all at this time.**

Step 2: Review harvested outcomes & parameters (constraints, needs)

Step 2a: Review all harvested outcomes to determine the criteria for your substantiation model.

AND

Step 2b: List your potential constraints/ parameters you have for the substantiation (for example: budget constraints, lack of access to substantiators, time constraints)

Step 3: Design your substantiation model

Now you are ready to substantiate!

- First, look at the needs you identified for specific outcomes in step 2. Can you fill those needs with existing data sources?
- If not, you plan for substantiating with third-party individuals.

The Tool

Step 1: Your substantiation purpose

1. Are you using Outcome Harvesting for monitoring only or for formative/summative evaluation purposes?

- a) **You are using it for monitoring only.** In that case, you don't need to substantiate after each harvest. Substantiation can be necessary for specific uses or after a certain period. For example, when you want to enhance the reliability of outcome data for use in the final evaluation, for external communication purposes, or for fundraising, etc. Or simply because many outcomes have been harvested over a long period and it is preferable to authenticate the outcomes now, as meaningful access to substantiators is still possible. When you decide to substantiate the outcomes obtained through monitoring, you can use this tool. To avoid bias, the substantiation process should be led by a person, e.g. a MEAL Advisor, that is sufficiently independent from the program
- b) **You are using it for formative and/or summative evaluation.** Substantiation is one of the six steps that you need to apply as part of the outcome harvesting process. The right time to substantiate is just after you have harvested all the outcomes. Once you have established that you are going to substantiate, it is essential to determine what the **use/purpose of the substantiation** is, as this will influence which outcomes to select for substantiation. For example, suppose we want to improve our ToC based on a more precise understanding of how our outcomes emerged. In that case, we substantiate the outcomes where we doubted the accuracy of our contribution to the outcome. Suppose the donor needs the evaluation report for accountability purposes. In that case, the outcome statement will be selected based on the extent to which there's doubt or disagreement about the information in the outcome statement (these would be the ones sampled). Lastly, and equally important is **what your audience is**:
- External audience (required for publication, technical brief, donor with donors, disagreement at the stakeholder level, etc.)
 - Internal audience (for new program design, documenting the impact of the program, reporting purposes, etc.)

Your level of confidence in the results should be high, irrespective of your audience. It is important to know the audience to help contextualize the results and frame your final product.

Step 2a: Review all harvested outcomes

Instructions: Review all your harvested outcomes (yourself or with a team of people) using the table template below:

1. Review all outcomes
2. List them on the table
3. Ask yourself questions for each outcome

Please think about the following throughout the table:

Do you have potential substantiators *identified* for each outcome?³

- If yes, list the substantiator(s)
- If no, please begin to think about who will be able to substantiate this outcome and ask your human sources for contact details

General questions to consider for each outcome statement. These can determine the criteria you are going to use for selecting your outcomes to substantiate:

1. Which outcome statements are unclear/incomplete/ do you need more information on?
 - o Assess this based on the outcome, the significant and the contribution of the outcome
2. Which outcome statements do you doubt the accuracy of the outcome, the contribution, or both?
3. What is the level of significance of the outcome compared to other outcomes?
4. Are we looking to obtain a different perspective about how the change and contribution happened?
5. Do we want to understand the outcome and contribution claim
6. Are there confidentiality issues we need to consider that might limit which outcomes we can substantiate?

The WORKSHEET on the next page helps you decide which outcomes need substantiation. Instructions: **You can add these columns to your existing data sheet.** For each outcome (list each outcome per row), answering these questions helps to design your substantiation approach.

The table below will help you explain **your criteria for substantiation:**

- Why do you want to substantiate specific outcomes
- Why not other outcomes
- What was your rationale for substantiating some outcomes vs others

³ If you don't have access to substantiators and/or didn't manage to get any names, then the outcome can't be substantiated and you'll need to mention this under the limitations of the study.

WORKSHEET to decide which outcomes need substantiation.

Instructions: You can add these columns to your existing data sheet. For each outcome (list each outcome per row), answer these questions helps to design your substantiation approach.

	Outcome Statement	Q1 What do you need?	Q2 What do you need more info on?	Q3 Do you have existing sources which can provide enough of this information?	Q4 Significance compared to other outcomes?	Q5 Existing sources? And/or substantiator names and contact info
#	Brief sentence describing the outcome (or: the outcome title)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unclear/incomplete? Determine Accuracy Level of significance of the outcome Different perspective Outcome and Contribution claim Confidentiality 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yes/No 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You might already have in your datasheet a column with ratings for significance Or you can add this to help you decide which outcomes to substantiate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you have existing sources that can help you verify accuracy of the outcome description? Yes/No Potential substantiator(s): <i>please list the names</i>
Ex	More women opened businesses in province A	Need to confirm accuracy of contribution	Which part of the increase in women-owned businesses happened in synergy with the simultaneous and similar intervention by NGO X?	We know the # of new businesses opened, but need info on the proportion that resulted from synergy with Z's interventions	Outcome is significant in relation to our ToC, and relates directly to a strategic objective	Representative Chamber of Commerce province P; representative of NGO X?
#1						
#2						
....						

Step 2b: Study parameters (needs, constraints)

Instructions: Now, lay out your study parameters, needs, and any constraints by filling in this table.

Question Prompt	Your responses
Budget	
Staff resources: Which person/people are available to conduct the substantiation?	
Locations of potential substantiators (geographic spread)	
Social/cultural considerations/security considerations/Other:	
How will you conduct the substantiation? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Written communication?• Will it be virtual or in-person?• Need to ensure safe space by enabling individual responses?	
Time: How much time do you have to engage with substantiators?	
Sensemaking/Report: If you ´re doing sensemaking first, when will this happen? When does the report on the outcomes need to be ready?	

Step 3: Design your substantiation model

Instructions: Now you can design your Substantiation Model based on your answers in steps 2a (which outcomes need substantiation) and 2b (your parameters, needs, and constraints) by answering these 5 questions:

1. How many outcomes will you be (or can) you substantiating?

- a) **All** outcomes (if your resources allow for this)
- b) **Targeted** sample (purposive)

Considerations:

- Do you need to deepen and broaden your understanding of the outcome?
 - Select those outcomes where you want to gather more information or additional perspectives.
- Are you conducting substantiation to verify the accuracy of the data in the outcome and contribution descriptions?
 - Select those outcomes where there is doubt or disagreement about the information in the outcome statement
- Are you conducting substantiation to gain more knowledge on the contribution of the project and/or the contribution of others?
 - Select those outcomes where you want to know who and to what extent they contributed.

2. If you have existing sources (documents, websites, articles, etc.), review them and determine if they provide enough information to triangulate your outcome description.

- **Yes**--Existing documentation provides sufficient information to verify the accuracy and completeness of the outcome description only.
- **No**--Inconclusive written evidence exists; it does not validate the outcome statement (including contribution description)
 - In this case, consulting third-party substantiators is necessary.

Considerations:

- If **you already have existing data sources** that can be used for substantiation (e.g., online evidence of the outcome, pictures of the contribution, published articles, etc.), then you can use those to verify factual information or fill in missing data. However, please note data sources will often NOT provide sufficient information on contribution and therefore consulting third-party individuals will be necessary for this element of substantiation.
- If you **do not have those data sources**, or if these turned out to be inconclusive, or if you want more information about the contribution of the project to the outcome, you would need to substantiate with an external independent substantiator.

3. Virtual or in-person contact with substantiators

- a) Virtual (e.g.: multiple substantiators, various locations, lack of resources for in-person substantiation)
- b) In-person (e.g.: fewer substantiators, connectivity issues, availability of resources for substantiation, use of substantiation meeting beyond just OH)
- c) Hybrid (combination of virtual and in-person)

4. How will you conduct the substantiation? Level of depth in questions asked to substantiators:

- a) Simple questionnaire (e.g.: under 5 questions, closed-ended, often yes/no responses with options to add comments. This may be used when you need limited information and/or if substantiators have limited time)
- b) In-depth discussion (usually 1:1; open-ended questions, get clarifying statements, use of data beyond just OH, substantiators can respond to more in-depth questions)
- c) Focus group discussion (group of people (usually 6-8, other parameters are the same as above)

5. How many substantiators for each sampled outcome?

- Some guidance: Aim at contacting 2-3 substantiators per outcome (anticipating that only 1-2 substantiators may respond). By approaching multiple substantiators for the same outcome you might get different views which could enhance your understanding of the change). *Ideal*: have the same number of substantiators for each outcome. One substantiators can substantiate more than one outcome.

Considerations:

In a rigorous application of OH, consulting external third-party substantiators is a requirement for officially calling this “substantiation”.

Substantiators can be the target beneficiaries or other stakeholders familiar with the project. But please be aware of the potential power dynamics of consulting target beneficiaries and try to mitigate any of these concerns.

NOTE Prior to starting your substantiation, discuss with your team what you will do in case one of these scenarios comes out of the substantiation process:

- What does one *do* with those outcomes that are negatively assessed by substantiators, yet the authors of which, after seeing the substantiators' opinion, maintain that the text truly reflects reality?
- What to do in case substantiators contradict each other on an outcome statement?
- Will you allow harvesters the opportunity to improve the outcome statement?
 - If you are in a substantiation role to make a judgment, then you DO NOT do this.
 - However, if you are substantiating to learn more about how change has taken place in practice, including from other perspectives, then you can discuss the opinion of the substantiator with the author of the outcome statement and offer the possibility of revising the statement.

TEMPLATE: Summary of Your Substantiation Model		
How many outcomes to substantiate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many to substantiate: _____ • Out of how many totals: _____ 	<i>Explanation for why (mention constraints and choices you made above)</i>
Virtual or in-person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtual • In-person • Hybrid 	
Type of consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple QQ • In-depth discussion 1:1 • Focus group discussion 	
# of substantiators per sampled outcome statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 	
Allow harvesters yes/no opportunity to improve outcome statement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 	

Real-life example substantiation approaches

Example #1

Who substantiated: *Third-party substantiators*

How many outcomes: *all outcomes*

How: *simple QQs, in-person*

Examples #2 and 3

Who substantiated: *Third-party substantiators*

How many outcomes: *sample of outcomes*

How: *simple QQs, virtual*

Example 1: In Cambodia, all 17 outcomes were substantiated by target beneficiaries of the program who were independent substantiators. The substantiators were selected based off their knowledge of the program. Each partner was requested to provide the name of 2-3 substantiators for their outcome statements and subsequently a random individual was selected to be the substantiator. Substantiation was done virtually, via phone call, to ensure that all outcomes were substantiated in a timely manner. There were budgetary and time constraints to conducting an in-person substantiation exercise. Since the total number of outcomes was small, all outcomes were substantiated.

Example 2: In Zambia, the USAID-funded Adolescents and Children, HIV Incidence Reduction, Empowerment, and Viral Elimination (ACHIEVE) project delivers social/ health system strengthening interventions to strengthen the capacity of the Ministry of the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services (MCDSS). OH was adapted to measure complex systems strengthening outcomes, especially capacity development and institutional behavioral changes within the ministry.

The internal team led the harvest and harvested less than 10 outcomes. Participants provided the contacts of the substantiators who have been seen or part of the outcomes, and ACHIEVE Zambia substantiated six outcomes with those substantiators.

Example 3: A Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs funded, 5-year, multi-country program. OH used in monitoring policy advocacy: 1,700 outcome statements. Substantiation in ToR for the final evaluation.

Independent external evaluators used contribution analysis. During Covid, they designed & implemented (purposive) sampling strategy, with special attention for outcomes where program claimed high significance & big contribution.

Evaluators selected & contacted the substantiators. Evaluators assessed the strength of the evidence in statements on the outcome and on the contribution (causal linkage). They also expressed their opinion on the necessity of the program's contribution and on its sufficiency.