

## Qualitative Methods Guidance Note for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) at CARE

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### Why is this guidance being developed and who is it for?

CARE recognizes the need to clarify and understand how complex and emergent change happens and to test our theories of change, which is why CARE has begun to explore various theory-based methods such as [Outcome Mapping](#), [Outcome Harvesting](#), [Most Significant Change](#) and [Contribution Tracing](#). Unlike traditional approaches, theory-based approaches “assess the extent to which an intervention has produced or influenced observed results.”<sup>1</sup> The influence of context matters greatly in these approaches and the emphasis on attribution, rather than contribution. The [CARE International MEAL Approach, Principles and Operational Standards for Projects and Initiatives guidance document](#) reminds us that MEAL systems should track qualitative and quantitative changes at impact and outcome levels in order to understand how and why change happens, and if and how CARE is contributing to significant and lasting change. Theory-based methods can help explain what worked (planned or unplanned), how it worked, and why, especially in the complex contexts we have mapped out in our stakeholder mapping and analysis and our theories of change. Recognizing the need to clarify and understand how complex and emergent change happens, in order to test our theories of change, CARE has begun to explore various theory-based methods such as [Outcome Mapping](#), [Outcome Harvesting](#), [Most Significant Change](#) and [Contribution Tracing](#).

**This guidance is intended for MEL focal points** in both programs and advocacy. The guidance aligns with the CI-MEL developed concepts, standards and policies document, and thus any Country Office, program, project or initiative is encouraged to take the tools suggested in this document and use it for their own work.

**This guidance aims to** provide additional insight on various qualitative methods promoted by CARE International to help tell your impact story and how your work contributed to the change. These do not replace existing systems, but they can complement those systems by gathering more qualitative data during or after a project, program or initiative. It also aims to provoke a shift in thinking to include MEL that complements quantitative data for CARE global indicators, and tells a more complete, robust and richer story of change. To clarify, this document provides information on some methods that can be

#### General Principles to keep in mind for all methods

1. **Develop a theory of change** (a hypothesis about actors, factors, domains)
2. **Gather project data on expected change** (e.g. progress markers & outcome challenges)
3. **Review secondary evidence** about “significant” outcomes that we think happened and code your data
4. **Gather primary evidence** to fill gaps in your story (positive & negative) and code your data
5. **Review theory of change** – your “story” of change (test hypotheses about how change actually happened)
6. **Make a judgement/conclusions** about your contribution to change (in light of alternative evidence and alternative hypotheses)
7. **Make recommendations about how to improve practice** (e.g. amend strategy maps for key stakeholders)

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<sup>1</sup> [Centre of Excellence for Evaluation](#), Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat



used for tracking the HOW of change, while the methodological guidance for the core Global Indicators helps track the WHAT of change.

In addition, this document complements **the Impact Growth Strategy Complexity-Aware Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning (MEL) Guidance Note** which provides points on what must be covered in each IGS strategy in terms of M&E; to provoke a shift in thinking to include M&E beyond quantitative data for CARE global indicators, but also to consider context and systems, multipliers and our/their role in the system, and to create a balance between learning and adapting, and accountability.

The document is organized by qualitative method. Within each method, we provide an overview of what the method is about, when it is useful, what is needed to use it, key steps to follow, how it can be used for advocacy, and where to find additional information. For any questions, comments, or clarifications on these methods, please contact [amathies@care.org](mailto:amathies@care.org).

## Outcome Mapping (OM)

Outcome Mapping unpacks an initiative's theory of change by identifying a system's actors and their changes in behavior - actions, activities, relationships, policies or practices – towards a common vision, and supported by key strategies and activities within the initiative. This framework allows the initiative and its key partners to collect, analyze and make sense of these behavioral changes, or change pathways in order to understand, explain and learn from the ways in which change happens. This also allows the team to identify the need to make mid-course improvements, provide rich stories of change, and empower actors to explore and assess their own behavioral change.

### What can this method tell us?

OM helps us to unpack that 'missing middle' – the complex array of relationships and actions that happen between the initiative's activities and longer-term changes. At the planning stage, it can help a program clearly identify the actors and the changes it intends to support and the strategies appropriate to achieve these. At an evaluative stage (monitoring, evaluation or developmental evaluation), it can be used to assess the changes that have happened (planned and unplanned) and what contributed to those changes.

Outcome Mapping can also be used to help track and explain household-level or intra-community behavioral changes. In the [Pathways Program](#) in Mali, Malawi, Tanzania, Ghana, India, and Bangladesh, CARE used Outcome Mapping at the mid-term point to help evaluate men's behavioral changes around production, access to land, and workload sharing, [for example](#). The process helped the project to refine its indicators around behavioral change and show the relative significance of different changes.

### When is this method most useful?

OM can be used at the design, monitoring and / or evaluation stage. It is ideally used with the participation of the key actors the initiative works with, in order to drive self-reflection and social learning.

### What do we need to have in place in order to use this method?

- A theory of change is useful to have in place, though OM can help develop this or complement it by identifying intended (or unintended changes) in behavior as they relate to the theory of change.

- Competencies and systems to be able to collect, organize and analyze qualitative data, and the ability to triangulate this data with other quantitative and qualitative data generated from an initiative’s M&E system.
- Time, space and facilitation skills for sense-making: to ask the ‘so what and now what’ questions.
- A clear idea of the use and users of the data OM will provide.

### Key Steps of OM

OM involves three stages: **Intentional Design, Outcome and Performance Monitoring, and Evaluation Planning**. The Intentional Design stage is the ‘heart’ of OM, and it consists of 7 steps that not only inform design, but also the monitoring and evaluation stages. The [steps](#) are listed below, and more information can be found [here](#):

1. Describe the vision
2. Identify the mission
3. Identify the boundary partners
4. Identify the outcome challenge
5. Develop graduated progress markers
6. Complete a strategy map for each outcome challenge
7. Articulate organizational practices

From there, you must determine the best physical tool to collect data and how to store it, as well as the space and time for analysis and sense-making.

### OM for advocacy:

The RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach<sup>2</sup> (ROMA) is an approach for improving policy engagement processes to ultimately influence change. It can be used to help improve how you engage with policy to influence change. These OM-based approaches help organizations navigate the complex environment of advocacy to understand how policy change really happens and what they can hope to achieve, realistically. More information and the full guide can be found [here](#)<sup>3</sup>.

### Additional resources on OM:

<https://www.outcomemapping.ca/>

[https://www.outcomemapping.ca/download/OM\\_English\\_final.pdf](https://www.outcomemapping.ca/download/OM_English_final.pdf)

[http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/outcome\\_mapping](http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/outcome_mapping)

### Additional guidance for using OM for advocacy:

<http://www.roma.odi.org>

Figure 1: The ROMA Cycle



<sup>2</sup> More information on ROMA can be found here <http://www.roma.odi.org/introduction.html>

<sup>3</sup> Full guide on ROMA can be found here <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9011.pdf>

## Outcome Harvesting (OH)

Outcome Harvesting collects (“harvests”) evidence of what has changed (“defined as outcomes”) and, then, working backwards, determines whether and how an intervention has contributed to these changes. It has proven to be especially useful in complex situations when it is not possible to define up front and concretely most of what an intervention aims to achieve, or even, what specific actions will be taken over a multi-year period.

### What can this method tell us?

This method describes whether and how your initiative has contributed to outcomes, defined as changes in the behavior — actions, activities, relationships, policies or practices — of one or more actors. It allows staff to identify, formulate, verify, analyze and interpret ‘outcomes’ in programming contexts where relations of cause and effect are not fully understood.

### When is this method most useful?

The approach is similar to sciences such as forensics, criminal justice or archaeology. It does not measure progress towards predetermined outcomes or objectives, rather, it can only be applied when a project/initiative has completed the implementation of actions and, only then, the method helps collect evidence of what has been achieved, and works backwards to determine whether and how the project or intervention contributed to that change.<sup>4</sup>

### What do we need to have in place in order to use this method?

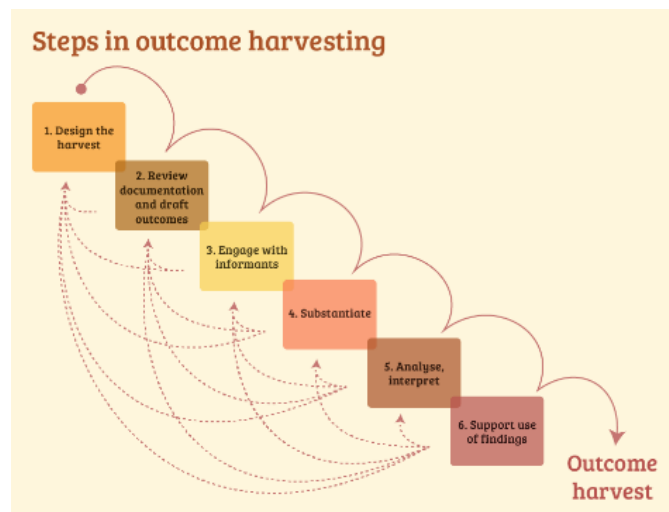
OH requires competencies and systems to be able to collect, organize and analyze qualitative data, and the ability to triangulate this data with other quantitative and qualitative data generated from an initiative’s M&E system.

### Key steps of OH:

1. Design the harvest
2. Review documentation and draft outcomes
3. Engage with informants
4. Substantiate
5. Analyze, interpret
6. Support use of findings

### OH for advocacy:

OH can help judge the merit, significance or worth of the advocacy effort by exploring the depth and meaning of patterns among the actual outcomes harvested, in relation to the intended outcomes of the group. It can bring rigor to organizations’ ability to assess to what extent their advocacy strategies are contributing towards their long-term intended outcomes.



### Additional resources on OH

<http://outcomeharvesting.net/>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/outcome\\_harvesting](http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/outcome_harvesting)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6UukxFBYell>

[http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/outcome\\_harvesting](http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/outcome_harvesting)

**Additional guidance for using OH for advocacy:**

<https://www.outcomemapping.ca/resource/the-value-of-the-outcome-harvesting-tool-in-evaluating-advocacy-organizations>

## Contribution Tracing (CT)

Contribution Tracing (CT) is a rigorous quali-quantitative approach that is used to help you test the validity of claims about your contribution towards achieving an impact. Essentially, you make a “claim” about your intervention’s role in achieving a change that really happened (your contribution), and then find evidence to defend your claim, increasing or decreasing your confidence about that claim.

Contribution Tracing combines Process Tracing and Bayesian Updating. It allows an organization to use mathematical probability to back up their qualitative contribution claims.<sup>5</sup> This can help you be more precise and rigorous. To give an example, we might see this in Peru’s advocacy work on nutrition policy. CT would recommend us to narrow the focus of precisely where we (CARE) thought we had the most influence in improving nutrition policy in Peru. The Child Nutrition Initiative (CNI) encompassed a variety of aspects that could lead to policy adoption, but where we felt we were strongest was in its role in getting the government of Peru to commit to tackling nutrition as a priority- most notably through the 5x5 campaign which challenged presidential candidates to sign a pledge to do something about malnutrition if they were elected.<sup>6</sup> Over time, this increased political commitment translated into improved nutrition security for over 450,000 children and their families.

### What can this method tell us?

Contribution tracing tells you what evidence is most compelling. It can also essentially tell you when your claim of contribution is not unique and therefore, for something like advocacy, your influence may be weak. The reason for this is because you have to rate your evidence and say whether you would still expect to see the change even if your theory of change was false. For instance, is it possible, based on the evidence, that someone else could have made the change, or is the change so unique that it is hard to believe another actor contributed to that change? In other words, the more unique your input, the more confident you can be about the level of your influence.

### When is this method most useful?

CT is most useful when a change has happened, and you want to make a claim about your contribution toward that change, when you are confident you have had a significant influence and you want a rigorous way to show how.

You can show your contribution, even when change processes are complex and make credible impact claims, without a counterfactual. It can help answer how and why questions pertaining to the intervention. Questions include:

- How/why did the intervention work?
- How/why did the intervention make a difference?

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/contribution-tracing-brand-new-evaluation-approach-prove-brown>

<sup>6</sup> Add link to Peru report here

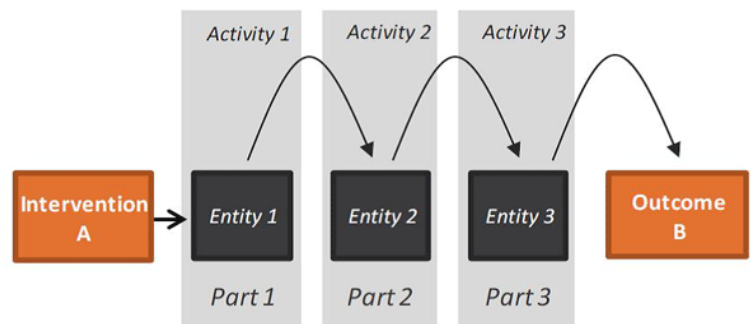
- What role did the intervention play in the achievement of the outcome?
- What was the contribution of the intervention to the outcome?
- How did the intervention contribute to the outcome?
- How confident are we that the intervention made a contribution?

#### What you need to have in place in order to use this method:

- A clearly stated theory of change for the program, project or initiative.
- A hypothesis (a proposed explanation) about how you think change happened
- A space to review the connection between different steps (or components) in that process.
- Reliable data from multiple independent sources to help confirm (or refute) what we believe.

#### Key steps of CT:

1. Making a claim about your contribution to an outcome
2. Develop a Theory of Change (a causal chain of actors and activities)
3. Identify what evidence would support or undermine your claim (each step in the chain)
4. Apply the principles of process tracing hypothesis tests to identity evidence to support/reject the claim; combined with assignation of two probabilities (Sensitivity and Type I Error) to identify evidence with highest probative value
5. Apply Bayesian Confidence Updating (putting a number on it) to assess confidence in the claim.
6. Seek out additional evidence and identify alternative causes for the change
7. Hold a 'Contribution Trail' by your peers and adjust your confidence scores.



#### CT for advocacy:

Similar to how it is used for programs, CT allows us to identify how the organization contributed to the policy change, and helps us understand the process of change. CT can be used to test claims and answer questions such as how did our campaign contribute to the policy change? What moments in our campaign were most significant? What specific proposals were taken on board by policy-makers?

#### Additional resources for CT:

Barbara Befani and Gavin Stedman-Bryce (2017) Process Tracing and Bayesian updating for impact evaluation, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1356389016654584>

Anne-Murray Brown (2016) Contribution tracing: a brand new evaluation approach <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/contribution-tracing-brand-new-evaluation-approach-prove-brown>

Tom Aston (2017) Capturing complex change: Is it really all about confidence? <http://insights.careinternational.org.uk/development-blog/governance/capturing-complex-change-is-it-really-all-about-confidence>



Tom Aston (2017) How to avoid toolsplaining: thinking differently about social accountability  
<https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/development-blog/how-to-avoid-toolsplaining-thinking-differently-about-social-accountability>

Contribution Tracing Video Series: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCeu34i7dbMKzq7zwDoD90bw>

### Additional guidance for using CT for advocacy:

Gavin Stedman-Bryce (2013) Effectiveness Review: Health for All: Towards Free Universal Health Care in Ghana <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/effectiveness-review-health-for-all-towards-free-universal-health-care-in-ghana-306376>

## Most Significant Change (MSC):

Most Significant Change is a form of monitoring and evaluation specifically catered towards complex programs. It involves generating and analyzing personal stories of change from a program/ initiative and deciding which of these stories is the most significant – and why. Unlike traditional methodologies, MSC is known for ‘monitoring without indicators’ and uses a ‘story’ based approach. It can be used as both a form of monitoring and evaluation, occurring during the program cycle while also providing data on impact and outcomes. MSC is not just about collecting and reporting stories but about having processes to learn from these stories and understand the effects of the intervention on people’s lives.<sup>7</sup>

CARE has employed Most Significant Change to support various projects in the Andes, including the Strengthening Andean Organizations in Public Policy Advocacy in Food Security in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru project. The method was particularly useful in identifying the most (and least) successful practices which led to changes and lessons learned in the process. It also helped provide a clear framework for guiding questions in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

### What can this method tell us?

MSC can be very helpful in explaining HOW change comes about (processes and causal mechanisms) and WHEN (in what situations and contexts). It can tell a more detailed, richer understanding of the effects of the intervention and learning what stakeholders consider the ‘difference that makes a difference.’ MSC asks participants a question such as, “Looking back over the last month, what do you think was the most significant change in [particular domain of change]?”

After those stories are collected and examined, the next group of participants are asked, “From all these significant changes, what do you think was the most significant change of all?” This process of examination allows us to make sense of a large amount of complex information collected from “participants across a range of settings.”



### When is this method most useful?

<sup>7</sup> Most information in this section has been taken from the “[The ‘Most Significant Change’ \(MSC\) Technique Guide](#)” found here.

This method is most useful for complex programs that are focused on social change. Since there are no predetermined indicators in this method, it can be used to complement existing MEL systems and provide richer data to tell your impact and outcome story. It can easily be applied across cultures as it is often easier for people to tell stories of events they consider important in their life. It's also very useful for programs that are struggling with conventional monitoring systems.

### What you need to have in place in order to use this method:

MSC can be used in any program/ initiative that focuses on social change. Since it does not focus on the conventional monitoring and evaluation tools, what is most needed for MSC is openness to try something different, an organizational culture where it is acceptable to discuss successes and failures and how to learn from both, as well as infrastructure to enable regular feedback of results to the stakeholders.

### Key steps of MSC:

MSC can be easily adapted to fit your program/initiative's needs. However this list of ten is considered the "comprehensive overview of what a 'full' implementation of MSC might look like." More details on each of these steps can be found in the guide [here](#).

1. Getting started: establishing champions and getting familiar with the process
2. Defining the 'domains of change'
3. Defining the reporting period
4. Collecting significant change stories
5. Selecting the most significant of the stories
6. Feeding back the results of the selection process
7. Verification of stories
8. Quantification
9. Secondary analysis and meta-monitoring
10. Revising the system



### MSC for Advocacy:

This technique can be used to identify and document changes in support and critical events without using indicators. It is important to determine what type of significant change we are looking at, by defining the scope of what significant change can entail (who is the audience, who benefits from the change, as well as certain change domains or 'categories' of change). Since advocacy campaigns can and will vary in scope, it's important to identify what change domains we are analyzing and focus on the type of change. For example, if a policy is implemented, MSC can be used to discuss significant changes since the policy has been implemented. Or if assessing the advocacy strategy, MSC can be used to identify tactics that participants felt were the most significant. It is important to define your scope before collecting MSC stories.

### Additional resources on MSC:

<http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf>

[http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/most\\_significant\\_change](http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/most_significant_change)

### Additional guidance for using MSC in advocacy:

[http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/resources/guides/Learners\\_practitioners\\_teachers](http://www.betterevaluation.org/en/resources/guides/Learners_practitioners_teachers)