Qualitative and Open-ended M&E:

Experiences with Outcome Harvesting in DRC and Uganda

In late 2023, FH Suisse (Food for the Hungry) and Interaction carried out two Outcome Harvesting Evaluations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Uganda. This summary paper presents the outcome harvesting approach in general terms, the objectives of the evaluations, methodology, findings, lessons learned, and recommendations. This paper has two purposes. Firstly, elaborating the outcome harvesting approach to practitioners with no prior experience in using outcome harvesting. Secondly, summarising and synthesizing the two outcome harvesting evaluations.

What is Outcome Harvesting?

It is a monitoring & evaluation (M&E) approach used to identify, describe, verify, and analyse changes created by a project. It collects evidence and then works backwards to assess how a project contributed to that change. Outcome Harvesting is very participatory as it includes engagement with various stakeholders at different steps. It was developed by Ricardo Wilson Grau and Heather Britt[1]. For more information refer to this brief[2].

Outcome Harvesting terminology
The term **Outcome** does not necessarily refer to the outcome statement in a logframe; rather it means any *"change in the behaviour, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of an individual, group, community, organization, or institution"*[3].
*A **Change Agent** is an individual or organisation that influences an outcome. In outcome harvesting the change agent is often an organisation running a project or programme.*[4]
*A **Social Sctor** is an individual, group, community, organisation or institution that changes because of a change agent's intervention.*[5]
*A **Harvest User** is the stakeholder who needs the findings of an outcome harvest to make decisions or take action. This may include one or more people within the change agent organisation, or third parties such as a donor.*[6]
*A **Harvester** is the person or people responsible for managing the outcome harvest. The harvester is often an internal or external evaluator. The harvester leads the outcome harvesting process, and facilitates and supports participation within the process.* [7]

Left: Tomato garden of a Farmer Group in Lokales, Amudat, Uganda © Elijah McQuinn Uganda Ltd.

Right: Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with Women Groups in Nyangezi, DRC © Grace Rubambura

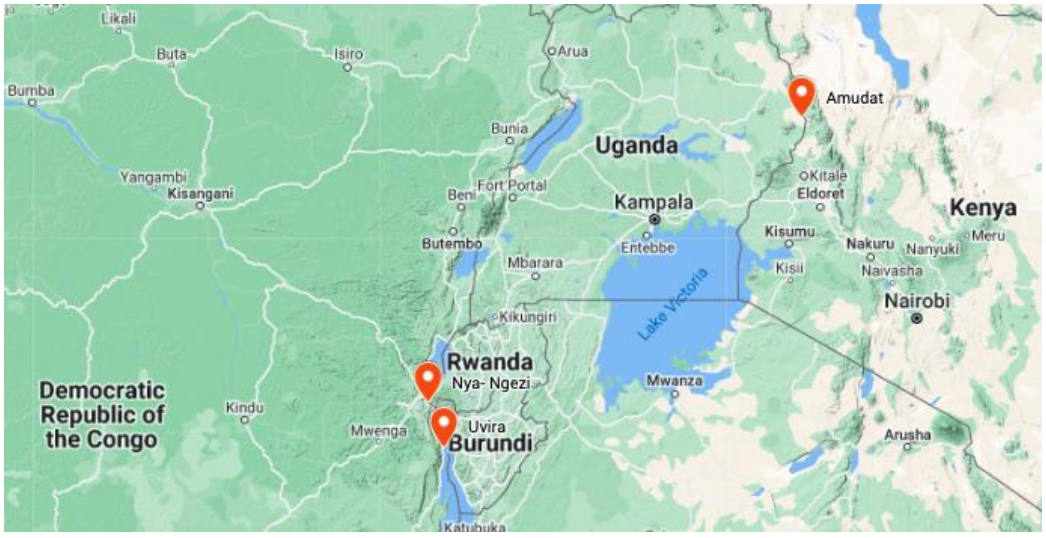
[1] Wilson-Grau, R and Britt, H (2013). *Outcome Harvesting*. Ford Foundation.
[2] INTRAC (2017). *Outcome Harvesting*.
[3] Wilson-Grau, R and Britt, H (2013). *Outcome Harvesting*. Ford Foundation, p. 2.
[4] INTRAC (2017). *Outcome Harvesting*.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

The Evaluation

	DRC	*Uganda*
What was evaluated?	2 projects in Nya-Ngezi and Uvira; reaching 2'200 farmers, incl. coffee farmers. Implemented 2020 through 2024.	2 projects in Amudat; reaching 2'400 farmers, mainly pastoralists. Implemented 2022 through 2025.
Projects' goals	Strengthening the capacities of farmers and members of society to promote an agro-ecological transition. The agro-ecological transition aims at modifying the food system to achieve food security and to make it sustainable and resilient in the face of climate change, land degradation and other possible upheavals.	
Key Evaluation questions	The use of Outcome Harvesting aimed to answer the following key questions: - What intended or unintended positive or negative outcomes (changes) occurred? Who has changed? When and where did this change happen? - How did Food for the Hungry (FH) contribute to making the effects or outcomes happen? - What are advantages and disadvantages of integrating qualitative elements into FH's M&E practices?	
Change Agents	FH staff, lead farmers, Provincial Inspection of Agriculture and Education Division.	FH staff, lead farmers and external trainers hired under the program.
Social Actors (Project Participants)	Farmers' community members, lead farmers, (members of) cooperatives and (leadership of) school.	Agro-pastoral community members, lead farmers, (members of) water user committee, cooperatives and (leadership of) schools and health centres.
Harvest Users	Primary: FH DRC Secondary: FH Suisse, Interaction, Fédération genevoise de coopération (FGC)	Primary: FH Uganda Secondary: FH Suisse, Interaction, Fédération genevoise de coopération (FGC)
Harvesters (Evaluators)	Elijah McQuinn Uganda Ltd. (Koen Sneyers, Sarah Kalembe); Interaction (Nicola Malacarne)	Grace Rubambura; Interaction (Nicola Malacarne)
Reports	Final report / Outcome Database, February 2024	Final Report / Outcome Database, February 2024

Google Map of the Great Lakes region in East Africa

Project locations in DRC (Nya-Ngezi, Uvira) and Uganda (Amudat) are marked with red pins.



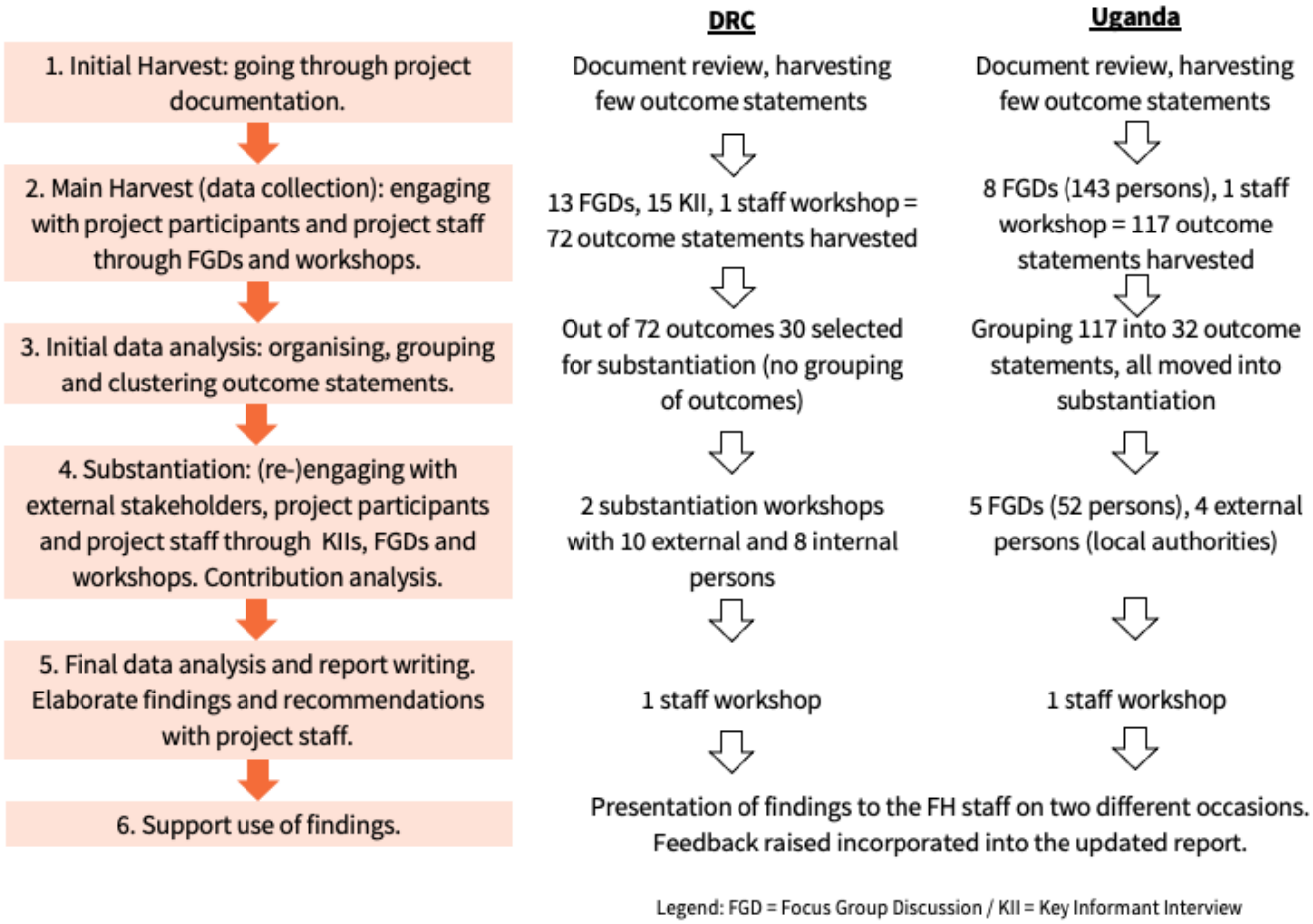
Methodological Approach

The evaluation employed the Outcome Harvesting (OH) approach through a 6-step process, as the illustration below shows. OH is a participatory, outcome-focused, qualitative method. Throughout the evaluation process, the evaluators (harvesters) and change agents (FH staff) focused on identifying and formulating outcome statements in order to substantiate changes - intended and unintended, positive or negative - that occurred as a result of FH DRC and FH Uganda project activities.

After harvesting outcome statements in steps 1 and 2, the evaluators analysed data by organising, clustering and grouping the statements (step 3). Thereafter, they went back to social actors (project participants) and reached out to external stakeholders not directly involved in the projects but with knowledge about it. This allowed to **substantiate** the outcome statements and assess FH's **contribution** (step 4).

Step 4: Outcome Harvesting terminology
Substantiation: The process by which an outcome and its description are verified and validated. This requires at a minimum triangulation, but more data points help to provide a better- detailed description of the outcome and how a change agent contributed.
Contribution: A verifiable explanation of how the change agent caused or substantially influenced a change to occur.

Hence, OH does not only collect data from social actors (project participants) but involves them in data analysis. Similarly, FH staff were involved throughout the process during workshops and field work contributing to the harvest and data analysis. The final data analysis (step 5) and findings are presented in the next chapter.



Evaluation Findings

	DRC *72 outcome statements, thereof 30 substantiated* *→ full outcome DRC Database*	***Uganda*** *117 outcome statements, grouped into 32 statements, all substantiated* *→ full Uganda Database*
What has changed	All outcomes except 1 were positive, while 90% of the 72 outcomes were intentionally planned. 70% of outcomes related to the application of agro-ecological practices. More than half included increased crop production and around a third income increase.	90% of the 117 outcomes were positive, and intentionally planned. Most outcomes related to increased crop production and storage, second most related to WASH behaviour changes.
Unintended Changes	6 unintended positive outcomes harvested. Examples: - Social cohesion was strengthened within farmer groups. Since the start of group learning through the demonstration fields, households in the community feel much closer to each other and now meet more often, hence their cohesion has improved. - The conflict between farmers and breeders was managed through stable breeding. Livestock breeding has greatly reduced conflicts between breeders and farmers because of the wandering of animals that had occured frequently.	10 unintended positive and 4 unintended negative outcomes harvested. Examples: - Positive: The pro-active inclusion of the Karacuna youth into the groups contributed to enhanced security in the region. - Negative: The oxen and ox ploughs were distributed to the farmer groups to facilitate land opening; however, these were not used. Farmers consider selling them.
Level of Change	90% of changes occurred at individual/ household level, while they started to influence community level change. One third of outcomes demonstrate community involvement in agro-ecological practices.	Most of the changes occurred at the individual/ household and group level with less change happening at community or government level so far.
Sustainability of Change[8]	Most changes are replicating level (88%) showing that the changes are being disseminated among community members.	Most changes are still at pilot (32%) or sticking level (39%).
FH's Contribution to Change	Trainings (incl. through cascading approach[9]) and awareness raising were the most frequent factors underlining FH's contribution.	The FH strategies of trainings (36%) and input distribution (36%) have been most frequent FH contributors to the outcomes.

[8] Ad Hoc Change (one-off, temporary); Pilot Change (basic change has happened, but fragile); Sticking Change (change has happened, strong among the actors or institutions); Replicating Change (change is getting larger, more actors or locations); Enduring Change (change is throughout the system, and built in).
Classification is based on the Initiative for Global Development's innovation maturity model which has been used in USAID OH evaluations. Refer to: IGD. *Operating models and measurement techniques for private sector-led development. Assessing impact in Nigeria's Niger delta*.

[9] FH trains model farmers on agro-ecology who in turn train further farmers (cascading). This approach, developed by FH, is called the Participatory Agricultural Cascade Extension (PACE) approach.

The outcomes were rated for how significant[10] the respondents found them to be and how important FH's contribution[11] was to achieve them, both on a scale from 1-10. The following table presents an overview.

Overall, ratings of significance and contribution were found to be high, while DRC achieved higher scores than Uganda. This seems reasonable given that in DRC project activities shave been active for longer and the context is more conducive to agriculture. The quantitative monitoring data explained in the next section allows a similar conclusion.

The strength of OH lies in its participatory approach, the width and depth of outcome descriptions, as well as in establishing the specific contribution of FH, and less so in quantifying information.

Social actors and FH staff gave higher ratings than external stakeholders in Uganda, which is in line with expectations. External stakeholders are more neutral and critical in their assessment. In DRC there seem to be no substantial differences between actors. In Uganda, external actors were most critical about FH's contribution, giving the lowest average rating. The variability in the data - the difference between minimum and maximum values - was highest for social actors in Uganda and for FH staff in DRC.

		Significance			***Contribution***		
Country	*Statistics*	*Social Actors*	*External Stake-holders*	*FH Staff*	*Social Actors*	*External Stake-holders*	*FH Staff*
DRC (72 statements for social actors and FH staff; 30 statements for external stakeholders)	Minimum value	6.0	7.0	2.0	7.0	7.0	4.0
	Mean (average)	**8.4**	**8.6**	**8.2**	**8.5**	**8.7**	**9.2**
	Median	8.0	9.0	8.0	8.0	9.0	10.0
	Maximum value	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0	10.0
Uganda (32 combined statements for all)	Minimum value	1.5	4.8	4.0	2.0	5.0	5.0
	Mean (average)	**8.3**	**7.2**	**7.6**	**8.9**	**6.5**	**8.0**
	Median	9.0	7.3	7.5	9.8	6.5	6.5
	Maximum value	10.0	8.3	10.0	10.0	7.7	7.7

These numerical ratings have to be interpreted with utmost caution. First, the sample is purposive and not statistically representative of all social actors (project participants). Second, the ratings are highly subjective. Factors such as social norms and culture, and how the projects engaged with social actors influence the level of optimism or pessimism. Third, the evaluations in DRC and Uganda were conducted by different evaluators, the setting and way the questions were posed will have affected results.

In conclusion, the numeric ratings on significance and contribution are limited in their explanatory power. At best they can be used to triangulate other information, but as stand-alone information, they have to be interpreted with caution. The strength of OH lies in its participatory approach, the width and depth of outcome descriptions, as well as in establishing the specific contribution of FH, and less so in

[10] "On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is "not very significant to people's lives" and 10 being "highly significant to people's lives", please select where you believe this outcome falls."
[11] "On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is "Happened without FH project" and 10 is "Only happened because of FH project," please select where you think this outcome falls."

quantifying information. The following outcome description shows the width and depth of information collected. The full set of harvested outcome descriptions can be found here: DRC Database / Uganda Database.

	Example of an Outcome Description from DRC
Outcome	In a 400m^2 field of cassava we could barely total 20kg during harvest, but currently we harvest at least 100kg on the same area.
Description	Before FH, the local available Cassava cuttings could barely yield good cassava. It was rare to harvest even 100kg in a hectare of land, but since FH came with the cuttings, the whole community has witnessed change in their harvest/production.
Significance	Before the project, there no good quality cassava cuttings were available. The ones we had could no longer produce well and the yield was too low. When FH gave us a new variety of Cassava cuttings and taught us agro-ecological practices, including mulching and spacing, we saw a real change in our yield and our revenue was impacted.
FH Contribution	Providing Cassava cuttings that are of good quality is part of the objective to producing balanced and abundant food by farming families whose dignity is restored thanks to agro-ecological practices. Through this, the assisted communities improved their yield, and as a result diversified their revenues.

Testimonials

For more than a decade, our farms were no longer producing, basically due to the lack of technical skills that could enhance our abilities to harvest more and diversified food and due to the poverty/infertility of our soil. Before the free of education policy could start its implementation, parents had a hard time to make ends meet and ultimately could not send their children to school, as the primary source of their revenue was their farms and livestock. All of this changed with the coming of the Agro-ecology program implemented by FH. Farmers can now harvest more, sell their surplus, have livestock breeding, then take care of their households, all of this thanks to FH program.
School director in Nyangezi (DRC).

Before the FHU (FH Uganda) project, I used to harvest an average of 2 bags of maize from 1 acre of land. After learning and practicing agro-ecological practices like making and applying organic manure, row planting and crop rotation, I now harvested in the first season of February 2023, 10 bags of maize from 1 acre,
according to one of the women in Amuna village womens' FGD (Uganda).

Before the FHU project, we used to access water from the river Chepkararat, which is about 4 kilometers away from our village. This is a seasonal river, and we would dig small sand water ponds to access water. The water had mercury since the local community members use mercury for mining gold from the river. We would drink, bathe and use that water for any purpose. As a result, we would suffer from water borne diseases not less than 3 times a month. Diarrhea and typhoid were the commonest diseases. Now we can spend a month without experiencing such diseases,
male youth from Amuna village (Uganda).

I feel like being commissioned to spreading good practices of agro-ecology to my family, my neighbors and everyone willing to be an agent of change. I am not forced to do it because I know if the word is not spread enough, we will remain in the same conditions we were in before this project could start and our community will remain underdeveloped.
FGD member, Mumosho (DRC).

What does quantitative monitoring data say?

This section requires knowledge of statistics. ⚠

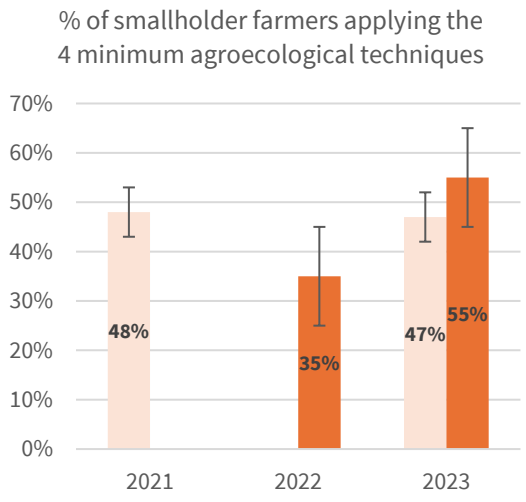
The data presented below was collected as part of FH's annual monitoring through randomly sampled and structured surveys at household level in 2021, 2022 and 2023.[12]

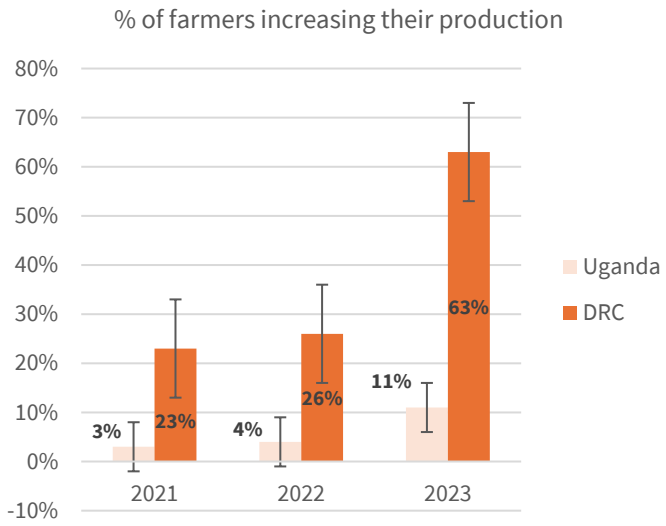
The significant increase in production in both countries matches with the harvested outcomes – increased crop production being the most commonly harvested outcome.

The uptake of agro-ecological practices[13] in 2023 has reached similar levels in the DRC and Uganda, i.e. 55% and 47%. The difference between the two countries is not significantly different in statistical terms.[14] However, there seems to be a significant difference in production increase: In DRC, 63% of farmers experienced a production increase in 2023, while in Uganda only 11% of farmers experienced this. This may have to do with the soil in DRC being more responsive and quicker in showing production increases. Further, in Amudat, Uganda, farming activities are strongly gendered. While men rear livestock, women perform agricultural farming. In the evaluation this has been pointed out to be a potential barrier for the uptake of agro-ecology. This is aggravated by women's lower decision-making power in the family. This calls for a continuation of gender empowerment activities in Uganda.

Over time, the share of farmers experiencing a production increase has risen in both Uganda and DRC. However, only the difference from 2022 to 2023 in DRC is statistically significant. More farmers experiencing a production increase over time matches with the harvested outcomes – increased crop production being the most commonly harvested outcome.

Applying agro-ecological practices has remained stable in Uganda. Most farmers apply crop farming side by side livestock rearing. This is different from DRC where crop farming constitutes the vast majority of activities.





[12] DRC: Confidence Interval 95%, Margin of Error 10%. Uganda: Confidence Interval 95%, Margin of Error 5%.
[13] These are permanent soil cover, crop/ plant association, organic fertilizers/ compost (solid and liquid), and agroforestry.
[14] Differences are statistically significant if the Margins of Error of two values do not intersect. Margins of Error are denoted with the black line spanning from below to somewhat above a value.

Strengths and Weaknesses of evaluated Projects

DRC:

The cascading training method was highly effective, facilitating quick dissemination and adoption of agro-ecological practices.[15] The project fostered social cohesion within communities through group learning and collaborative agricultural practices. The successful integration of agro-ecology into school curricula promotes agricultural education and practice from an early age. Overall, significant behavioural and practice changes among farmers, are leading to increased agricultural production.

Weaknesses include that some outcomes were in the pilot phase and require further support to ensure long-term sustainability. Efforts to influence policy changes were hindered by political instability and administrative changes, limiting the project's ability to institutionalize agro-ecology practices. While there were significant resource and role changes, systemic changes were limited due to the political context and the complexity of achieving such transformations.

Uganda:

The project strengths include its integrated programming approach, focusing on a cascading training method which engages with lead farmers.[16] The project showed flexibility in decision-making, gender inclusion, and institutionalization at community level by establishing village savings and loan associations. Overall, the project found many changes at individual and household levels related to increased agricultural production.

Weaknesses lie in the broad geographical coverage limiting impact, conflicting project approaches by the different development actors in the region may lead to confusion by project participants, insufficient consideration of different livelihood zones within Amudat, challenges with water access and seasonal migration, inadequate human resource deployment and language barriers affecting knowledge uptake. Additionally, the lack of involvement of social actors in project conception, and dependency on FHU for agro-inputs raise concerns about long-term viability and community engagement.

Conclusion

While the projects made good progress in the uptake of agro-ecology and agricultural yields, most changes happened at the individual and household levels. No substantial wider community, societal or policy changes could be observed. Furthermore, the changes in Uganda were mainly of pilot nature, while in DRC most changes were being replicated, which is most likely a result of the project having been active longer in the DRC as well as the more favourable conditions for agriculture.

[15] The Participatory Agricultural Cascade Extension (PACE) approach is used. By investing in particular in innovative model farmers (lead farmers) who use good agro-ecological practices and who have the pedagogical capacity to explain their practices and generate enthusiasm. This approach encourages local farmers to be catalysts of change within their communities and create their own extension services with the participation of the community.

[16] Ibid.

Recommendations

DRC

- Engage community leaders more intensely in project activities for ownership and support, including policy advocacy.
- Supply Blue Mountain Jamaica Coffee seedlings as well as vegetable seeds to improve production and boost revenue.
- Educate on agroecology benefits and support related businesses like compost and tree seedlings.
- Facilitate more knowledge sharing among farmers.
- Incentivise lead farmers and target more locations for growth.
- Advocate for agroecology courses in school curriculums.

Uganda

- Target communities more strategically based on criteria allowing agro-ecology, like water access and migration habits.
- Conduct household economy analysis to profile different groups and design targeted intervention strategies. Intervention strategies should recognize livelihood zones and household typologies, emphasizing a stronger animal husbandry component in pastoral zones.
- Streamline geographical scope.
- Recruit more agricultural extension officers.
- Reduce number of activities by dropping the more ambitious ones and focus on those with most value to communities.
- Incorporate practical research and financial coaching for sustainability.
- Increase coordination/collaboration with District Local Government, local CSOs and connect with knowledge networks.

Opportunities and Challenges of using Outcome Harvesting

- In-depth, quality interaction with stakeholders fostering participation and ownership.
- Improved understanding of project outcomes, incl. unexpected ones.
- Emphasize results/ outcomes and not activities/ outputs.
- Multiple phases in the OH process gradually fine-tune insights and contribute to more data accuracy and enhanced credibility.
- Empowering and giving voice to those needed through joint harvesting and analysis of outcomes.

- Qualitative approaches require additional resources and specific expertise. Data analysis is time consuming.
- They face challenges with stakeholder bias.
- Subjective, relying in researcher's interpretations and judgements.
- Does not deliver representative results, which are thus not generalizable.

Acknowledgement
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