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Planning Data Collection in Resettlement Work

Thoughtful data collection is essential when carrying out research, conducting evaluations, and monitoring program performance and impact. A clear, intentional data collection plan helps resettlement professionals collect needed information, draw useful conclusions about programs, and inform program budgets, staffing needs, and timelines. This guide helps you plan data collection processes to gather the information you need for reporting and internal learning.

Identify What You Want to Learn and Why

Before you think about what data you will collect or what methods you will use, clearly define what you want to learn and why.

Brainstorm learning goals

Start by thinking broadly about **what you want to learn**, whether through formative research to inform your program design, ongoing program monitoring, or evaluation. For example, you may seek to:

- Understand what type of services your clients most want and need.
- Track program deliverables and/or client demographic information, like the number of clients served, disaggregated by country of origin, age, and sex.
- Determine whether services are being delivered in compliance with cooperative agreements or according to best practice.
- Assess whether you are seeing the outcomes/changes you expected to see among the clients you served.
- Learn about how an existing program model could be improved or how positive results can be replicated in other locations.
- Understand the factors that influence your results.
- Determine which program or service model is more effective at achieving a particular outcome.

Establish your question(s)

Once you have broadly defined what you want to learn, narrow your focus to identify one or more **specific questions** you are interested in answering.

In some cases, your funder will request specific data, making it easy to identify the data you need to collect. Consider what else you can learn from this data; if you are taking the time to collect it, you should maximize your use of it.

In other cases, your funder might not ask for specific data, but your team may still believe that data will be useful. In those situations, be sure that your data collection is driven by a specific, useful question. For example, you might ask a question that helps you evaluate whether your program achieved what you hoped it would, such as, "What percent of households experiencing food insecurity reported better access to local food resources after our workshop?"

You may also choose to ask research questions, which seek to understand whether there is enough evidence to support the claim that a certain intervention is likely to lead to a specific outcome. For example: "Does participation in weekly peer support group sessions increase the self-rated hopefulness of teenage unaccompanied refugee minors?"

Choose relevant, useful data

Once you have identified the question(s) you want to answer, you can begin considering **what data you will need to answer your question(s).** For each question, ask yourself what information would help you confidently answer it. If your question was very specific, like the above examples, this will be fairly straightforward. In other cases, you may need to think more carefully. For example, if you want to answer a broader question, like what your clients believe the biggest impact of your intensive case management program was, you may decide you want to collect client stories.

Determine What Type of Data You Need

There are two main categories of information: **qualitative** and **quantitative**.

Qualitative information explains what is being studied with words and pictures (such as observations, descriptions, and perceptions).

This information can often be used to answer broad questions like "why?," "how?," and "under what circumstances?" It often explores opinions, feelings, and priorities and can help explain behaviors or beliefs, offering depth of understanding on a given topic.

Tip: Map out all the data points you need to collect to answer your questions and identify the sources of the information. Switchboard's Data Collection Planning Worksheet can help.

Quantitative information measures what is being studied with numbers (such as counts, ratios, percentages, and proportions).[1] It can be standardized across a large population. It can often answer narrowly defined questions, and can help explain the nature, size, frequency, and distribution of a problem.

After determining what you want to learn and why, consider whether you need quantitative or qualitative information, or both, to answer your questions.

Determine Who Can Provide the Information You Need

Once you have confirmed the type of data you need, determine if this information already exists. If so, is it worth collecting again? If you need to collect it, who can provide it? Consider clients, community members, staff, partners, or government institutions. Depending on your question, you may need to include all clients receiving a particular service, or just a certain subgroup or sample of clients.

Consider any factors that might affect your collection of information from these different populations and respond to them. Develop data collection processes that integrate considerations related to sex, culture, and language and, where relevant, rely on trauma-informed practices. Linguistic needs may require translating forms and surveys, training multilingual enumerators, or engaging qualified interpreters. Take time to plan for ethical and appropriate methods for your population.

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[1] Definitions adapted from International Federation of Red Cross Project/Programme M&E Guide, 2011.

Identify Appropriate Data Collection Methods

Depending on the type of data you hope to collect, some methods will be more appropriate than others. Use Switchboard's Overview of Common Data Collection Methods to learn some of the pros and cons of document review, individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), surveys, and observation. If you have the capacity to do so, it can be helpful to use **mixed methods** to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. For example, you may choose to pair a survey with FGDs. Qualitative data can help explain or interpret quantitative findings, adding richness and specific detail.

Whatever the method, you must keep ethical considerations in mind. These include acknowledging power dynamics and how they may affect data collection; upholding participants' right to meaningful, informed consent; ensuring confidentiality (including carefully protecting personally identifying information); and preventing harm. When data collection meets the definition of **human subjects research**, you are legally required to obtain ethical approval from an Institutional Review Board, or IRB.

Consider Human and Financial Resources Needed to Collect Data

Consider what **financial and human resources** would be required to collect, manage, analyze, and disseminate your data using the method you have chosen, then compare these to your existing capacities. Some methods require more resources than others. Often, there is a trade-off between rigor and financial cost. When weighing different possible methods, ask yourself:

- Would you need to design new tools?
- Would tools need to be translated?
- How many people would collect the data?
- What language, data collection, analysis, and design skills would be required of staff?
- Do you have adequate staff with the right skills and time available, or would you need to train them or hire new staff or consultants?
- How much time would be required?
- What resources would you need for transportation or coordination activities?
- What equipment, data plans, or software would you need? Do you have these available, or would you need to purchase them?
- How will you compile and analyze the data? How much time would it take?
- How will you edit, format, and share findings? Can you do editing and formatting in-house, or will you need to hire a vendor?

If there are budget limitations, reassess what data you plan to collect and the methods you will use.

Conclusion

Data collection is a critical part of compliance and learning in resettlement work. When planning data collection, start by being clear about what you want to learn. This will guide your decisions about what data to collect. By considering the type of data you hope to collect and its availability, you can identify an appropriate method to collect that data. While budget constraints may require you to reevaluate your choice of data collection methods, taking a methodical approach as outlined here can help you make the most of your resources you.

Want to see these tips applied in practice? This information guide is accompanied by a case study!

Resources

Sample Informed Consent Form: This Switchboard template can be adapted to your organization and project to ensure that clients are properly informed about any data being collected from them.

Planning for Data Collection and Quality Assurance: This Switchboard eLearning course helps you make decisions about data collection to minimize stress and collect data that serves a clear purpose.

Gaining Staff Buy-in for Data Collection and Entry: This Switchboard guide includes talking points and tips for bringing teammates on board with data tasks.

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