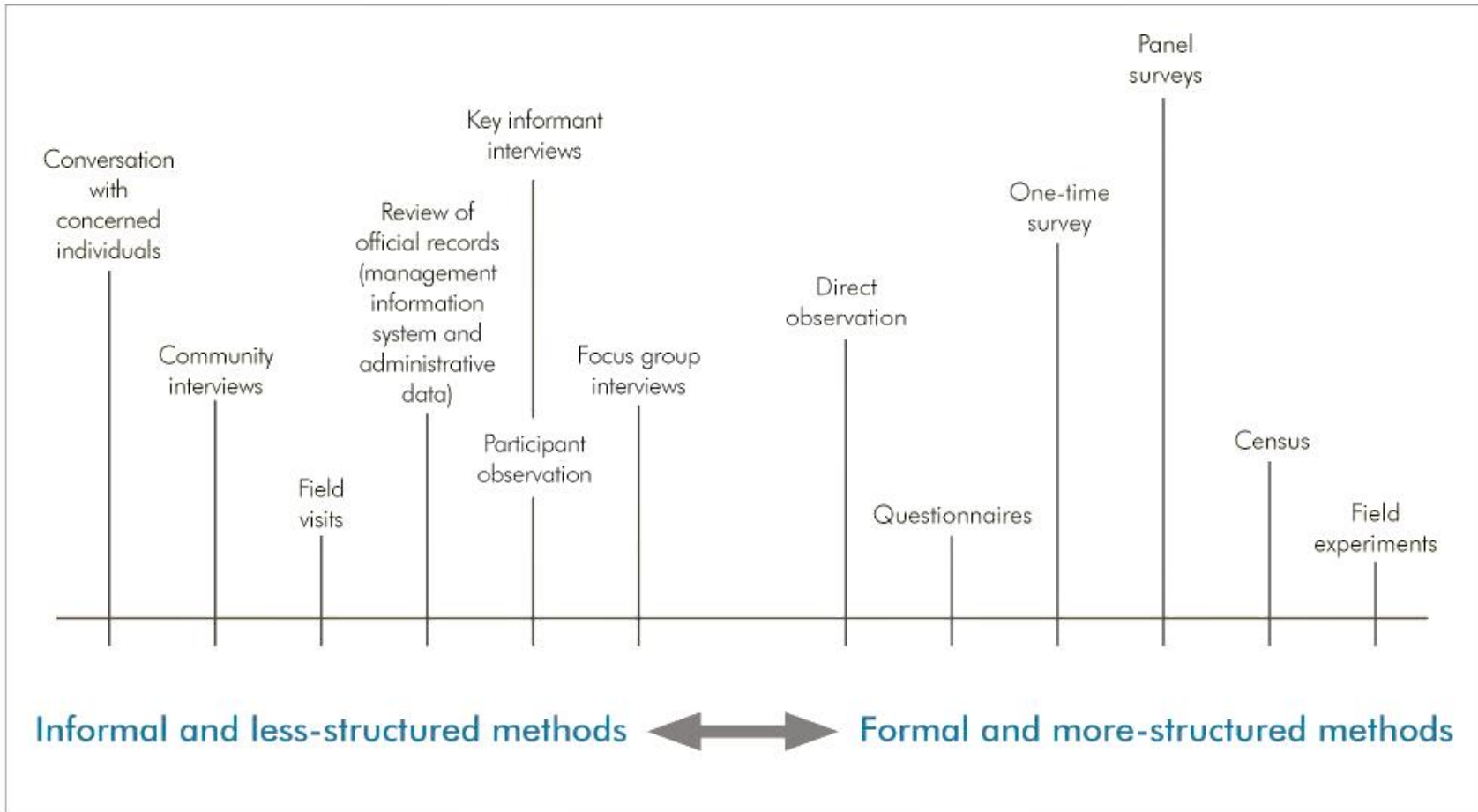


3. Data Collection Approaches and Methods

WHAT IS IT?

Data collection is the process of preparing and collecting the information and data that will answer your research questions and inform your findings. Once you've decided which types of data you will need, you can decide which data collection methods will be most useful to collect the type of information needed for your study. A range of approaches and methods are used to collect data in order to understand key issues, boost learning, and ensure accountability and the validity of project results. Below is a graphic with an overview of some methods, ranging from informal to formal. On the following pages we provide two tables listing a few approaches and several methods for data collection. As they highlight, there are benefits and drawbacks to each approach and method of data collection. Diversifying and selecting complementary data collection approaches and methods can help to overcome the 'blind spots' and shed light on different dimensions of the change you seek to measure.



PRIMARY AND SECONDARY DATA

- Primary data is original data you have collected yourself for your specific purpose. For example: data from a survey you have sent out.
- Secondary data is data that has been collected by somebody else for another purpose. For example: data from a book or journal article.

(Note: this is a sample, not an exhaustive list of data collection approaches and methods.)

Approaches:

Approach	Snapshot	Benefits	Drawbacks
Project-led Data MEL	The traditional approach to MEL where the project team defines indicators to project outcomes and activities and collects and analyzes data and produces reports.	Project staff have full control over the process, can influence the data quality and reliability; this method is well suited to inform donor reports with given requirements and limited flexibility on indicators and their changes.	A lot of the stimulated change may be happening outside of the reach of a MEL framework set by the project staff and therefore not captured by this approach. There is limited opportunity for targeted communities and individuals to learn from data unless a systematic approach to feedback loops is established.
Community-led MEL	Community members define their own simplified Theory of Change, intended goals and measures (e.g. indicators) of how to monitor progress.	Builds research capacity of community members, promotes ownership and buy-in, boosts collaborative learning, shifts power to local stakeholders, supports accountability to those directly affected by projects and boosts sustainability of project outcomes. Can be used as a stand-alone approach or in a combination with other approaches.	Requires more extended timelines in order to build relationships, buy-in and build local research skill and capacity. Requires staffing and training to mobilize and catalyze the community process. May not entail same data quality or rigour as other approaches.
Participatory MEL	Stakeholders of a programme or policy are involved in any stage of the evaluation process from design to data collection, analysis or reporting.	Can identify locally relevant evaluation questions, improve accuracy and relevance of reporting, improve programme effectiveness, empower participants, build capacity, and support learning.	Requires time and commitment, resources, and facilitation skills. Also requires clarity on the purpose of participation, and alignment between that purpose and the design of the evaluation. Requires understanding of culture and context and what those imply for the design.

Outcome Harvesting¹	Collects (“harvests”) evidence of what has changed (“outcomes”) and, then, working backwards, determines whether and how an intervention has contributed to these changes.	Works well in complex projects and environments and can be also mediated remotely. Can capture unintended and unexpected outcomes of interventions. Does not rely on pre-determined outcomes and generates verifiable outcomes during the evaluation process.	Only those outcomes that informants are aware of are being captured. Skill and time are required to identify and formulate high-quality outcome descriptions and to design the harvesting approach.
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Data Collection Methods:

Method	Snapshot	Benefits	Drawbacks
Questionnaires /Surveys/Census	Written set of questions.	Can reach a large sample size and results can be easy to analyze relative to other methods. Useful for gathering a wide range of data; from household demographics to attitudes, opinions and beliefs. Respondents may be more confident that their anonymity will be preserved.	Samples must be large and carefully selected to ensure statistical relevance; requires complex statistical analysis. Can be expensive and logistically challenging depending on sample size needed and geographic coverage required. Data may lack depth. Prone to error, particularly if an additional data entry step is required.
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	A type of group interview. Can be used to find out what issues are of most concern for a group/community.	Efficient way to gather qualitative data from a large group of people. Group settings can stimulate important insights.	Requires strong facilitation skills and thorough notetaking is important for the analysis of results. Individuals who prefer anonymity may not participate. Replication is difficult. Results are specific to the study participants.
Key Informant Interviews (KII)	Qualitative, in-depth interviews of people who have particularly informed perspectives on an aspect of what is being evaluated.	Can provide in-depth information from a knowledgeable source or important stakeholder. Allow for new ideas to emerge.	More time consuming and potentially expensive approach to reach a small sample size. Information may be biased, and it can be difficult to analyze results, especially across a large number of respondents.

¹ Collects (“harvests”) evidence of what has changed (“outcomes”) and, then, working backwards, determines whether and how an intervention has contributed to these changes.

External / Operational Data	Data that is routinely collected.	Review of official records and data that is routinely collected by third parties can provide data that is readily available, inexpensive to collect and otherwise inaccessible (e.g. health clinic stats). Historical data can provide useful insight on change over time.	Requires permission to access this information; accessing the data may involve complex procedures. May be incomplete, not generalizable or statistically significant or directly relevant to the project participants. Need to understand how the information is collected to know its reliability.
Direct Observation	Systematic, structured process, using observation record forms.	Good way to gather data about practices and behaviour.	Poor method for establishing cause-effect relations. Observer's presence, if known, may influence participants' behavior.
Appreciative Inquiry	Involves searching for "the best of what is" to design and deliver based on imagining "what could be."	The questions we ask and the stories we elicit can influence behaviour, decisions, and the future. A positive approach will build on what is working.	Can risk ignoring or denying problems; not giving people space to mourn what has been difficult. Has been criticized for not digging deep enough.
Case Studies	Focuses on a particular element, e.g. a person, a project, a project element. Often combines quantitative and qualitative data.	Rather inexpensive compared to other methods and can provide rich qualitative data and insights into what change is really happening and why. Puts data into a usable format for those who read the data and want to understand outcomes. Can study rare phenomena in depth.	Poor method for establishing cause-effect relations. The person or event may not be representative. Often relies heavily on the researcher's subjective interpretations. If there are different demographics involved, or different needs which must be examined, method becomes very inefficient.
Storytelling	Individual narrative, providing qualitative data from one point of view and a particular time.	Can provide insight into the change process and results, illuminate or illustrate quantitative data, identify issues. Software can support categorization and analysis of story elements. Allows people to do their own sensemaking.	Needs to be combined with other sources of data, and to include perspectives of the full range of participants. Requires high degree of trust of evaluator, skilled listening and recording, and acute attention to research ethics and confidentiality. Aggregation can be challenging.
Photovoice/Photos	Participatory photography as a way for marginalized populations to convey their reality and tell their stories.	Helps explore key questions in the research or change over time and can empower participants (by putting tools in their hands), to remedy power imbalances in the research relationship, and provide insights	Requires equipment—means to take pictures and upload, email or send in. Difficulty in analyzing or making sense of photos and showing complex issues. Need to be aware of potential risks to participants and issues of consent and

		into lived experiences that may not be accessible in interviews with a researcher. Works especially well with marginalized, “hard to reach” youth or those not engaging in formal processes. Doesn’t rely on words, language or speaking, which may help to mitigate barriers for participants.	confidentiality of people in photos. Highly subjective as participants decide what to include or exclude. Requires interest and buy-in and time requirement from participants.
Most Significant Change	Involves generating and analyzing personal accounts of change and deciding which of these accounts is the most significant – and why.	Can help participants tell their stories and communicate their perspectives in an accessible, compelling and versatile format through a participatory process. Strengthens participants’ engagement, ownership and stimulates constructive dialogue and understanding between different stakeholders. Helps build bridges between communities and decision-makers. Captures information other approaches cannot, revealing unexpected results.	Stories can be hijacked for other purposes such as for promotional material. Not a quick option; takes time and an appropriate project infrastructure to generate understanding and value clarification (identifying what people think is important). Can be challenging to get engagement of the different groups involved in the process and to maintain their interest. Good facilitation skills are important along with the ability to identify priorities.
Activity Monitoring	Collecting activity related data (e.g. training participation/school attendance etc.).	Can be a very easy and commonly already well integrated (therefore inexpensive) method of data collection at the lowest level.	Aggregating data across many activities and people can be challenging without the use of some MEL Software, or expertise in Excel. It also only monitors the project activities, not their outcomes.

Note: You will find more information on most of these approaches and methods at www.betterevaluation.org.