

dimagi

The Introductory Guide to Data Collection



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Thank you!

This guide would not have been possible without help from our partners at Oikoi (formerly AgImpact), ProMujer, Terres des hommes, Save the Children, and Dimagi employees and alumni.



Introduction

At Dimagi, our goal is to improve the efficiency and quality of data collection and service delivery programs in low-resource settings around the world. With our mobile data collection software, [CommCare](#), we thought we could revolutionize the way data is collected, but quickly realized there are foundational aspects of data collection that should be adhered to regardless of whether you're using a smartphone or pen and paper.

Data collection, at its core, is the process of gathering quantitative and qualitative information on specific variables with the aim of evaluating outcomes or gleaning actionable insights. Good data collection, regardless of the method, requires a clear process to ensure the data you collect are clean, consistent, and reliable.

Establishing that process, however, can be tricky. It involves taking stock of your objectives, identifying your data requirements, deciding on a method of data collection, and finally organizing a data collection plan that synthesizes the most important aspects of your program.



1. How to Define Your Project Objectives

One crucial mistake we see organizations make is launching into the development of a data collection program without clearly defined project objectives. You can design sophisticated forms, loaded with all sorts of bells and whistles, but if they are not designed to support—and amplify the success of—your project objectives, the value of the tool you select will fall short.

Well-articulated project objectives become a lens through which you can examine each step of your data collection program. But starting with clearly-defined project objectives can be easier said than done. A challenge for all monitoring and evaluation professionals is working through the competing priorities, obstacles, and stakeholders involved in a given project to pinpoint the core objectives their program is looking to address.

In the last decade, we have had the privilege of working with hundreds of different organizations, and with them, a full range of project objectives. From this experience, here is our advice for successfully identifying and organizing around focused objectives, as well as common pitfalls to avoid.

Identify your project objectives

In order to define your project objectives, you must start by focusing on the right problem. Our Chief Services Officer, Rowena Luk, learned the hard way that defining a project objective without basing it on a clear and urgent problem will not lead to the highest impact.

Prior to joining Dimagi, Luk worked on building a consultation platform for specialist doctors in hospitals in Ghana. After reflecting on her work, she realized the project had been doomed from the start, because it focused on objectives that were not solving the most pressing issues for the hospitals at the time. Rather than supporting better care for all patients through digital medical records, she was focusing on a small percentage that needed specialized care. Doctors told her, “Nevermind the one percent of patients that need to consult with a neuroradiologist. What about the 90 percent that need better continuity of care?”

So even if a successful specialized medicine program would have helped patients in those communities, doctors were receiving dozens of referrals per day for patients in critical condition without any documented medical history. For the doctors, and thus for Luk, the real priority was urgent and clear.

Review & Confirm Your Project Objectives

Avoiding an experience like the example above starts by critically examining the problems you have identified. These questions can help you evaluate whether you are focusing on the right ones:



Which of my stakeholders are ignoring me and why?

If you are struggling to get your project champions and supervisors to pay attention to your project, it might be because you are focused on a problem they do not care about. Take a holistic view of the problem by including stakeholders from all levels, and you will experience higher participation in the project over time. This is something Luk realized on that same project in Ghana:

“Problems that matter will draw the attention of the Minister of Health or the Country Director. They will not just look at the results. They will demand them.”

Are there other projects competing for budget and time?

If you are competing against other priorities, look at the problems those projects are focused on to see if they solve issues you are ignoring. What can you learn from the attention (and resources) these projects have earned? Guillaume Foutry, Dimagi partner and project director for Terre des hommes’ Integrated eDiagnostic Approach (leDA) project in Burkina Faso, recommends understanding where your project fits within the priorities of the organizations you are working with:

“Ministries of Health have many competing priorities,” said Mr. Foutry. “We found it to be extremely important to take this into account and understand that leDA was one project among many for them. Try to understand the players, the dynamics within the MoH (Ministry of Health), and who could be champions for the project within the MoH. If you understand their needs and goals, you can work to make your project fit with them. Connect your project to their other initiatives.”

What else might my stakeholders require?

You often have performance benchmarks to reach in order to receive the next round of funding. Build these into your objective. Government agencies might require certain data be measured for compliance purposes. Include these, as well. You might even know of other items your program supervisors or partner organizations want to keep track of. If you incorporate the needs of all your partners into the foundation of your project, you are more likely to avoid conflicting objectives later on. Organizing your objectives around your partners’ needs and accounting for their other priorities will provide you with reliable guardrails (and investment) as you build out your data collection plan.

Organize Your Project Objectives

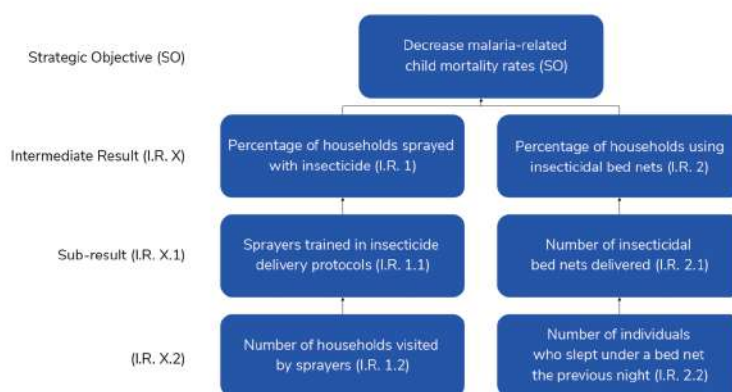
Once you establish your key project objectives, the next step is to outline how you will achieve them. What results do you need to prove in order to call your project a success? When working with governmental organizations, such as USAID, the map of this journey is called a “logical framework” or “results framework.” In essence, they are project to-do lists that make you ask the question of each aspect of your solution: Does this get me closer to achieving my project objective?

A results framework places your project objectives at the top of the diagram and maps out each of the intermediate results that will add up to their success. In the example below, we will use a malaria campaign to illustrate how this works. Our strategic objective (SO) is to “Decrease malaria-related child mortality rates.” From there, we break down the components of the objective into all its intermediate results (I.R.) and sub-results.

A few example intermediate results could be:

- **Intermediate Result #1 (I.R. 1): “Percentage of households sprayed with insecticide.”**
- **Intermediate Result #2 (I.R. 2): “Percentage of households using insecticidal bed nets.”**

Additional sub-results would follow that can break down each intermediate result into further detail, including additional objectives to achieve and the tools we would use to achieve them.



This is an example of a basic results framework from a USAID template.

Your organization might not need a results framework to justify your program for the purposes of funding or additional support. However, a results framework still establishes your project’s objectives as the core focus of your program and helps you think through all the ways you can review their progress and ultimately achieve success.

The method of data collection you choose will be the way you measure the success of many of these intermediate and sub-results. There will even be cases where the approach you take will aid in improving program outcomes themselves. Mapping out your full set of objectives will help you to align your approach to data collection and service delivery with the core needs of the project.

Focus on Your Objectives

The process of turning clear and urgent problems into precise project objectives is a crucial step before developing your data collection program. Your project objectives should be at the core of your entire program, and they should be clearly defined and written down in a document such as a results framework. Anyone on your team should be able to understand your project’s approach from reading your results framework, which they should reference throughout the project’s lifespan to evaluate their decisions. Including considerations from partners will also help to ensure your project is given the proper attention and resources required for success.

It can be hard to get a project moving in the right direction. But once you have a clear destination, it is easier to determine whether the next tool or initiative will take you closer to or further away from where you want to be.



2. How to Identify Your Data Requirements

So, how can you get rid of all the noise and focus on what you need? A clear understanding of your data requirements will help narrow your focus and identify a method of data collection that serves your needs precisely.

The first step in this process is to make a list of what data you know you need. Sometimes, you will have existing documents to give you a head start, such as results frameworks, M&E frameworks, or requests from supervisors and funders. Other times, you will need to start from scratch. In either case, you should outline an initial list of data requirements, and then stress test that list to identify other factors. There are a number of questions you can ask that will help expand the list and describe each variable in more depth.

Categorize Your Data Needs

Most often in data collection and service delivery programs, your data can be broken down into two categories:

- **Program performance metrics**
- **Worker performance metrics.**

These categories help explain which aspect of your program the data affect.

Program performance metrics focus on how well you are meeting the project objectives. On the other hand, worker performance metrics are the best indicators for how well your workers are performing their duties and how much they are contributing to the success of the project.

When you want to know whether you are accomplishing your project objectives, examine your program performance metrics. How many beneficiaries have you reached? What percentage of your beneficiaries have improved health outcomes or crop yield? The answers to these questions are made up of many different variables, such as patient weight, disease contraction rate, or pounds of crops harvested, which will help you determine any improvements to beneficiary outcomes as a result of your intervention.

When you want to know how efficiently your team is working, take a look at your worker performance data. How long does it take for a data collector to submit their data after a field visit? How long does your team spend on data entry? How many beneficiaries does each worker reach and when? Keeping track of metrics such as number of house visits and form submission times will help you optimize individual and team performance.

Describe Your Data Needs

Once you have organized a list of your data requirements by category, flesh out their attributes and characteristics. There are numerous questions you can ask to help with this:

- **Are you searching for quantitative data you can record or qualitative insights from sources close to the subject of your analysis?**
You don't have to collect just one type, but the characteristics of the data you are collecting will be integral to selecting the right method of data collection and the questions you ask later on.
- **Are you searching for longitudinal data— that is to say, are you looking to update the same metrics from the same source over time?**
This type of data requires case management, which means you will need to collate the data you collect from that source over numerous visits.
- **Do your data require outside data sources?**
Many governments have regular reporting on health, income, agriculture, and many other sectors. This is helpful when you are trying to compare your data to national averages, for example.
- **Does one variable depend on another?**
For instance, before asking details about a patient's treatment history, make sure that patient has actually received treatment. When you ask a patient if she has ever received medical treatment, and she replies, "no," you don't need to ask about vaccinations, medication, or any other medical treatment. This will require your workers to know all the combinations of questions they might need to ask (or a tool that can be programmed to filter those questions for them).

There are many more questions you can ask to help describe the characteristics of your 10 variables, but as with everything else, they will depend on your project's objectives. Marcos Lavandera, health analyst at Pro Mujer, a woman's development organization in Latin America, explained that for his project that focused on women's healthcare in Mexico, his entire team took part in the process of defining their data's characteristics.

“We had our program director, health analyst, and medical director all working together to make sure we looked at the data from all the possible perspectives,”

Lavandera said.

All of the characteristics you define will help you later, as you determine the right data collection method for your program.

Summarize Your Data Needs

With the myriad methods of data collection, developing a clear, written summary of all the variables you need will help keep you focused. Differentiating between program performance metrics and worker performance metrics will help keep your data organized. The characteristics of your variables will help determine the method and features of data collection that will work best for your program. It won't surprise you to know that data is the most important piece of any data collection program, so a comprehensive understanding of the data you need to collect is vital.

3. How to Determine Your Method of Data Collection

There are many options to choose from and each one has strengths in a different area. The type of data you are looking to collect, as well as the characteristics of its source and environment, should all inform what method of data collection makes the most sense for your program.

How Data Requirements Inform Method Selection

The data you want to collect should inform everything about your program – especially the method of data collection you intend to use. The characteristics of those data will mean different things for that decision, and each method has different strengths and weaknesses. This could be simple, like quantitative inputs might be tough to collect from a focus group, but qualitative information (like quotes) could be much easier that way. Here are a few questions worth asking to determine what your data requirements mean for the method of data collection you select:

How Often Are You Collecting Data?

This could mean a few different things. For one, you might know that you will need to revisit certain data sources to collect updated information. In that case, interviews or mobile data collection could help you keep track of that same source over time. On the other hand, if you know you only have a one-off survey, depending on the scale, the cost of setting up a mobile data collection program (including the platform, devices, and data plans) probably doesn't make as much sense as paper.

What Is the Scale of Your Data Collection Program?

While much information (both qualitative and quantitative) has been collected on paper or through interviews for a long time, it can be hard to scale these programs. Many national health organizations have struggled with growing successful pilots because they didn't have a structure or tool that could handle such large demand. In this case, tools like mobile data collection and Interactive Voice Response (IVR) could help you reach significantly larger populations.

Do Your Data Require Technical Inputs?

Sometimes, organizations need to collect information like GPS coordinates, video, or even fingerprints. In these instances, you require an additional tool to capture the data. If you're working with paper, that could mean copying down information from a GPS-enabled device, tracking timestamps from a video camera, or keeping track of photos taken of fingerprints. With a mobile data collection tool, some of these features might be included.



Account for Environmental Factors

Once you have listed, organized, and described all the variables you need to collect, you still need to account for where you are collecting data and whom you are collecting them from. Pro Mujer recommends beginning this effort with the beneficiaries. By putting them first, you make sure they are the ones experiencing the greatest impact. Understand the data they have and the environment they live in to best provide the services you hope to offer

Here are a few questions to consider when examining your project's environmental factors:

- **What are the languages spoken by the people involved (both data collectors and beneficiaries)?**
- **What is the reading level of your typical field worker or beneficiary?**
- **What is the level of mobile connectivity in the region? Is there WiFi available to workers?**
- **How familiar are your data collectors with mobile devices? What is their level of digital literacy?**
- **How accessible are your sources of information? Do you have a way to contact them? Or will you have to refer to others' efforts to collect data from them?**

When you think of the answers to these questions might pose a risk to your program's success, it helps to speak with the workers on the ground. For instance, we have found that when we cannot get a phone signal, local mobile phone users often have a specific spot that works. Dimagi Senior Field Manager Nick Nestle encountered this issue on a field visit in Zambia:

“When we arrived at the village we realized we had no service on any of the carriers. This was a major problem, as the village was remote and travelling to get a connection would be very difficult. Our program hinged on the data being synchronized every day.

We started brainstorming ideas: Could a more expensive phone get a signal? Perhaps we could convince the mobile operators to expand coverage (not likely)? Should we buy the workers bikes to ride to where reception was? We didn't have any real viable ideas when one of the local village workers overheard and stopped us.

'No, no, no,' she said. 'Do you see that ant hill in the distance? That is where we get our reception. Every day, at five o'clock, I will go stand on that ant hill and hold my phone up in the air to synchronize. It will be fine.' This was apparently a well-known solution in that village and one that everyone was used to doing."

We recommend collaborating with the local workers to overcome challenges like these. You might know the right questions to ask, but they are the ones with the best understanding of the environment you will be working in.

Storage & Security

Certain sectors lean more heavily on this consideration than others. For some beneficiary populations and projects such as those working with HIV patient data, privacy concerns may be much more important than others. Thus, understanding where the data you collect go is vitally important.

The actual considerations will depend on the sector you are working in. For instance, projects in the public health domain might require you to consider patient confidentiality and HIPAA compliance. The FDA has shared guidelines for the use of electronic health record data that may be helpful for your project.

As you consider the storage and privacy of your data, ask yourself the following:

- Does the dataset need to be de-identified before sharing?

- **Do I need to protect certain data after they are collected?**
- **Who can have access to the data?**
- **How long can the data be stored?**

All of these considerations will be specific to the industry or sector that you work in, while others will depend on local laws or even partner organizations' codes of conduct. Make sure you are familiar with the requirements of all parties involved before you decide how to collect your data.

Summary of Techniques

There are so many different methods of collecting data available today. The following are a selection of some of the more popular approaches we have seen:



Surveys

Surveys are likely the most famous form of quantitative research. They offer standardized forms for a consistent set of variables to be collected across a wide audience. The three most common approaches to surveys are:

Mobile: Mobile data collection is the use of mobile devices (e.g. smartphones, tablets, etc.) to administer surveys directly (via SMS) or through frontline workers (via mobile apps). With proper investment, this approach to data collection offers impressive speed, accuracy, and scalability.

Paper: Paper-based data collection is a classic approach. Forms are printed out and either administered by frontline workers or filled out directly by beneficiaries. While they are prone to slow collection timelines and data errors, paper-based forms remain the easiest to quickly spin up small-scale programs (especially for one-off surveys).

Interactive Voice Response (IVR): IVR is a method of data collection administered over the phone, where a series of questions are asked and respondents' information is collected virtually. While it can be restrictive in terms of user responses and sample selection, IVR does offer a kind of plug-and-play approach to data collection for target audiences with reliable phone service.

Interviews

Interviews can be based on a common set of questions, like a survey, but they allow for more flexibility in the responses. The organic insights gleaned from interviews can give you answers to questions you didn't even think to ask.

Individual: Individual interviews are relatively self-explanatory. An individual with experience in the topic you are curious about answers questions from the data collection team. Individual interviews can be a good way to start other types of data collection programs, especially when you are trying to figure out the right question to ask on something like a survey.

Focus groups: Focus groups are like group interviews, often including a stimulus for discussion. Focus group leaders will prompt the group with a set of questions or statements and gather reflections and feedback from the group. It's a good way to quickly compare reactions or information from representative sources and an opportunity to see how group dynamics might affect an individual's reaction.

Observational

Observational data collection is much more low-touch. The idea is that in the absence of an opportunity to interact with your subject (either due to distance, scale, time, or other reasons for their inaccessibility), you can observe them to collect certain types of information.

Firsthand: Firsthand observation allows for the data collector to directly observe and gather notes on an individual or group without interacting with the subject(s). This approach is often used when direct observation is available but not direct contact either for reasons of inaccessibility or fears of bias.

Documents/records: Often used when information is needed from the past, document review allows for secondhand observation of sources when firsthand observation is unavailable.

How to Choose

As you can see, selecting the method of data collection that is right for your program is entirely dependent upon your program objectives and data requirements. For qualitative data, you might lean more heavily on individual interviews and focus groups. For hard quantitative insights, look in the direction of surveys (mobile, paper-based, or otherwise). Some programs might call for a hybrid or combination of approaches to collect all the information you need.





4. How to Organize Your Data Collection Plan

A data collection plan is just that – a plan for how the information your program hopes to collect will flow from its source all the way to the actionable insights you hope to glean from it. The process of developing this plan will reveal things about where your data come from, who has access to it, and how it is collected and stored – all of which are key pieces of information that will inform the design and implementation of any new system you choose.

Gillian Javetski, COO & Co-Founder of TecSalud — an ICT4D company in Bogotá and Cambridge — explains:

“When you have to map out your project from square one, it opens your eyes to gaps you didn’t see earlier and that technology may not be able to fix. All of a sudden, the conversation may shift from ‘What do we want this technology to do’ to ‘Wait, is the problem actually in our workflow?’”

Once you have clarified your project objectives, taken stock of your data requirements, and determined the method of data collection you hope to employ, it’s time to put all the pieces together.

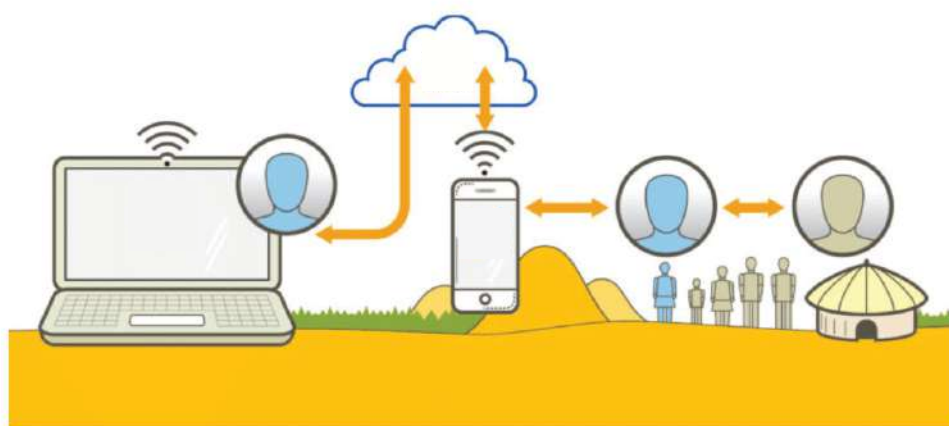
Two Approaches to a Data Collection Plan

There are two primary methods of organizing a data collection plan that we typically use. One is more visual and maps out the flow of information specific to that program. The other is more analytical, applying a standard set of criteria to the process for you to fill out in a way that makes sense for your program. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, but they share the goal of documenting your data collection plan in a way that can be shared, analyzed, and improved.

Information Workflow Diagram

A workflow map is a diagram of components and their connections throughout a particular process. When used correctly, workflow maps can increase program efficiency, reduce errors, and improve outcomes. When designed well, they portray a clear beginning and end. After reviewing a workflow map, someone unfamiliar with the program should be able to explain it clearly from start to finish.

Workflow maps actually represent a number of different types of flow diagrams—from organizational hierarchies to application workflows and information flow diagrams. An information flow diagram is most often what we use when mapping how information flows through an existing data collection process. It typically starts with what data are being collected (e.g. quantitative data vs qualitative data) and follows through from how they are collected (e.g. paper forms vs mobile device) to where they are stored and how they are shared from the bottom to the top of your organization (e.g. reporting presentation vs online dashboard)



This is a very basic version of an information flow diagram based on a typical CommCare project.

This is the most basic version of an information flow diagram. Data from beneficiaries is collected by community health workers (or other data collectors) using a mobile data collection app that wirelessly sends data to the cloud. There, they are accessed by a program manager or analyst on a desktop platform. Of course, this version doesn't include what type of data they are or how that program analyst shares reports with their superiors, funders, or the government. However, that is exactly the type of information that is covered in more complex information flow diagrams. Two key questions to ask when designing your information flow diagram are

- **What are the major milestones that occur in this process?**
- **What are the major component types (e.g. actions/activities, documents, decisions, etc.)?**

The answers to these questions are like the pieces to your puzzle. Once you collect them all, start with the outside and work your way in. In other words, begin with your data source and your final output and then fill out the pieces inbetween. The beauty of an information flow diagram is that you can read the same diagram from bottom-to-top and notice different things about your data collection process than if you review it top-to-bottom. The change in perspective will help reveal things about the way your data are used and potential means for improving them. Bonus tip: We like to use a platform called Draw.io to create our workflow maps. Check it out [here!](#)

Data Collection Plan Outline

The other way we often analyze the data collection process is by filling out a data collection plan outline. It helps organize each variable you are collecting by source, method of collection, timeline, where it is stored, and how it is analyzed and shared. Compared to the information flow diagram, which looks to map data through your entire program in a visual way, a data collection plan outline typically summarizes relevant characteristics of each variable in a table or chart.

This approach does not quite measure up to an information flow diagram in terms of viewing your program's strengths and weaknesses from a high level, but it's great for organizing detailed notes on how each variable is collected, who has access to what, and even how it might be analyzed. In fact, you can often find some insightful trends by reviewing each row in the chart together. For instance, in the chart above, you can see how the source of your data might differ between data points #1, #2, and #3, by reading across row #2 ("source of data").

One reason we like the Americorps version of this outline is that it ends with "How will the data be used for program improvement?" It is a good reminder that, regardless of your data collection program objectives, you can always examine your results in a way to improve your final output. Addressing that question early and deliberately is a good way to make it a habit and improve the sustainability of your program.

Instructions: For each data point collected by the program, fill in the requested information in the relevant column. Note that the "logic" of the document flows from top to bottom, so the information entered builds upon the data / information that was entered in the cell directly above.

	<i>Example data point</i>	Data point #1	Data point #2	Data point #3
Data to be collected	<p><i>Outcome: number of beneficiaries who demonstrate improved knowledge of [X]</i></p> <p><i>Improved knowledge: score increase of 10% or more from beginning to end of program</i></p>			
Source of data	<i>Beneficiaries: economically disadvantaged residents of community [Y]</i>			
Instrument type and description	<i>Pre-post-test: a 25-question multiple-choice assessment created and field-tested by researchers at ABC University that measures knowledge about [X]. The same instrument is used for both the pre- and post-test.</i>			

The first few rows of a [data collection plan outline from Americorps](#) .

Additional Considerations

As you develop your plan, it's not uncommon to begin to consider aspects of your program you hadn't thought about before. This is an intentional aspect of the process. It's much better to head into the design and implementation phase of your program aware of these facets, than it is to retroactively build them into a program.

Timelines

Often, these planning frameworks don't include the dimension of time. Consider ways you might incorporate it to account for how often your frontline workers will head into the field to collect data or how often you will lead them in refresher training sessions.

Approvals and Consent

Depending on the type of data you collect and how they flow through your program, you may need to request consent from beneficiaries or approvals for data integration from another organization. Think about how you might note these potential bottlenecks on whatever method of planning you choose. What other aspects of your program might you need to account for? It's different for everyone. Is there a particular consequence of selection bias you might need to account for? Might you need to include two methods of data collection to collect different types of data in the same program? Once you have organized your data collection plan, these types of considerations should be easier to spot.

Why Use a Data Collection Plan?

The most important reason to use frameworks like workflow maps and data collection plan outlines is that they help you to understand the stakeholders, data sources, and points of connection that will reveal areas for improvement.

For example, in an analysis of the time between the collection of data and the submission of that data to the server, a careful observation of the clinical workflow helped the Dimagi Data Science team determine that 75% of CommCare users were using their application as an offline data collection tool. By understanding how the data flowed in these low- to no-connectivity environments, it was then possible to optimize surveys, flows, and general user experience.

More recently, one of the most important uses of an information flow diagram has been to assess privacy risks related to data protocols. The EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) forced millions of organizations working with user data from the EU market to examine their data flow to uncover any potential violations of the regulation before it went into effect.

In each of these cases, the effort to review every aspect of an existing process and map the interactions between them made for a better final product. This is not a coincidence. These projects are made up of interacting components, and if you can understand how each variable related to the others in your data collection process, you can build a map that provides you strong insights for improvement and tells you precisely where to focus your efforts.

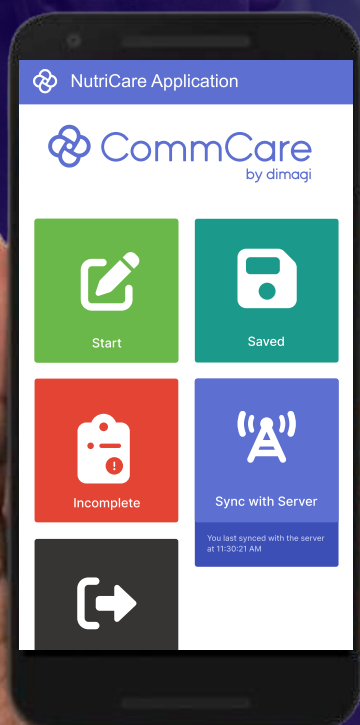
Ready to Go With Data Collection?

A well-organized data collection plan is the culmination of all your other work in clarifying your project objectives, defining your data requirements, and selecting a method of data collection. This plan will serve as the basis of your efforts to actually design and build a program that precisely serves the needs of your project and its beneficiaries. It will help when you bring on new team members and when you need to apply for new funding. The structure that your data collection plan provides will help at every step of the way from here on out and, if acted on correctly, should improve the sustainability of your program as a whole.

If, after following this process, you find that mobile data collection is the right avenue for your program, we have some good news for you. We have developed a comprehensive guide to take you from the process of selecting the right mobile data collection tool through designing your surveys, building your tool, and ultimately maintaining its sustainability. This guide is a collection of advice from our partners and Global Services team, aimed at increasing the use and impact of mobile data collection tools worldwide. To learn more, check out our Guide to Mobile Data Collection.

What's next?

Visit www.dimagi.com/commcare for more personalized advice from the team who built the world's most powerful mobile data collection platform:



Track data

Build smarter data collection apps that allow you to collect and track data over time.



Work offline

No signal? No problem. Build a data collection app that works offline.



Empower end-users

Collect quality data by building an app that guides your workforce to do their best work.



Start small and scale

Invest in a data collection app that will keep pace with your growth.