

TRACER STUDIES



In a tracer study, data is collected and analysed repeatedly over time. For monitoring and evaluation purposes, tracer studies are often designed to track changes at individual level, following a development intervention. However, they might also focus on other units of analysis such as communities, organisations or policies. Tracer studies are most useful when change is intended to be long-term and significant.

In a tracer study data is collected and analysed repeatedly over time. Tracer studies are sometimes called tracker studies or longitudinal studies. Within monitoring and evaluation (M&E), tracer studies are mostly concerned with evaluation and/or impact assessment. They are designed to find out what changed, when and why.

Tracer studies are often designed to track changes at an individual level, following a development intervention. For example, a tracer study might be designed to track individuals who have received vocational training in order to find out whether or how they use the training, and how their lives progress over time. But tracer studies may also focus on other units of analysis, such as households, communities, organisations, projects or policies.

Tracer studies are normally carried out using the same **cohort**. This means the same individuals, groups or organisations are regularly contacted over time. Theoretically, tracer studies can be carried out with a cohort of people who have received support and a cohort who haven't (a control or comparison group). However, INTRAC currently knows of no examples where control groups have been used by CSOs within tracer studies.

Tracer studies are most useful when change from a development intervention is intended to be long-term and significant. For example, the ultimate impact of an educational project may not be known until a very long time after the project has finished. This is why tracer studies are often used within the educational sector. By contrast, health projects often have a much more immediate impact and, consequently, tracer studies are less common.

Tracer studies can be carried out following many different types of development intervention. This could include major events, trainings and campaigns, or any type of project or programme with defined, long-term objectives. However, for a tracer study to be useful the development intervention needs to be designed to bring about long-term change that can be traced over a significant period, and then attributed back to the intervention. For example, it would be valid to design a tracer study to track the changes resulting from a vocational training course intended to influence the career choices of trainees. But it would not be useful to design a tracer study to track individuals attending a three-day workshop on NGO management. This is because it would be too difficult to attribute medium- to long-term changes to the workshop.

Data collected during a tracer study may be quantitative or qualitative or a mixture of both. Sometimes, a tracer study involves developing a series of case studies over time. This means tracer studies can be used to build up a complex picture of evolving change. This is particularly useful when working in areas such as capacity development or community mobilisation, where change is often complex and intangible.

How it works

There are no fixed steps for a tracer study. Indeed, tracer studies are not well covered in development literature. However, the process described below contains some of the elements that are common to most tracer studies.

1. The first step is to **define the question or questions that need to be answered**. An example could be "*what employment paths do children take after completing vocational training?*" Another example could be "*what organisational capacity changes occur following capacity building activities carried out by an NGO?*" The questions have implications for how the tracer study is designed and conducted.
2. The next step is to **identify the subjects**. These are the individuals (or other units of analysis) that will be tracked through the tracer study. Sometimes a tracer study follows all relevant subjects. For example, if fifty children have been trained through a vocational training scheme then it would be possible to follow all fifty over time. In other circumstances some form of sampling is needed to identify the subjects of the tracer study.
3. The point of a tracer study is to assess change over time. Therefore, the next step is to **decide how often to collect information**. If the gap between rounds of information collection is too short then it may be difficult to identify change. But if it is too long there is a high risk of missing key change points. The decision will depend on the topic of the tracer study and the type of subjects being tracked.
4. The next step is to **decide what data to collect, and how**. Data might be collected through face-to-face or telephone interviews, or through remote media. Questionnaires or surveys are often used in tracer

studies. Sometimes it might be possible to collect information through observation or direct measurement.

5. Once the first round of data collection has taken place, the next step is to **produce an initial report**, based on analysis of the data. Depending on the data collected, analysis might be quantitative, qualitative or a mixture of both. Subsequent rounds of data collection and analysis are then carried out at discrete intervals, each with an accompanying report.
6. At the end of the process a **final report** is normally produced, outlining the key changes, lessons learned and recommendations for the future.

The case study below shows a tracer study run by the Climate and Development Knowledge Network (CDKN), following its Action Lab process.

Case study: Action Lab Tracer Study

In 2011, CDKN held an Action Lab. This was a four-day long, action-orientated workshop focused on strengthening the relationship between action and policy at the intersection of climate change and development. It brought together a dynamic group of over 200 experts from around the world, drawn from academia, government, civil society, NGOs, donors, and the private sector. The aim was to catalyse knowledge sharing, develop new collaboration, and broker action. The Action Lab provided a facilitated space in which participants engaged in dialogue and collaborated on ideas, some of which were developed into concrete project proposals.

CDKN wanted to find out the long-term results of the Action Lab, and decided to carry out a tracer study. The main question addressed by the tracer study was *“what were the key changes in coordination, collaboration and mobilisation around climate change for key stakeholders”*. It would have cost too much to track all the 200 experts, so a sample of 25 experts was developed.

Semi-structured interviews via telephone were carried out with each of the 25 sampled experts at regular, 6-monthly intervals following the Action Lab. This enabled CDKN to assess how many of the participants engaged in new activities after the Action Lab had finished. It also enabled CDKN to see whether initial enthusiasm post-Action Lab translated into longer-term projects and initiatives.

The first round of the tracer study, carried out about 6 months after the event, showed a significant amount of activity. From the data, CDKN estimated that 100-150 new projects or partnerships had been developed following the event. Subsequent rounds, however, showed that only a few of the projects and partnerships developed into longer-term, funded projects.

Unfortunately, it proved successively more difficult to interview people as time passed, and only the people who believed they had gained from the Action Lab process continued to contribute to the tracer study after the second round.

Strengths and weaknesses

Any study designed to follow up on a baseline can assess change to some degree. The key strength of a tracer study is that it can show how change evolves – not just *what* change happened but *when* it happened as well. A tracer study is therefore able to pick up changes that would not necessarily be identified during a one-off study. For example, a tracer study would be better able to identify whether (or when) initial enthusiasm for applying new skills dropped off, or whether a series of campaigns tended to pick up momentum over time.

In theory, tracer studies are also capable of contributing to genuine impact assessment. Tracer studies that extend beyond the lifetime of a project or programme can demonstrate not only whether change has happened, but also whether these changes are sustained in the medium- to longer-term.

However, tracer studies are rarely carried out by CSOs. There are several reasons for this.

- Tracer studies can be costly. The normal cost of carrying out a baseline and repeat study is multiplied in a tracer study, as data collection exercises need to be carried out at repeated intervals.
- Tracer studies are often most effective when assessing major changes that have taken place after a project or programme has finished. But it can be very difficult to identify funding for impact assessment work after a project or programme has finished.
- Many tracer studies rely on tracking individuals over long time periods. But in some countries it is not easy to find out when and if people have moved away. There are many practical problems involved in tracking individuals over time.
- As with any long-term M&E or impact assessment exercise, there is always a danger that the findings resulting from a tracer study may be too late to be useful. For example, an NGO might be interested to know what happened to people supported by a vocational training scheme five years after the training. But if the NGO no longer carries out vocational training the information might not be of much practical use.

Tracer studies are probably most useful when applied to large interventions, where significant change is likely to unfold over a long-period of time. They are arguably least useful when applied to minor interventions, or those where change is likely to be more immediate.

“A tracer study shows not only what changed, and why, but when it changed as well.”

Further reading and resources

Very little has been written about tracer studies in the social development field to-date. Some examples of longitudinal studies can be found on the Wikipedia site at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longitudinal_study. But these are mostly large-scale tracer studies, and the methodologies would need to be adapted by CSOs depending on the environment in which they are working.

Author(s):

Nigel Simister

Contributor(s):

Maureen O'Flynn

INTRAC is a not-for-profit organisation that builds the skills and knowledge of civil society organisations to be more effective in addressing poverty and inequality. Since 1992 INTRAC has provided specialist support in monitoring and evaluation, working with people to develop their own M&E approaches and tools, based on their needs. We encourage appropriate and practical M&E, based on understanding what works in different contexts.

M&E Training & Consultancy

INTRAC's team of M&E specialists offer consultancy and training in all aspects of M&E, from core skills development through to the design of complex M&E systems.

Email: info@intrac.org

Tel: +44 (0)1865 201851



M&E Universe

For more papers in the M&E Universe series click the home button