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Tracer studies: practical orientation



1. Introduction

This hands-on orientation paper has been developed for SDC staff who are not directly involved in the implementation, but who oversee programs, engage with partners, and support implementation at institutional and governmental levels. It aims to equip them to assess the quality of the instrument and make effective use of the results. It is informed by best practices from SDC, Helvetas, ILO, Swisscontact, and other key partners. It provides a concise and practical framework to help **assess the quality** of tracer studies commissioned within SDC-funded programs.

While tracer studies are typically carried out by implementing partners, external firms, or national institutions, SDC seeks to ensure that tracer studies meet quality standards, generate credible and useful evidence for program steering and accountability, and are embedded in the monitoring framework of skills development programs.

Tracer studies are a practical tool within Monitoring, Results Measurement (MRM), and Results-Based Management (RBM). They usually follow up with graduates 6–18 months after training to understand employment outcomes, income changes, and relevance of skills. They are a key tool to **strengthen evidence-based programming, labor market alignment, and can inform policy dialogue. It is also a practical way to test and validate pilot interventions by generating early evidence on what works, for whom, and under what conditions.**

How is a tracer study different from other studies?

- **Tracer studies** track graduates' pathways: whether they work or study, the jobs they hold, their income levels, and how relevant their training is.
- **Labour market surveys** examine overall labour demand and skills needs but do not follow individuals.
- **Mid-term and final evaluations** examine programme performance and contribution using multiple data sources and methods. Tracer studies can provide outcome-level evidence to inform these assessments.
- **Impact assessments** focus on broader and longer-term program effects, including community or system-level change, usually two or more years after program completion and using more complex methods. Well-designed tracer studies can provide outcome evidence and help strengthen attribution, especially when combined with other data sources and stronger counterfactual approaches.

As programs become more evidence-based, tracer studies provide practical and reliable results data, provided they remain feasible and aligned with the needs.

2. Why Tracer Studies Matter

In education and training, tracer studies help determine whether programs lead to real improvements in employment and income (two core outcome dimensions consistently captured through SDC's TRI indicators in VSD programs). By tracking the paths of graduates, tracer studies contribute to:

- **Impact and relevance:** Are graduates finding meaningful employment?
- **Accountability:** Are results communicated accurately to partners and donors?
- **Steering:** Do findings inform program adjustments and future programming?
- **Learning & benchmarking:** Are we understanding differences across regions and providers, and do findings help test key assumptions about the link between training and outcomes?
- **System strengthening:** Do tracer studies align with national monitoring systems, foster good practice among training providers, build institutional capacity, or

help lay the groundwork for them where they are not yet in place?

As tracer studies follow real people who took part in skills development programs, they offer concrete evidence which complements broader labor market analysis and more complex external evaluations. Their value lies in ensuring that the evidence that is **credible, comparable, and actionable** for program learning and decision-making.

The tracer studies in Mozambique and Tanzania followed graduates months after training to assess employment status, income changes, and the use of acquired skills. The findings demonstrated measurable improvements in livelihoods for many participants, while also highlighting persistent challenges such as gender income gaps and limited access to capital, thereby informing program learning and targeted improvements. Read more [here](#).

3. Methodology

This section explains the essential quality standards and methodological elements to be assessed when reviewing a tracer study.

Tracer studies use *quantitative surveys* to measure outcomes like employment and income, and *qualitative methods* to understand graduates' experiences and challenges. They can be implemented as one-off or longitudinal approaches, with the latter tracking individuals over time to capture longer term changes. This paper focuses on a ***mixed methods approach***, as tracer studies are most effective when quantitative outcome data are complemented by qualitative insights that explain how and why these outcomes occur.

3.1. Mixed methods approach

A strong tracer study combines:

- **Quantitative data** (employment rates, income)
- **Qualitative insights** (barriers, graduate experiences, training-market relevance)

A quality tracer study should:

- Clearly explain how quantitative and qualitative data complement each other
- Use concise, purposeful questionnaires linked to clear objectives
- Include qualitative elements to contextualize findings (Focus group discussions, key informant interviews or open questions)
- Show that the sample is appropriate and response rates are reasonable (i.e. broadly representative and large enough to produce reliable results with limited bias)
- Be transparent about data gaps, bias, and limitations so the reliability of the findings can be judged

The **PropelA** Kenya tracer study demonstrates how the use of a control group (i.e. a comparable group of non-participants used as a benchmark) can strengthen impact measurement by comparing graduate outcomes against similar non-participants and better interpret observed changes. The analysis of different employment outcomes across groups adds depth to the findings and helped identify issues warranting further inquiry, such as gender differences, which were then explored through a dedicated follow-up study.

3.2. Core elements of a high-quality tracer study

The following outlines the key elements of a high-quality tracer study, along with guiding questions for review.

a. Early integration and readiness

- Was the tracer study planned from the concept note and inception stages?
- Are baseline data, budget allocations, M&E responsibilities, and a strategy for handover to system actors in place to enable the tracer study later?

b. Clear purpose & scope

- Are objectives of the tracer study aligned with program indicators and learning needs?
- Are labour market outcomes clearly defined?

c. Appropriate study design

- Is the tracer study a one-off follow-up, a repeated survey of different graduate groups over time, or a follow-up of the same graduates over time? Is the chosen approach appropriate for the objectives?
- Does the design match the available resources and the size and scope of the program?

d. Sound sampling strategy

Look for:

- Representativeness
- Transparent documentation
- Minimisation of bias (gender, rural/urban, training streams)

e. Adequate timing

- Is the tracer study conducted 6–18 months after training, when outcomes can be observed?
- If repeated, is a follow-up planned around 24–36 months after training or programme completion, using consistent timing to allow comparison over time?

f. Lean, modular questionnaire**Assess whether:**

- Core modules cover standard labour market indicators.
- Additional modules are justified and not excessive.
- Length is manageable (ideally 10–15 minutes).

g. Ethics and data protection**Verify:**

- Informed consent
- Anonymous data treatment
- Secure storage ([GDPR](#) / [Swiss FADP](#) principles; local data management laws)

3.3. Data quality and usability

Verify that the study provides assurance that data collection and analysis were conducted to an acceptable quality standard, including:

- Clear description of data collection and data cleaning processes and limitations
- Measures taken to minimise non-response and bias
- Transparent explanation of how quantitative and qualitative findings were analysed and triangulated

3.4. Reporting and use of results

Verify that the tracer study supports effective interpretation, learning, and program steering, including:

- Clear and combined interpretation of quantitative and qualitative findings
- Transparent presentation of results and key limitations
- Reporting in concise, accessible formats tailored to different audiences
- Clear links between findings and program decisions or adjustments
- Sharing and discussion of results with partners and relevant stakeholders

4. Cross-cutting: System Anchoring

Tracer studies are usually implemented by training providers, national institutions, or external firms, often financed through program budgets. To support system strengthening and sustainability, tracer studies should progressively be anchored in national monitoring systems and institutional capacities, rather than remaining stand-alone project activities. They should:

- Align with existing national monitoring systems (indicators, definitions, formats)
- Strengthen data, analytical, and learning capacities of training institutions, authorities, and implementing teams
- Feed findings back into policy dialogue and sector coordination to support long-term improvements in training relevance and to contribute to a more coherent VSD monitoring ecosystem
- Promote sustainable, locally anchored tracer practices

In Albania (S4J), tracer studies are embedded in the regular management and quality assurance work of VET providers, rather than treated as a one-off project activity. Each VET school has a designated tracer coordinator, a trained teacher with dedicated time and resources, who collects graduate contact information before graduation, coordinates follow-up surveys using an open-source KoBo tool, and analyses results across multiple cohorts, guided by a [tracer manual](#). Tracer findings are documented in [reports](#) and used directly in school-level planning to adapt curricula, close or introduce trades, strengthen links with employers, and set annual objectives. At system level, S4J has supported the National Agency for Employment and Skills in integrating tracer study learnings, processes, and tools from providers and the project into the national monitoring and performance management framework, with results consolidated in [national tracer reports](#). Read more [here](#).

Annex 1:

DOs and DON'Ts for effectively reviewing tracer studies

The following do's and don'ts highlight the essential practices that help maintain the quality and usefulness of tracer studies.



Top DOs

1. Ensure objectives are clear and aligned with RMF indicators: Confirm that the study's purpose directly supports the program's RMF.

2. Align with national systems: Ensure tracer studies fit existing national frameworks to support sustainability.

3. Verify sampling quality and representativeness: Check that the sample reflects the full graduate population and avoids systematic bias. Missing key groups undermines representativeness and reliability.

4. Check that mixed methods are used: Ensure that quantitative surveys are combined with short interviews or FGDs where feasible to strengthen interpretation and contextual understanding.

5. Ensure questionnaires, contact lists, and data collection procedures are fit for purpose: Confirm that questionnaires are concise and context-appropriate, contact information is up to date, and data collection follows clear procedures.

6. Assess response rates and potential bias: Look at who responded, who didn't, and whether the results may be skewed.

7. Validate data checking and analysis steps: Confirm that data was checked and analyzed transparently and systematically.

8. Use of results for program steering: Ensure that tracer study findings are jointly reviewed with partners and used to inform program decisions and adjustments.



Top DON'Ts

1. Don't forget early planning and handover: Plan tracer studies from the design stage, with clear roles, resources, and include a handover plan to system actors.

2. Don't approve studies that partners cannot sustain: Avoid methodologies or tools that exceed local capacities and hinder long-term system anchoring.

3. Don't overlook baseline or counterfactual data: Without them, tracer study findings may be reported but lack meaning in terms of change or contribution.

4. Don't accept reports without transparent methodology: Conclusions are unusable if methods are not clearly described.

5. Don't overlook ethics and data protection: Avoid tracer studies that lack informed consent, do not protect anonymity, or handle data insecurely.

6. Don't overlook low response rates without mitigation: Poor participation must be addressed to avoid biased findings.

7. Don't disregard limitations or uncertainty in the findings: Always ensure the study clearly states its constraints so results are interpreted realistically.

8. Don't treat tracer studies as isolated exercises: Findings should feed into program learning, dialogue, and continuous improvement.

Annex 2: Quality Assessment Checklist

This checklist highlights the core aspects that should be assessed when reviewing a tracer study.



1

Early integration, readiness and sustainability planning

- ☐ Was the tracer study planned from the concept note or inception stage?
- ☐ Are baseline data, budget, and M&E responsibilities in place?
- ☐ Are the study objectives clear and aligned with the program?
- ☐ Is the study design appropriate for local capacities and resources?
- ☐ Is there a clear plan for handover to partners or national institutions?
- ☐ Are resources earmarked for conducting the tracer study after program closure?
- ☐ Is there a clear institutional responsibility for follow-up once the project has formally ended?
- ☐ Are data ownership and long-term hosting arrangements defined?

2

Sampling

- ☐ Is the sampling method transparent and representative?
- ☐ Are gender, geography, and training streams adequately covered?
- ☐ Is the sample size sufficient for reliable conclusions?

3

Tools & Instruments

- ☐ Are mixed methods used (survey plus limited qualitative inputs) where feasible?
- ☐ Is the questionnaire concise and aligned with objectives?
- ☐ Are tools adapted to the local context and language?

4

Data Collection Quality

- ☐ Is there a clear explanation of how data were collected?
- ☐ Is data collected digitally when possible?
- ☐ Are multiple tracing strategies used (phone, SMS, social media)?
- ☐ Are basic data validation and quality checks applied (e.g. consistency checks, spot checks)?
- ☐ Are key data limitations and potential biases acknowledged?

5

Ethics & Data Protection

- ☐ Is informed consent ensured?
- ☐ Are data storage and handling compliant with GDPR/FADP, and local data management laws?
- ☐ Is anonymity protected?

6

Analysis

- ☐ Is data cleaning described?
- ☐ Are both quantitative and qualitative analyses rigorous?
- ☐ Is triangulation used?

7

Reporting and use of results

- ☐ Are findings clear and actionable?
- ☐ Are findings contextualized and limitations discussed?
- ☐ Are recommendations clearly linked to program steering, learning, and adaptation?
- ☐ Are results shared with relevant stakeholders?

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