

From Monitoring Data to Decisions

A practical guide to turning programme data into something you can act on

Data-rich, insight-poor

Most programmes collect far more data than they ever use. Monitoring outputs, field reports, survey results, and indicator trackers pile up, but the reporting deadline passes, the data gets filed, and the next decision still gets made on instinct.

The problem is rarely a lack of data. It is that nobody has time to turn what is already there into something a decision-maker can use. This guide is about closing that gap: getting from the spreadsheet to the decision, without a data-science degree.

Start with the decision, not the data

The most common mistake is to open the dataset and ask "what does this tell me?" Start the other way around.

First ask: what decision is coming up, and what would change my mind about it?

A decision about whether to extend a distribution, shift budget between activities, or flag a site for a monitoring visit each needs different data. When you know the decision, you know which two or three numbers actually matter, and you can ignore the rest for now.

Trust the data before you trust the conclusion

Before drawing any conclusion, spend five minutes on the data itself:

- **Completeness:** which sites or periods are missing, and would they change the picture?
- **Consistency:** are units, dates, and categories recorded the same way throughout?
- **Source:** who collected this, how, and what pressure were they under when they did?

A confident conclusion from shaky data is worse than no conclusion. If the data will not bear the weight of the decision, that is itself a finding worth reporting.

The questions that unlock most datasets

You rarely need advanced analysis. A handful of questions surface most of what matters:

- **Change over time:** is this going up, down, or flat, and since when?
- **Plan vs. actual:** where are we against what we said we would do?
- **Outliers:** which sites, months, or groups are far from the rest, and why?
- **By segment:** does the picture hold when you split by location, gender, or partner?

Asking these four of almost any dataset will tell you where to look closer, and where things are fine.

Turn the number into a picture

A table hides trends that a simple chart makes obvious. Match the chart to the question:

- Change over time → a line
- Comparison between groups → bars
- Part of a whole → keep it simple, and only when the parts genuinely add up

Resist the dashboard with forty widgets. One clear chart that answers the actual question beats a wall of gauges nobody reads.

Traps to avoid

- **Vanity metrics:** numbers that look impressive but do not inform any decision (total reach with no denominator, activities counted instead of outcomes)
- **Over-collecting:** every extra field is a burden on field teams and a source of error; collect what you will use
- **Correlation is not cause:** two things moving together is a question to investigate, not an answer
- **Cherry-picking:** decide what "good" looks like before you look, not after

Make it routine

Insight comes from rhythm, not heroics. A short, regular look at the same few indicators beats an occasional deep dive nobody has time for. Build a simple monthly habit: same questions, same charts, ten minutes, then a decision or a note on why no change is needed.

Remember

Data serves decisions, and decisions serve people. The goal is not a perfect dataset or a beautiful dashboard, it is a better call made a little sooner, with a little more confidence. Your field judgment is what turns a number into a decision. The data just makes that judgment sharper.

Need more help? Connect with Impact Node to make sense of your programme data.

