

# Guidance on Developing Assumptions

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## What are assumptions?

An assumption is an idea or belief about what is true that has been accepted without evidence, or with limited evidence. It is an assertion about some characteristic of the future that is at the heart of why we've chosen to do the things we are doing.

Assumptions underpin our ideas about how change happens. They are based on norms, values, and ideological perspectives about how the world works.<sup>1</sup> Typical assumptions include that people believe, think, or need certain things; that something works because of certain rules or conditions; or that it is possible (or impossible) to do something, given variables such as time, capacity, and cost.<sup>2</sup>

Assumptions can be explicit or implicit:

- *Explicit assumptions* are those that a person has identified and is fully aware of.
- *Implicit assumptions* are those that influence your thinking and behaviors without you being aware of it.

## Why articulate them?

The process of identifying our assumptions engages us in complexity thinking about how we understand the systems in which our strategies are situated, and how the actors and factors in those systems relate.<sup>3</sup>

Because they operate beneath the surface of our awareness, our implicit assumptions in particular go unchecked. Because they undergird our strategies, this creates blind spots; and faulty assumptions can derail strategies.

Our aim is to make our implicit assumptions more explicit so that we can:

- Make our thinking visible to each other
- Invite alternative perspectives about how systems work or how change will occur
- Test the validity of our assumptions with evidence.

Assumptions are rarely all right or all wrong. More often, they are contextually appropriate or inappropriate. Articulating them gives us a way to monitor our strategies in context so that we can understand if our thinking and plans are still relevant or if they need to adapt.

While we may not monitor all of our implicit assumptions, the process of articulating them is important, so our goal is to be as comprehensive as possible when generating them.

<sup>1</sup>Van Es, M., Guijit, I., Vogel, I. (2013). [Theory of change thinking in practice: A stepwise approach](#). Hivos.

<sup>2</sup>Interaction Design Foundation (2018). [Challenge assumptions](#).

<sup>3</sup>Aston, T. (2020, March 15). [Windows on the world: The power of assumptions in uncertain times](#). LinkedIn.

# How do I identify assumptions?

When we develop hypotheses and strategies, we make assumptions about cause-and-effect relationships, what is required during implementation, and factors about the context that we cannot control but that will matter to our success. Questions to trigger thinking about each type of assumption follow.

## IDENTIFYING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT CAUSE-AND-EFFECT.

### 1. What are you assuming about the causes of the problem you're trying to address?

- What are its main drivers?
- Is structural racism a driver?
- What alternative ideas do people hold about the problem's drivers (especially those affected by it)?

### 2. What do you believe will trigger people, organizations, or systems to act differently?

- Do we *really* think action X will lead to change Y?
- Has this worked in the past or in other situations?
- If so, what's similar about this situation that will make it work again?
- If not, what is different about this situation that would make it work this time?

### 3. What has to occur outside your strategy for it to work (e.g., work by/support from others)?

- What will happen if any of this does NOT occur? In other words, what conditions and concurrent efforts will have to be in place for your strategy to work?
- What conditions would derail it?

## EXAMPLES OF CAUSE-AND-EFFECT ASSUMPTIONS

- Strong evidence about the economic merit of new practices will convince the target audience.
- Communities/residents will gain political power if they successfully organize and advocate to change policies that are harmful to them.
- Issues covered in the media will be salient and generate a strong public reaction from both elites and those affected.

## EXAMPLES OF CAUSE-AND-EFFECT ASSUMPTIONS THAT HAVE BEEN DISPUTED BY EVIDENCE

- Policymakers will be convinced to support a policy proposal by a compelling, nonpartisan, rational argument.
- Increasing knowledge alone about an issue will cause people to change their behavior.
- Trainings/workshops alone will change organizational capacities or practitioner behavior.
- Collaborative planning processes will result in alignment and cooperation.
- If you build it (shared platforms, data clearinghouses, new services), they will come.
- Our strategy will work without addressing how markets, the private sector, or private interests affect this problem or shape solutions.

## IDENTIFYING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING IMPLEMENTATION.

**1. What are you assuming other people/organizations will do to make this strategy work?**

**2. What are you assuming about the leverage or influence that key partners, grantees, etc., have and with whom?**

- What does your strategy assume about how power, influence, and resistance work?

**3. What kinds of reactions are you expecting the strategy to trigger among other actors in the system?**

- Who will likely “win” or experience your strategy as “on their side”?
- Who will likely dislike or resist the change, and who will experience a “cost” or a loss (e.g., in time, in effort, in political or relational capital, in power and control) as the strategy moves forward?

**4. What are you assuming about the resources, time, and skills you will be able to bring to the table over the long term?**

- What about your reputation and credibility?
- Why will people listen to you? Trust you?
- Who is likely to distrust you and how will that cause them to react to your efforts?
- What will the amount of dollars you have to commit actually cover?
- What missteps could you take that would cause this to go off the rails?

### EXAMPLES OF IMPLEMENTATION ASSUMPTIONS

- General operating support grants will give grantees the flexibility and adaption they need.
- We can identify other funders to support the effort/initiative/grantee if we frame this as a system effort.
- Making the foundation's voice public on this issue will benefit advocacy efforts.

### EXAMPLES OF IMPLEMENTATION ASSUMPTIONS THAT HAVE BEEN DISPUTED BY EVIDENCE

- Open RFPs will help us find "undiscovered" innovative groups and ideas to fund .
- Grantees and community members will assume good intent on our part.
- People will *want* to collaborate, all collaboration is good, and organizations that are not already collaborating ultimately will be grateful if we push them to.
- The amount of money we will commit is enough to cover *new* work from grantees organizations (rather than just filling out their budget to keep doing what they already do).
- Our strategy will not trigger active resistance or backlash; or, the resistance it triggers will not be enough to slow down our progress.
- Policymakers or other institutions will care what we say/think, even when there are no real consequences for disagreeing with us and they have their own agendas.
- There will be no turnover in the organizations we work with, nor in the audiences/political bodies/institutions we seek to influence; or, our ideas will "stick" despite the turnover.

## IDENTIFYING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT AND EXTERNAL FACTORS.

1. What assumptions about the larger political and economic environment must hold true for this to strategy work?
2. How will key players react if the political or economic environment improves? Worsens?
3. What changes to the context (positive/negative) will force you to re-think your strategy?

### EXAMPLES OF CONTEXTUAL ASSUMPTIONS

- Even under conditions of increasing political polarization, bipartisanship on the issue is possible.
- The trajectory of systems change will change (flatten/improve) under different political leadership.
- Because audiences in geography X and Y have different values and normative beliefs, different narratives and messages will be required.

### EXAMPLES OF CONTEXTUAL ASSUMPTIONS THAT HAVE BEEN DISPUTED BY EVIDENCE

- We will not be in competition with other public and private funders to get nonprofits or communities to focus on the goals we're interested in or work in ways we want them to.
- The next election will result in roughly the same political/policy trajectory we're on now.
- The attention of public, partners, or other actors will sustain no matter what crises emerge.
- Power, influence, and decision-making roughly work the same way in geography X as geography Y.

## What happens after I generate assumptions?

Because context is critical, assumptions will also need monitoring during implementation to ensure they remain relevant and valid. Assumptions should be generated before strategies are implemented, and then revisited at least once a year to determine if they need to be revised. Assumptions also should be revisited if the context suddenly changes.

Because assumptions are so critical to change strategies, we need to check their validity with evidence. Before strategies are implemented, their validity should be reviewed against what is known already based on existing research, analogous approaches, shared professional know-how, and the insights and experiences of other actors involved in the system.

To determine which assumptions are a particular priority for monitoring, and which may even merit the dedication of evaluation resources for testing, categorize and prioritize your assumptions along two dimensions (as shown in the figure):

- **Certainty:** how certain or uncertain you are that the assumption will hold true.
- **Seriousness:** how serious it would be to your strategy if the assumption did not hold true.

