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Assumptions

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. 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.

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 assumptions?

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.

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. Guidance on

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?



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- 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?

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?

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?

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



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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

- 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.