



MAPPING ASSUMPTIONS

What: A tool for testing assumptions related to a new concept or solution. It helps you structure testing and validating your assumptions by taking a closer look at the desirability, viability, and feasibility of your proposed concept or solution.

Why: Behind every new concept or solution is a level of 'leap of faith'. When creating a theory of change or a logframe for a new project, these are based on a number of assumptions that must be true for the project to achieve its objectives. If proven false, these important assumptions can cause your initiative to fail. Assumptions mapping is an interactive technique designed to identify key assumptions related to the relevance, effectiveness, and potential for impact of the new concept or solution as a team. The goal is to get teams to talk to one another and discuss the overall risk and then go do something about it. Use this mapping to test if the new concept or solution will meet your desired project objectives in a feasible and viable manner.

When: This is a great tool in to test your solution towards the end of your design and planning processes, e.g., as part of validating your theory of change or logframe to test and validate the potential for impact of a new concept or an early-stage new solution.

Step 1

PREPARE THE EXERCISE

To run this exercise, you need to have a clear problem statement and project goal that clearly sets out what you want to achieve to explore key appertaining assumptions.

Assumptions are internal and/or external factors that have the potential to influence (or even determine) the success of an intervention but most often lie outside the direct control of the implementing team. Assumptions relating to key enablers for- and barriers to the intervention should be carefully identified, monitored, and acted upon to give the intervention the best possible conditions for success. This tool zooms in on **3 categories: Desirability, Viability, and Feasibility.**

INFORMATION

PHASE
TEST

TIMEFRAME
120-240 MINS

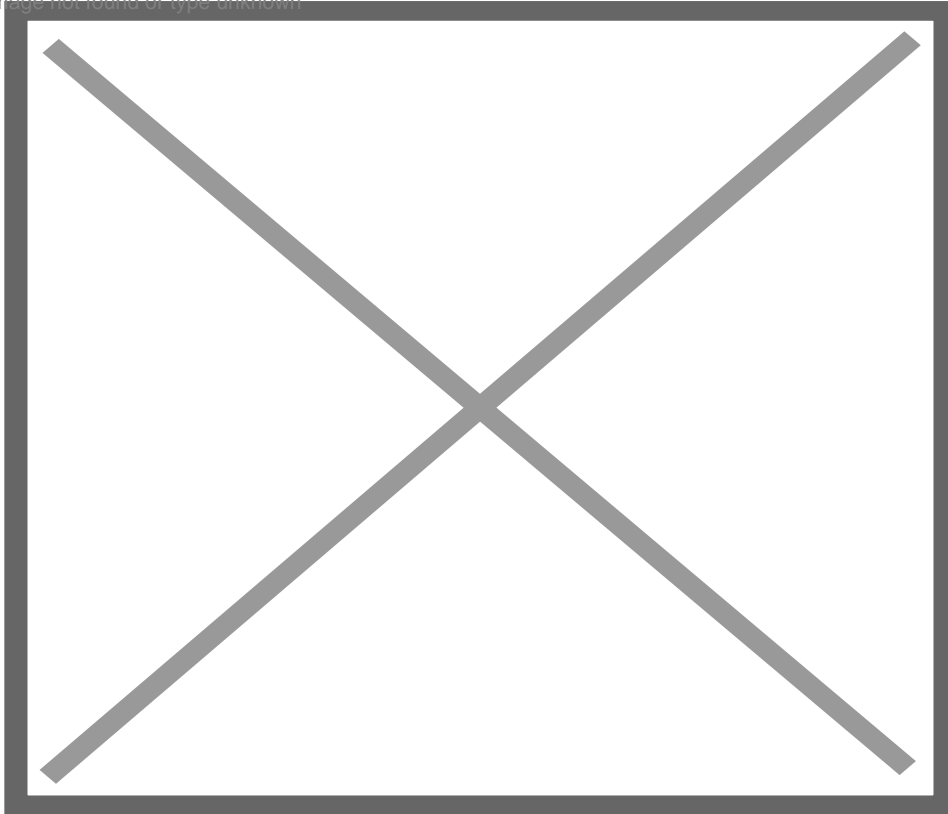
MODE
FACE-TO-FACE

PARTICIPANTS
4 - 8

FACILITATION LEVEL
MEDIUM

MATERIALS
STICKY NOTES IN 4
DIFFERENT COLOURS,
(ORANGE, GREEN, BLUE AND
YELLOW), PENS,
WHITEBOARD,
PRINTOUTS/LAPTOP AND
SCREEN, AND TIMER.

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For better visualization of the category assumptions, each category should have their own colour sticky notes. Now orange, green, blue, and yellow are proposed. Feel free to change the colours so they match the sticky notes you are able to acquire for the exercise. Just ensure you have four different colours and that you update the category colours accordingly, when presenting to the participants.

Do your homework for the chosen challenge you want to address, so you can guide the exercise participants with background or contextual information, insights from past evaluations, information about the target communities, and strategic plans and ambitions etc.

Print out the assumption questions listed under step 2, one category per sheet of paper, so the categories of questions to be revealed one by one to the participants.

Draw your assumption map on a big flip chart by drawing the horizontal axis first and map *known* vs. *unknown*. Then draw the vertical axis and map important vs. unimportant (see illustration of sample map below).

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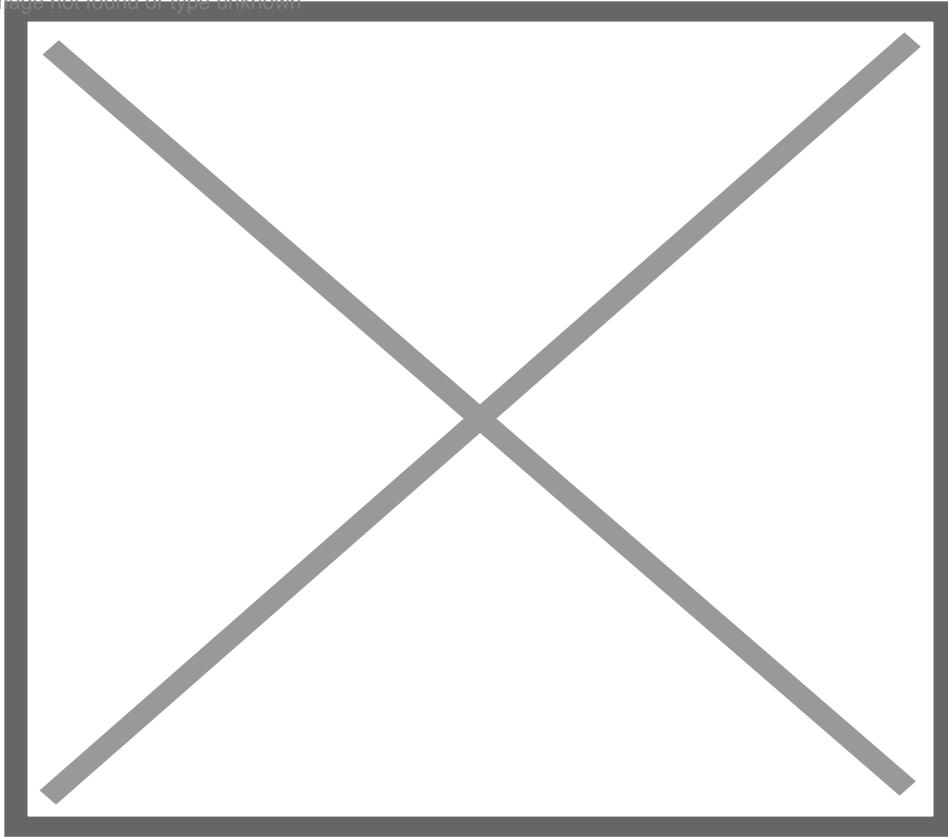


Illustration of the assumption map

When choosing participants for this exercise it will be very helpful to get a diverse group of people who would have different perspectives on the proposed solution. Ensure to apply a community engagement and accountability lens as well as a protection, gender, and inclusion lens to consider the relevance and appropriateness of including various types of stakeholders.

Facilitator tips

Tweak and add to the assumption questions in step 2 to suit the project you are working on – just make sure the questions are framed to uncover the relevant assumption: 1) Do they want this, 2) Should we do this? 3) Can we do this? If making changes remember to make same adjustments to the Assumptions categories and questions handout document for download in the sidebar.

Step 2

ASSUMPTIONS IDENTIFICATION

Introduce the participants to the timeframe and the purpose of the exercise:

- What are we going to do today?
- Why are they invited?
- What are their roles (if participants do not know each other well)?
- How long will this exercise take?

If you have more than four participants, split them into two groups for this entire step and summarise and consolidate at the end. If splitting into two groups, each should nominate one person to report back to the overall participant group.

Establish the challenge the group(s) will focus on, the context, the targeted communities for the intervention, and the parameters based on the data and insight that you have gathered. Make sure everyone thoroughly understands the proposed concept or solution at hand and that everyone is aligned on the project objectives.

Instruct the group(s) to now:

- Discuss and answer the questions under each category: Desirability, Viability, and Feasibility
- Identify and discuss the assumptions against the three categories.
- **NOTE:** Reveal the categories one by one by handing out the assumption categories and questions printed out one category at a time.

Remind the participants that assumptions are internal and/or external factors that have the potential to influence (or even determine) the success of an intervention but most often lie outside the direct control of the implementing team. Assumptions relating to key enablers for- and barriers to the intervention should be carefully identified, monitored, and acted upon to give the intervention the best possible conditions for success.

Instruct participants that their answers should be as specific as possible, and to the best of their knowledge, based on what they know today.

1. **Desirability:** Testing if the intended target group(s) want the concept/solution

To outline your team's desirability assumptions, ask them the following questions:

- Who is/are the target group(s) for our solution?
- What problem does our target group want to solve?
- How do they solve this problem today?
- Why can't they solve this problem today?
- What is the outcome our target group wants to achieve?
- Why will our target group stop using their current solution?

The participants should now discuss these questions and answer them as a team, writing their "We believe that..." (WBT) responses on **orange sticky notes**:

- WBT the target group(s) for our solution is/are...
- WBT the problem our target group wants to solve is...
- WBT they solve this problem today by...
- WBT they can't solve this problem today because...
- WBT the outcome they want to achieve is...
- WBT they will stop using their current solution because...

Allow the group(s) approximately 20 minutes to reply to the desirability questions.

2. **Viability:** Testing whether you should implement the solution.

To outline your team's viability assumptions, ask them the following questions:

- What is the entry point to the community we want to work with?
- Why will our target group(s) adopt our solution?
- Why will they share the solution with other community members?
- How does our solution interact and fit with other existing solutions?
- How does our solution interact and fit with other existing enabling systems?
- How does this solution support our programme and organisational strategies and plans?
- Who are the other actors trying to provide a similar solution?
- How will our solution lead to the desired impact?

The participants should now discuss these questions and answer them as a team, writing their "We believe that..." (WBT) responses on **green sticky notes**:

- WBT the target community entry point is ...
- WBT the target group(s) will adopt our solution because...
- WBT they will share the solution with others because...
- WBT our solution will interoperate with existing solutions by...
- WBT our solution will interoperate with existing systems by...
- WBT the solution supports our programme and organisational strategies and plans because...
- WBT the other actors trying to provide similar solutions are...
- WBT our solution will lead to the desired impact because...

Allow the group(s) approximately 20 minutes to reply to the viability questions.

3. **Feasibility:** Testing whether you can do it

To outline your team's viability assumptions, ask them the following questions:

- What are our biggest technical (i.e., programmatic competences) challenges?
- What are our biggest legal or regulatory risks?
- What is our internal governance or policy hurdles?
- Why does our leadership team support this solution?
- Where does our funding for this solution come from and is it sustainable?
- Why is our team (uniquely) positioned to achieve impact?

Your team should discuss these questions and answer them as a team, writing their "We believe that..." (WBT) responses on **blue sticky notes**:

- WBT our biggest technical challenges are ...
- WBT our biggest legal and regulatory risks are...
- WBT our biggest internal governance and policy hurdles are...
- WBT our leadership team support this solution because...
- WBT the funding for this solution will come from...
- WBT our team is uniquely positioned to achieve impact because...

Allow the group(s) approximately 20 minutes to reply to these questions.

If split into groups, gather all participants back in to plenum to go through each category.

Let the nominated persons in each group take turns in reporting back on one category at a time – ask them not to repeat answers or points that have already been made. Consolidate all inputs as you go.

This step will take about 90 minutes to complete. Allow the group a break to get re-energised before starting step 3.

Other assumptions?

Ask the group if they have identified are other critical assumptions, not necessarily connected to the three categories, that, if proven false, will cause your solution to fail? The team should write these responses on **yellow sticky notes**.

Facilitator tips

Encourage the participants to be completely honest about the level of effort required for each solution and be as accurate as possible about the projected impact – ideally the assumed impact should be based on data or other evidence, e.g., insights acquired from past evaluations, knowledge about the general context and targeted communities etc.

Remind the participants to apply a protection, gender, and inclusion lens, as well as consider conflict sensitivity issues, when going through the questions in this step.

To help participants stay focused, allow a maximum of 5 minutes for presentation per category.

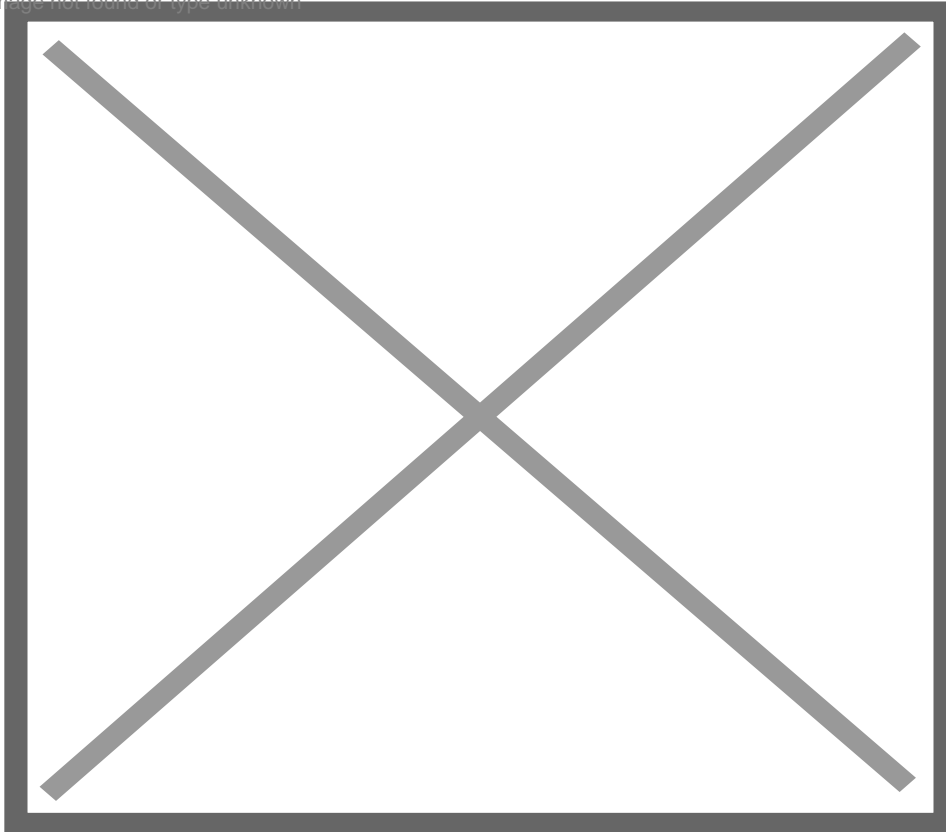
Step 3

ASSESS ASSUMPTIONS AND MAP

Now, you are ready to map your assumptions according to which whether they are known (you have evidence), unknown (you do not have evidence), important, and unimportant to achieve the desired impact.

Introduce the assumptions map to the participants that you have placed on the wall.

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Ask all participants to take a bunch of the assumptions they each feel most strongly about and place on the map individually and in silence. If any unplaced sticky notes are left, help each other place these remaining ones. There is no need to wait for turns, just go. Then, allow them a few minutes reflect on how the sticky notes are placed and whether they agree or not.

Next, invite the participants to engage in a structured conversation framed around:

- Why do you think this is known, when I think it is unknown? To validate the evidence for knowing.
- Why do you believe this is important, when I believe it is unimportant? To validate we understand the solution and its implementation context the same way.

Move the sticky notes according to the group discussions and following their agreements. This step to reach a shared understanding through the mapping conversation is extremely valuable and, moving forward, it can be more important than the map itself. With the conversation done, you have created your assumptions map.

Allow approximately 40 minutes for this step.

Step 4

TAKING THE MAP FORWARD

The assumption map should guide your next steps in designing and developing your project. Below are a few tips on how to take your map forward:

1. Focus on the top right quadrant for near term testing and validation of the important and unknown assumptions through, for example, interviews, focus group discussions [insert link], consultations, or whichever methodology is most relevant for the type of assumption you need to test.
2. Check the top left quadrant against your existing plan. Are these important and known assumptions already accounted for in your plans?
3. Defer commitment on the bottom left quadrant. These known and unimportant assumptions can be explored after you have validated the top right quadrant.
4. Create a list of exploratory tests for future validation. These experiments should come from the bottom right quadrant – the unknown and unimportant assumptions that can be probed later for future growth opportunities.

Define who will be responsible to do what and when after this exercise is completed and insert this into current action plans to ensure tasks are not forgotten. Thank everyone for their participation and insights.

Allow 15–20 minutes for this step.

Next: Allow the map to continue to grow past the confines of this exercise. If possible, keep it on the wall where the project team is based. This map should be a dynamic resource and an iterative process that informs your design, planning, implementation, and monitoring processes. Take a snapshot on a regular basis to document how things have changed and what you have learned over time.