

# ***ToC Reflection Notes 3:*** **Working with Assumptions in a Theory of Change Process<sup>1</sup>**

**Irene Guijt  
March 2013**

## **Introduction**

This note is based on our collective experiences in working with organizations to develop their theory of change. One of the most eye-opening aspects of the work for participants – and us – is that of *identifying assumptions*. Suddenly having an ‘aha’ moment about a long held and problematic assumption has been powerful, helping to: understand what works and why/or understand why things did not work, generate new strategies and actions, pinpoint information for outcome or impact reporting, and reveal why organisations in a partnership might not be working well together... yes, their assumptions differ.

We consider *thoughtful assumption identification an essential aspect of a ToC process*. Yet it is often poorly done. In Log frame matrices, the assumptions column is the parking lot for long lists of self-evident statements, such as ‘war won’t break out’, ‘resources will continue to flow in’, ‘partners have strong capacities’ and so forth. Common problems with assumptions are that people identify too few or too many, fail to see critical assumptions, and focus only on context assumptions while ignoring causal assumptions. We hope these notes can give ideas on how to improve this vital aspect of any good ToC process. After defining assumptions, this note explains their utility and gives some ideas about how to work with them effectively.

## **What is an assumption and what types exist?**

Our entire lives are based on assumptions. When I want to wash myself, I turn on the tap assuming water will come out. When I send an invoice, I expect it is paid within the agreed time. When I work with colleagues, I assume there will be moments of disagreement that will make me think. Our development interventions are also based on multiple assumptions about what will happen as a result of some kind of trigger.

What an assumption is and isn’t will not always be easy to define or understand. Our discussions in September 2012 led us to agreeing on a simple definition:

‘An assertion about the world that underlies the plan/anticipated change process.’

These assertions about what people believe to be true are determined by their values, experiences and beliefs. However, they are not always valid and are often

---

<sup>1</sup> This reflection note is one output of the learning retreat held by the Hivos ToC action-learning group on September 13-14, 2012. Group members are: Marjan van Es and Karel Chambille (Hivos Head Office), Simone van Vugt, Esther Koopmanschap, and Jan Brouwers (CDI), Irene Guijt (Learning by Design), and Iñigo Retolaza (independent practitioner). Hettie Walters (ICCO), Isabel Vogel and Zenda Ofir (independent practitioners) contributed greatly in their role as learning peers.

implicit. For example, I assume water will come out of the tap when I turn it on, and suddenly realize that this is an assumption when no water comes out, or when sand comes out. Surprises are therefore interesting eye-openers about implicit assumptions. Assumptions are context-specific; they hold true for a period of time in a certain place for certain people. They are more solidly grounded in some form of evidence than a personal bias (prejudice/like or dislike), yet biases most definitely shape our individual assumptions. However as a ToC process is collective, assumptions are not personal opinions but collective agreements about what the group holds to be true. Assumptions are also not equivalent to paradigms but underpin them. Paradigms are our worldviews that are based on certain assumptions about people, interactions, and the universe. So biases influence assumptions that bring forth the paradigms we uphold.

Different kinds of assumptions exist. Four categories are important to consider when mapping out how we think a certain kind of social change should happen. In a ToC process, considerable time should be planned to work through each of these categories.

1. Assumptions about the *causal links* between outcomes at different levels
  - operational or implementation assumptions, for example ‘we assume that participants will turn up for the training we have scheduled’ or ‘the facilitator has aligned the content with participants’ needs’
  - strategic assumptions or full pathway assumptions, for example ‘training will change people’s attitudes towards domestic violence, which in turn will change their behaviour’
  - purpose-level assumptions, for example ‘small scale farmers will be able to supply to global markets if they have access to easy credit’.
2. *Paradigm or ‘world view’ assumptions* about the drivers and pathways of change, for example ‘social change best occurs by civil society demanding and building responsive government’.
3. Assumptions about the *belief systems in society*, which inform judgments about what is appropriate and feasible in a specific context, for example ‘homosexuality is unnatural and should not be condoned or supported through our work’.
4. *Operational assumptions about the external context*, for example about (lack of) political stability or freedom of expression.

## **Why assumptions matter**

In our work, we have seen that clarifying assumptions in a shared thought process can contribute in several ways to development interventions, business plans and social change processes.

- *More effective teams.* The actual discussions that reveal the assumptions are those in which personal and group values are surfaced, collective energy is generated, and differences are named and sometimes resolved. Sometimes simply understanding different assumptions is enough to work together well.
- *Improving design and innovation.* Identifying those assumptions that most affect success can help people wake up to new options for action, and to help them

choose the most critical pathways on which to focus planning efforts. This helps us move beyond 'business as usual'.

- *More coordinated and focused action.* By hammering out the different ways in which individuals and organisations assume change will take place, the group can come to a negotiated shared meaning that can help coordinate different actions.
- *Better basis for adaptive management.* Focusing on critical assumptions (see below) can help with risk management, as it helps identify what you need to ensure must happen or avoid happening. Monitoring outputs, assumptions and processes together enables you to respond timely to new information and adapt planning and strategies, and to decide on the most strategic next steps to take in complex contexts/ processes.
- *More focused learning and evaluation.* Critical assumptions for which little knowledge or evidence exists, can become the focus for (action) research to inform the change process. Looking for critical pathways and assumptions can help guide analysis and judgments in evaluation.
- *Increased credibility.* An articulated set of assumptions can raise trust among those who have invested in an intervention or other key partners who are not directly involved in the design or intervention.

## **How to work with assumptions**

Assumptions are discussed once a first causal pathway exists – either as part of designing a new intervention or reviewing an existing one. Identifying a long list of assumptions is not hard. A quick brainstorm will lead to the obvious suspects that are commonly found in the Logframe 'assumptions column', such as 'partners stay engaged', 'funding arrives on time', 'civil war does not break out' and 'the weather is good for crop production'. However, how do we identify those that we can influence and are central to our strategic choices – and how do we stretch ourselves to go beyond the obvious ones?

### ***Formulating assumptions***

First decide how you will formulate assumptions. An assumption can be worded in terms of the behaviour, reaction, or condition of a person, group or system. It is clearest if these are worded in positive terms. For example, 'trainees implement according to their new business plans', 'the Department of Agriculture functions adequately in terms of staffing, systems, procedures and staff conditions of service', or 'girls feel confident to assert their rights'. Formulating them in this way allows you to assess how risky they are (see below).

***Questions to ask for each node or 'jump' in the causal pathways.*** Where do you start with identifying assumptions and how do you go beyond the obvious ones? Sit together in front of your change pathways that will often be visualised as a series of interconnecting streams. For each jump between two levels of outcomes, turn to the four categories of assumptions mentioned above. Also ask yourself and each other the following:

- If X happens, then will Y really be the result?
- Why do we think X or Y will happen?
- What are we taking for granted about relationships, social actors and their capacities?

- Should anything specific be in place or avoided in our political, economic or organisational context?
- Do people have the power to make the change we are assuming will happen: power to, within, over, with?
- What do we think motivates people to act, participate, change?
- What needs to be in place to make this assumed causal relation work – and is this likely to be the case?
- What are we assuming about how different pathways influence each other?

**Dealing with too many.** After identifying and documenting the assumptions, you will probably have too many. To make it manageable, you will need to identify those that are most important – those that are most risky for the success of development efforts. Identify those that:

- are most critical to success and, therefore, must be valid for expected results to happen – focus your design process and monitoring on these;
- have the highest risk of being invalid with severe consequences (see below);
- are the least clear, most contested, and/or need to be examined to reduce misunderstanding – decide how you will fill the knowledge gap or need to adapt your plan.

**Focusing on critical assumptions.** A useful way to reduce the number of assumptions and focus on those that matter is to identify the critical or high-risk assumptions. High-risk assumptions have a high likelihood of being invalid and lead to serious consequences. *High likelihood of being invalid* means that the assumption is probably not correct, e.g. ‘girls may well not feel confident about asserting their rights after having attended a training course’. *Serious consequence* assumptions are those that, if wrong, will have a major jeopardizing effect on the entire desired change process.

Once you have identified a handful of high-risk assumptions, they need strategizing and careful monitoring. The table shows what can help:

- identify actions to reduce the risks;
- identify additional activities to compensate for possible impacts *if* high risk assumptions do occur; or
- have alternative plans ready if assumptions prove to be invalid.

	Mild CONSEQUENCES	Serious CONSEQUENCES
Low LIKELIHOOD of being invalid	Don't worry	Can consequences be mitigated?
High LIKELIHOOD of being invalid	Can risk be reduced?	Watch out! Will bite us so rethink the design ...

As Bob Williams points out<sup>2</sup>, this approach works for assumptions about a course of events you can anticipate or imagine – the known. But what about when you are working under complex or chaotic conditions about which much becomes clear after the fact? All kinds of assumptions will jump out and catch us by surprise! Those situations ask for more frequent reflections and corrective action. In fact, under such

<sup>2</sup> Email from Bob Williams on 10/10/2012 to MandENews under the thread ‘How sound is our THEORY of CHANGE?’

conditions, action might be the only way to reveal an assumption. You try out something and see what happens. Whatever surprises us or does not happen as expected will reveal what our assumption was and is the basis for rapid reflection and identification of a new action based on a corrected assumption.

***Use your assumptions to define your learning strategy.***

Inevitably you will have identified assumptions about issues on which you know too little. For example, one programme realised they didn't know what farmers were spending the extended credit on. Team members agreed that it would be unwise to assume the credit would be used to improve farming; this assumption needed more supportive data. The critical assumptions (see above) about which little is known need to be followed up with some process to gather and make sense of the data. Check what is known from different sources of knowledge, not just what you think you know. Perhaps you will need to collect some data, have a survey, or develop a few case studies. Then bring the team and key partners or stakeholders together to discuss which assumptions are still valid or are proving to be questionable. Analysing the data together in order to update assumptions will keep your strategy and operational plan up to date.

***Update assumptions.*** Assumptions are specific to a context and not static. Because they hold true for a certain period of time, they need to be looked at regularly and updated. Only then can they be used for guiding the development intervention or change process, hence the importance of monitoring and adaptive management.

***Focus for discussions with partners.*** Having partners articulate their assumptions and sharing your own assumptions can be a very useful basis for discussing weak points in a collective theory of change. It can lead to more realistic and complementary expectations about each other's contribution to an intervention or change process.