Testing Assumptions with Scenarios Facilitator's Guide

OBJECTIVE: TO TEST CURRENT POLICY ASSUMPTIONS ACROSS POTENTIAL SCENARIOS.

This exercise tests the commonly held assumptions embedded in policy against previously developed scenarios. (We assume you are using archetypal scenarios for this exercise, although it could be adapted for other forms of scenarios). In just under 4 hours, a group of 20–25 participants (in a combination of breakout groups and/or plenary sessions) can test approximately 15–20 commonly held assumptions and revise those that don't seem robust.

People:
- 1 plenary facilitator
- 1 facilitator per breakout group
- 20–25 participants
- 1–2 runners (optional)
- 1 notetaker (optional)

Materials:
In the plenary room:
- Evaluation form, or 3 sticky notes per person for feedback (optional)

Post on the wall:
- Chart for testing assumptions in plenary (#2)
- A visual agenda (optional)
- Rules of engagement (optional)
- 2 headings on sticky notes (optional): What worked? What could be better?

In each breakout room:
- Approximately 10–12 assumptions
- Fine-tip marker for each participant
- Handouts with chart for testing assumptions
- Projector/computer (preferred to flipcharts)

Post on the wall:
- Chart for testing assumptions in breakout (#1)

Agenda at a Glance

TIME	ACTIVITY
5 minutes	1. General meeting introductions (if needed)
3 hours and 30 minutes	2. Give context for the assumptions testing exercise (1 min) 3. Provide instructions for the exercise (4 mins) 4. Test assumptions (100 mins) - Break (30 mins) 5. Identify vulnerable assumptions across scenarios (75 mins) 6. Summarize points of assumptions testing exercise (1 min)
10 minutes	7. Reflect on and/or evaluate the exercise

EST. TOTAL TIME: 3 hours 45 minutes

Meeting Space:
- A large room with a blank wall (or computer screen or several flipcharts) to post working chart for testing assumptions.
- Seating for all conducive to both hearing other participants and seeing the wall (or computer screen).

BEFORE THE MEETING: WHICH ASSUMPTIONS TO USE?

This activity evaluates the credibility of current policy assumptions in light of the plausible futures described in archetypal scenarios (hereafter referred to as scenarios). You will have generated a list of assumptions at the beginning of the study, in module 2. As the study proceeded, participants may have discovered additional assumptions. (The facilitation team may have noted these as the study progressed by reviewing the results of previous exercises, conducting an additional assumptions exercise, or inviting participants to add to an assumptions document or flip chart "parking lot.")

The facilitation team will need to consider whether it will be practical and beneficial to assess the full set of assumptions against the study scenarios, or whether the list will need to be reduced to the most important assumptions. (This exercise is designed to assess about 10–12 assumptions in two to three hours. Assessing more would require extending the activity time.) To identify the most important assumptions, the same questions from the assumptions exercise in module 2 can help:

- Which assumptions are most central to policy makers, for the system under study? That is, a lot rides on these assumptions for one or both of the following reasons:
  - ° the assumption underpins the policy context of a lot of issues
  - ° if the assumption turned out to be wrong, it would necessitate a significant adjustment

In some contexts it may be appropriate for project participants to vote for the most important assumptions using an online survey or dot-voting in person; alternatively, it may be preferable for the facilitation team to make this judgment on behalf of the group. Without revealing their results to participants, before the meeting the core facilitation team might also quickly ask themselves:

- Which assumptions could plausibly be disrupted by the kinds of change discussed during this study?

After all, it would be fruitless if all the assumptions were deemed credible when assessed against the range of futures discussed in the scenarios. While this is unlikely, reviewing the assumptions with this question assures the facilitator that the exercise to come will deliver some value.

At the other extreme, it isn't necessary to simply identify the assumptions that seem like "straw men" (easily rejected).* The facilitator should expect a range of outcomes from the exercise. Participants may deem some assumptions to be clearly vulnerable according to all scenarios. Other assumptions may be deemed vulnerable only under certain scenarios and credible under

other scenarios. For some assumptions, the group may be uncertain whether they hold up in a given scenario, indicating a need for more information. Finally, some assumptions may be deemed credible in most or all scenarios. A quick test run of the activity on some assumptions will help the facilitator prepare for the meeting.

Prepare the room

- In each breakout room, ensure that each participant has a chair, writing surface and a clear sightline to the wall. Project or post a list of commonly held assumptions on the wall using as a template the Chart for Testing Assumptions in Breakout Groups (Chart #1). Smaller handouts of the chart can also be provided to participants for ease of reference.

- In the plenary room, project or post on the wall the list of commonly held assumptions using as a template the Chart for Testing Assumptions in Plenary Session (Chart #2).

- For a larger group (e.g. 20–25), seating participants facing each other around a large table(s) can help to ensure all are seen and heard.

- Develop and post in the room any other visual aids that will be referred to in the meeting.

* If the assumptions reversal exercise of module 2 was delivered, those results may also inform this selection of assumptions.

ANNOTATED AGENDA

TIME	ACTIVITY	NOTES
5 minutes	**1. General meeting introductions (if needed)** • Introduce facilitators • Provide context for the session (why are we here?) • Allow participant introductions if they are unacquainted • Consider adding a few minutes to the agenda to: 　° build rapport through an ice-breaker activity 　° review or develop a list of ground rules on the wall	• If this is one of several activities, consider using a visual agenda to situate this activity within the day's events. • A list of "rules of engagement" posted in the room during the meeting is a visual reminder of the group's commitment to support a good discussion.
1 minute	**2. Give context for the assumptions testing exercise** • "At the beginning of our study, we gathered a set of commonly held assumptions embedded in policy. The assumptions we gathered gave us a sense of the expected future. They are the foundation on which we build our mental models that guide our actions, including policy." • "The purpose of this session is to revisit those assumptions in light of the scenarios we developed." • "This allows us to test and challenge the commonly held assumptions to see whether they are credible, uncertain or vulnerable across the different scenarios." • "It also allows us to reformulate vulnerable assumptions to make them more robust."	• It may be useful to give participants handouts with an overview of the scenarios (and corresponding policy challenges and opportunities).

4 minutes	3. **Provide activity instructions**

3. Provide activity instructions

- "In this activity, we will revisit the commonly held assumptions we identified at the beginning of this study." (If any additional assumptions were generated over the course of the study, indicate where they came from (e.g. from weak signal discussions, system mapping)).
- "We will present the list of assumptions that people thought were most central to policy making for our topic."
- "We will then break up into four groups: one for each scenario."
- "Each group will revisit its scenario and see how each of the assumptions holds up. The main question we will be asking is whether this assumption is credible, uncertain or vulnerable in this scenario."
- "If the assumption is vulnerable, we will reformulate the assumption to make it more robust."
- "We will then return to plenary to share our findings from each of the scenarios and determine which assumptions were credible, uncertain or vulnerable across all scenarios."
- "Before starting discussion, please assign a reporter in each breakout group."
- Have participants assigned to particular scenarios based on their previous involvement in the scenario building exercise.

- Note: If the core facilitation team made any prioritization of assumptions on behalf of participants, consider adding an item to the agenda (20 minutes) to have participants review the full list of assumptions generated over the study and the prioritized shortlist (e.g. in a handout). They could be asked to review the full list to nominate whether any other "most important" assumptions should be added to the shortlist. With the new shortlist, conduct a vote to reduce to the desired number of assumptions (that will fit the exercise timing).

		• To ensure efficiency and consistency, it is important that participants have a good sense of the particular scenario— if participants were engaged in the building of particular scenarios, it is best to involve in them in testing assumptions within the same scenario.
90 minutes	**4. Test assumptions in breakout groups** • On a flipchart or computer, use the <u>Chart for Testing Assumptions</u> in Breakout Groups (Chart #1). • The facilitator revisits the list of commonly held assumptions with the participants. Participants may be given an opportunity to slightly re-word these assumptions, if necessary. • The facilitator then provides details of the particular scenario for the participants so they understand the context of the world in which they are working. • The facilitator then asks the participants to rate whether each of the assumptions seems "credible," "uncertain" or "vulnerable" in this particular scenario. The participants have a chance to explain their decisions, as the facilitator records their preferences on the chart (via a simple mark in the appropriate box). • The facilitator goes through each assumption one by one until the list of assumptions is completed.	• Consider having a notetaker type the conversation.

	• The facilitator then reviews each assumption that was labeled "vulnerable" and engages the participants in a discussion to identify a new revised assumption that would be more robust. • Once the discussion winds down, discuss what the reporter will present in the plenary session (namely the assumptions that were vulnerable under this scenario, and the newly revised assumptions). • Direct participants to take a break and then return to the plenary session.	
30 minutes	**Break** • During the break, the facilitators and reporters can take stock of the information gathered in their specific sessions and record it on flipcharts or the computer for ease of viewing in the plenary session. As a template, refer to the Chart for Testing Assumptions in Plenary (Chart #2). The reporter from each breakout group completes their scenario column, rating each assumption as V (vulnerable), U (uncertain) or C (credible). In the same column, beside/under every V, the reporter also notes the robust assumption proposed by the breakout group. • Note: Some assumptions may be identified as vulnerable under several scenarios (and therefore have several proposed robust assumptions). The next activity will review those vulnerable assumptions and complete the final column with a single revised robust assumption that addresses all scenarios.	

75 minutes	5. **Identify vulnerable assumptions across scenarios**	• Note: If not all assumptions were assessed in breakouts, and/or if not all vulnerable assumptions are rewritten to be more robust, the core facilitation team can finish up the work and test with the group at a later date.

5. **Identify vulnerable assumptions across scenarios**
   - In plenary, ensure the Chart for Testing Assumptions (Chart #2) is visible to the whole group.
   - Ask each reporter to:
     ° Briefly describe their scenario (muddling through, incremental decline, incremental progress, transformation).
     ° Outline the vulnerable assumptions within that scenario, as well as the reformulated robust assumptions.
     ° Allow 5–7 minutes per group to share their findings (20–30 minutes).
   - Once all the groups have reported back, ask participants for their thoughts on some of the assumptions that are vulnerable across more than one scenario.
     ° Reformulate each of these vulnerable assumptions into revised assumptions that seem robust across all scenarios. Robust assumptions should be high level enough to address vulnerabilities across any and all of the scenarios (45 minutes).

- Note: If not all assumptions were assessed in breakouts, and/or if not all vulnerable assumptions are rewritten to be more robust, the core facilitation team can finish up the work and test with the group at a later date.

1 minute	6. **Summarize points of assumptions testing exercise**	
	• "The main point of this exercise was to test commonly held assumptions across different scenarios of the future. This allows us to challenge current assumptions about a particular system and identify more robust assumptions that could be incorporated into policy and planning."	
	• If appropriate, the facilitator could commit to post the robust assumptions in a shared space (e.g. a shared network folder, a workplace wall) and invite participants to comment further, as appropriate.	
10 minutes	7. **Reflect on and/or evaluate the exercise**	• Provide evaluation forms or sticky notes as appropriate.
	• Give participants an opportunity to provide feedback on the exercise.	
	• This might take the form of:	
	° Q&A discussion	
	° Participant completion of an evaluation form	
	° Informal evaluation—On their way out the room, participants are asked to post one comment on a sticky note for each of three wall headings:	
	- What Worked?	
	- What Could be Better?	

Building a Foresight Workshop: Complementary Activities to Consider

For facilitators with multiple objectives for a foresight workshop, below is a suggestion that would pair well with the assumptions testing exercise.

Before the exercise

- Revisit a few slides from the Scenarios presentation (specifically on the topic of testing assumptions)