Theory of Change Guide
No. 5 : Assumptions

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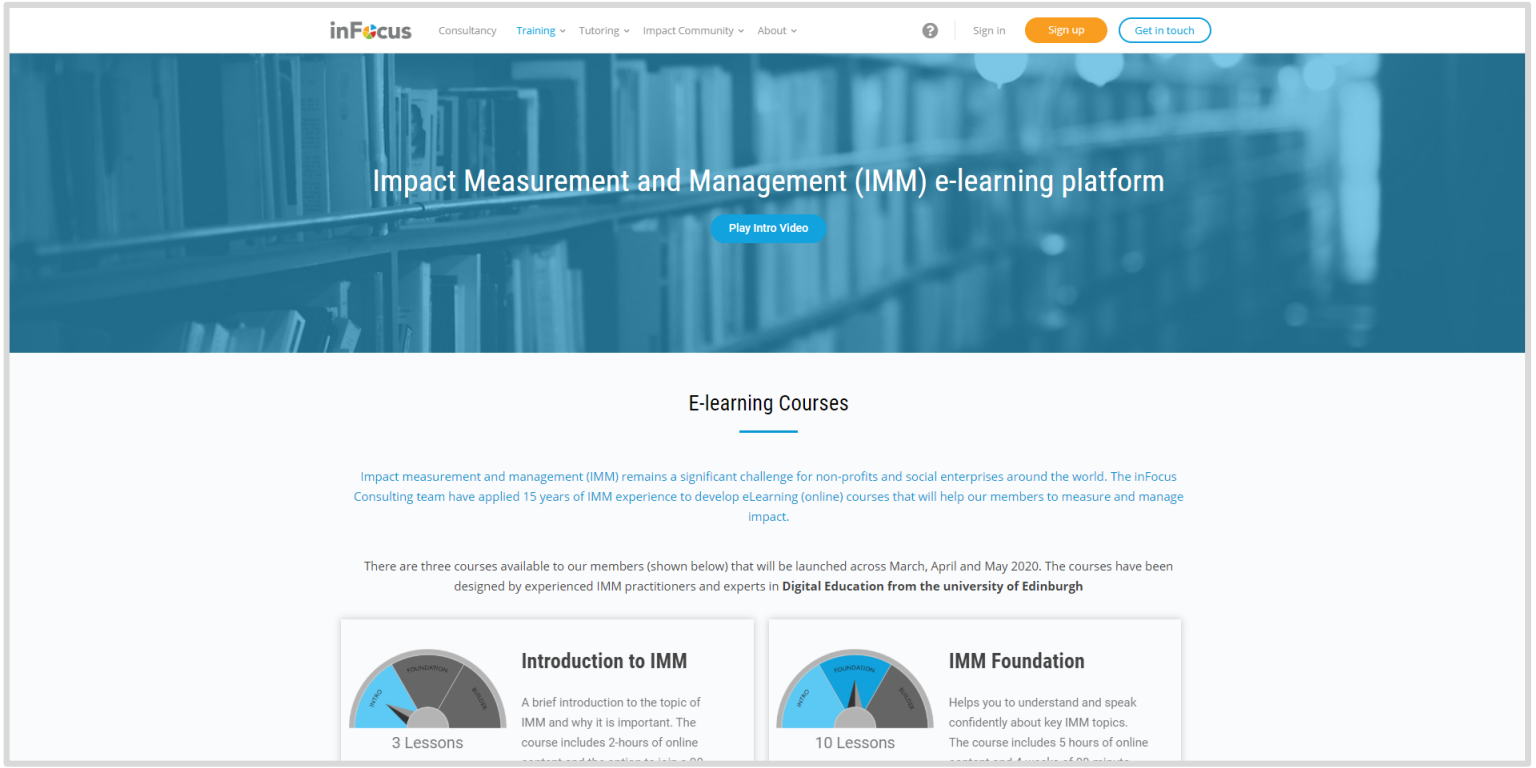
Introduction

This guide forms part of the inFocus Impact Measurement and Management (IMM) eLearning course (https://impactinfocus.com/e-learning/). This is one of a series of five guides that each look at how to develop each section of a theory of change.



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When to develop 'Assumptions'

The final step in developing the theory of change relates to assumptions. We do this last so that we can reflect on the theory of change developed to date in developing the assumptions.

1. Situation

Problem

The social or environmental problem or challenge that the organisation is seeking to address

Target Audience

The target audience that will be directly supported by the organisation's services or products

Stakeholders

The stakeholders that can influence the problem positively, or negatively

3. Outcomes pathway

Outcomes are the changes needed from the organisation and in the wider system for the impact to take place. These are often called preconditions, as they relate to the conditions required for the outcomes or impact to occur.

4. Activities and Inputs

The specific activities that are directed towards bringing about outcomes and impact through a service or product. This could also include activities of partner organisations. These are mapped against the outcomes or outcomes pathway to identify any missing outcomes and the extent to which organisations are contributing to impact.

2. Impact

Impact refers to the longest-term social or environmental change that your service or product contributes to in your local and wider social context.

5. Assumptions

Assumptions explore existing beliefs about how the theory of change works.

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What are 'Assumptions'

What are assumptions?

Assumptions are the core beliefs that underpin your theory of change and explain the ´theory´ behind the different elements of your theory of change and how they connect

Assumptions can be developed in a number of ways

- Knowledge and practical experience of your staff and volunteers
- Perspectives of your target audience and stakeholders
- Relevant academic research and 'best practice' from the field

Assumptions *´represent the values, beliefs, norms and ideological perspectives, both personal and professional, that inform the interpretations that teams and stakeholders bring to bear on a programme´* **(Isabel Vogel)**

One of the key distinguishing features of assumptions is that it describes something that is **assumed to already be in place/happening** and does not require an intervention or change for it to take place. This is compared with outcomes, which relate to a change that is needed, both from an individual organisation and the wider system they operate within.

In the example of **inclusivEd** we have used throughout this course, you can see that their three assumptions below relate to things that are already in place.

There are some pupils that do require more support than can be provided in mainstream education

More inclusive approaches to lesson planning and delivery are possible within the existing resources available to schools

Teachers have the time/ capacity to attend the inclusive training

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What are 'Assumptions'

Assumptions sit right at the core of your theory of change, they could be described as the 'deeply-held beliefs within the theory of change'

We regularly make assumptions about the way that our services or products work and the needs they address. For example, an organisation running an HIV and AIDS education programme might assume that a key early outcome in the outcomes pathway would be to increase the knowledge of participants in relation to what would constitute 'risky behaviour' in relation to HIV and AIDS.

In urban areas where the organisation runs programmes, young people might already be aware of this fact thanks to existing HIV and AIDS educational programmes. Therefore a focus on changing behaviour could be more effective.

However, in rural areas, where there are fewer interventions from NGO's and schools, the increase in knowledge could still be an important first step.

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Why develop 'Assumptions'

Why develop assumptions?

There are several reasons to develop assumptions within your theory of change:

- **'Eureka moments':** examining and challenging believes can really generate interesting learning and 'eureka moments' where key realisations are made.
- **Is the theory of change plausible?** i.e. have we created a compelling story about the pathway of change that would lead to the impact in this particular context? Assumptions act as a check on whether the activities are appropriate for finally influencing change in the desired direction, in a particular context.
- **What needs to be further evidenced and tested for validity?** Against some assumptions there will be strong evidence that the statement is indeed reflective of reality in the given context, in which case the assumption is less important to further validate through impact measurement. Assumptions that are both critical to the model working and evidence to support the statement is also lacking, should be highlighted.
- **Is the theory of change feasible?** i.e. do we have the capacity and resources to implement all the activities required to bring about the outcomes and lead towards impact?

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How to develop 'Assumptions'

Developing assumptions: three assumption types

When developing assumptions, individually or as a group, it can be helpful to think through the three different types of assumptions we use at inFocus before you start. It is important to remember that assumptions are **already in place** and are not changes like outcomes.

Intervention Assumptions

Intervention assumptions are assumptions which explain **how and why certain services or products are expected to bring about certain changes** in a given context.

EXAMPLE: A Child Protection 'trainer of trainers' programme delivered over a 3 week period and covering all key principles of child protection for informal actors, will lead to an increase in knowledge and understanding of CP issues within the wider community.

Contextual Assumptions

Contextual assumptions explain how and why certain conditions/ factors (either internal or external) need to be in place for change to happen, in the way that has been stated. This type of assumption about the 'context' in which a product or service is operating, can be viewed as a **'condition/ factor that is already considered to be in place'** rather than changes that need to take place.

EXAMPLE: There is strong support and recognition of the role and importance of Child Protection services at the national and local government level.

Domino Effect Assumptions

Domino effect assumptions explain **the belief behind a 'domino effect' outcome** where the achievement of an outcome at one stage, is believed to lead to the next outcome along in the pathway, without any additional action on the part of the organization with its service or product.

EXAMPLE: An increase in the knowledge and understanding of the community of the role of social workers will lead to an increase in demand for CP services within the community.