Initial Assumptions and Learning Questions

This facilitation guide and template are intended to identify learning questions to guide strategy, program, or activity design. It draws from assumptions in an initial (implicit or explicit) theory of change to identify unknowns, then move from those unknowns to learning questions. It includes two parts, and is recommended to be conducted in two separate sessions to provide time for facilitator work between sessions.

SESSION 1: Brainstorming

Facilitator Notes:

- The MEL team or facilitator should identify hypotheses from activity/project/strategy documents and enter them in tables **ahead of group work.** This is important to give the team a starting point. Make hypotheses as specific as possible so that team members can identify concrete assumptions. In an initial implicit or explicit theory of change, there are often several mini-hypotheses.
- With a larger team, it is best to send the hypothesis tables to the group ahead of time to enter initial ideas. This allows others who may need more time to think about their response, or who might be less likely to speak up, to contribute.
- In Session 1, discuss group inputs. If they need some prompting, these guiding questions may be helpful:
  - Why might this hypothesis not work out in practice?
  - Are all the relevant actors already motivated or interested in this?
  - Do all the relevant actors have the capacity necessary for this? What about the necessary relationships?
  - If they have the capacity, will they have the opportunity to use it? Are there legal barriers? Logistical barriers? Market opportunity?

- ○ Why isn't this happening now? What is the limitation and how is USAID filling it?
- **Note** the facilitator work of filling in unknowns and assumptions **before** Session 2. It is <u>not</u> recommended to combine Session 1 and Session 2 into one block of time.
- An example is provided here:

IF USAID trains more veterinarians throughout the country	THEN their services will be widely available to smallholder farmers	AND farmers will use veterinary services for their herds
Brainstorm factors that might challenge this hypothesis: ● Even more veterinarians are trained, they may not want to work in the most rural areas. ● Farmers may not be able to afford veterinary services.		
What actors need to be involved to make this work? ● The Ministry of Agriculture should be involved to figure out how to make veterinary services available. ● Veterinarians will need to want to serve smallholder farmers ● The Veterinary College will need to be involved in training		
If you designed a program based on this hypothesis, what additional information would you need? ● Is the Ministry of Agriculture interested in this effort, and are they willing to provide resources to improve veterinary extension services? ● Do new or young veterinarians have interest in working in areas not currently served? ● Are farmers willing to pay for services? How much?		

<u>Instructions for participants:</u> This worksheet contains several hypotheses stated explicitly or implicitly in the [activity design/CDCS/other]. Read each hypothesis, then think about the guiding questions under each hypothesis and note down your thoughts. Don't worry about having fully formed or well-articulated thoughts! This is a brainstorming document, and we'll dig into and discuss these ideas more in our session.

Hypothesis 1

IF	THEN	AND (optional)
Brainstorm factors that might challenge this hypothesis: (*Or, what are we assuming that may or may not be true?*)		
What actors need to be involved to make this work?		
If you designed a program based on this hypothesis, what additional information would you need?		

Hypothesis 2

IF	THEN	AND (optional)
Brainstorm factors that might challenge this hypothesis: (*Or, what are we assuming that may or may not be true?*)		
What actors need to be involved to make this work?		
If you designed a program based on this hypothesis, what additional information would you need?		

Hypothesis 3

IF	THEN	AND (optional)
Brainstorm factors that might challenge this hypothesis: (*Or, what are we assuming that may or may not be true?*)		
What actors need to be involved to make this work?		
If you designed a program based on this hypothesis, what additional information would you need?		

Hypothesis 4

IF	THEN	AND (optional)
Brainstorm factors that might challenge this hypothesis: (*Or, what are we assuming that may or may not be true?*)		
What actors need to be involved to make this work?		
If you designed a program based on this hypothesis, what additional information would you need?		

SESSION 2 FACILITATOR PRE-WORK

Facilitator Notes:

- Fill in "Unknowns" based on the factors raised in questions (1) ("Brainstorm factors...") and (3) ("What additional information...") under **each** hypothesis above. Fill in "Actors to Consult" based on actors identified in Question 2 under **each** hypothesis above.

- It is <u>not</u> recommended to combine Session 1 and Session 2 into one block of time, but if you must do so, you can have another team member fill these out while the Session 1 discussion occurs.

UNKNOWNS (Facilitator to fill in based on group inputs.)

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ACTORS TO CONSULT (Facilitator to fill in based on group inputs.)

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SESSION 2: Learning Questions

Facilitator Notes:

- Starting with the unknowns, discuss with the group which are most important, and shape these into question format. (You can also put them into question format before the session, then focus on prioritizing them with the group).
- Feel free to add more learning questions than you want to end up with - you can always narrow it down later after further consideration of (1) how you'll use the answer and (2) resources required to answer the question.
- Walk through each of the questions in the table column headers with the group.
  - The "Actors to consult" section on the previous page may be useful in guiding answers in Column 4.
  - The Local Works Program Design Toolbox page (USAID Agency internal only) has ideas for consulting local actors and understanding the local system, which may be useful for answering learning questions.

Learning Question	Why do you need the answer? How will you use the answer?	What do we know so far?	Activities to answer questions/Actors to consult