# Planning for What's Next: Scenario Planning in Food Security Activities

**Question and Answer (Q&A) Webinar Document**

## How do you define "scenario planning"?

As noted in the webinar, there are many different (but similar) definitions for scenario planning. A simple overarching definition, which applies to simple or complex approaches to scenario planning is **an intentional process by which you make decisions and plans now about how to be prepared to respond to a possible future situation.**

## When should you do scenario planning?

Scenario planning is an important exercise that can be initiated at any time. For example, it can be done at the design and planning stage of a new strategy, activity, or project to ensure your plan is robust. However, it is also an important process to revisit and review at appropriate points during implementation and management of an activity. For example, in a multi-year activity, revisiting your scenario planning efforts as part of a Pause & Reflect activity prior to developing your yearly work plan is a wise and worthwhile use of time. If you have a Theory of Change (TOC), revisiting your TOC and its assumptions is also a sensible time to revisit previous scenario planning efforts.

## Is COVID-19 a bad example for scenario planning?

We believe COVID-19 provides a helpful and globally recognized example of a change in context that can dramatically and rapidly require an adaptation. Organizations that already had contingency plans in place for remote working, for example, were arguably better positioned to adapt. It also provides an opportunity to imagine what a post-pandemic scenario could look like, and helps us think about what indicators we might look for to tell us when it is safe to meet in person or travel again. Just because this is a global pandemic does not mean it needs to take a lot of time to think about questions such as:

- How will our current service delivery model change if/when COVID-19 is not a high threat?
- When will we know it is safe again to conduct in-person monitoring?
- Have we learned anything from the current pandemic situation that we could leverage to improve our processes moving forward?
- Are there changes to the way that we budget and plan that we should talk to our funders about?

## How deep should you go into scenario planning in a proposal?

Scenario planning should be included in the proposal as an adaptive management tool that will be used during the implementation of the project or activity. Scenario planning does not need to be a super-detailed and lengthy exercise. What is more important is the recognition that a strong proposal usually includes a clear, evidence- and capacity-based theory of how proposed activities will lead to a set of desired outcomes within a certain local or regional context. Whether implicitly or explicitly, your proposal is based in certain assumptions about funding, the resources and expertise you have at your disposal, and who you can

collaborate with. If all of those components are included in a proposal, it is always worth noting – even at a high level – how you might adapt if any of those assumptions change. By demonstrating that you are aware that context or enabling conditions can always change, you are showing the funder that you are prepared to adapt, when necessary.

## Is the time available worth it to do scenario planning given multiple priorities?

"Failing to plan is like planning to fail" is a phrase worth considering here. It is a mistake to assume that scenario planning needs to take a lot of time. Rather, it should be built into the design and planning process of any activity, at least on an annual basis. When you are working on your proposal or developing your work plan for the coming year, there should always be a component of that exercise that asks "what if" about your assumptions where you discuss with your team, partners, and funder. You do not need to develop elaborate alternative plans but, at a high level, you should know how you might adapt if your situation changes significantly.

## Could you clarify key participants and key users for scenario planning?

In an ideal world, the stakeholders in a scenario planning exercise should be the same stakeholders you would involve in a collaborative proposal or work planning exercise. In other words, it should include inputs and conversations with your management team, your partners, and your funders. It should also include inputs from your entire team and other stakeholders working in the same sector, when appropriate. The purpose is to ensure that:

- Those developing the proposal, work plan, or strategy are informed by multiple perspectives;
- They have as clear a picture as possible about the assumptions upon which your plan is based; and
- There is agreement with the funder(s) about how you might need to adapt should certain conditions change.

## How do we know whether alternative scenarios will require a modification? Is there specific language included in awards to allow for flexibility during implementation?

It is common to see language in proposals and awards that requests some sort of adaptive management approach to be included. If this is not explicitly called for in a solicitation, make sure to ask questions to the funder during the questions phase about their intentions for flexibility in work plans and activities if there are context changes. If the award has been made, talk to your Agreement Officer's Representative (AOR)/ Contracting Officer Representative (COR) about your Theory of Change, and what flexibility there is for shifts in activities pending changes to your assumptions. You will most likely find that they are very open to discussions about alternative scenarios.

## Is scenario planning a different document than a log frame?

Yes, it is different but there is a connection. Your current log frame is based on your Theory of Change, and the assumptions that are built into it, which is your current operating scenario. Your scenario planning effort can look at that same log frame and ask: "If X changes, how would we adapt to try to reach the same intended outputs and outcomes?"

## How do you ensure that the scenarios are realistic? I often feel that we are being driven to a pre-ordained solution in the guise of scenario planning.

Scenario planning is not about predicting the future. It is about being prepared to adapt, when necessary, if your operating context changes and you're trying to understand what the early warning signs are for a

potential change so you can be ready. Try not to fall into the trap of getting the scenario exactly right and instead focus on discussing with your funders, your partners, and your team on how you might change your approach if your current assumptions change.

## Is there anything about scenario planning on the USAID Learning Lab website?

Yes. Go to the [CLA Case Competition Map page](#) on the USAID Learning Lab website and select the filter for "CLA Components" and select "Scenario Planning." As of December 2020, there are nine cases tagged Scenario Planning.