

# An Adaptive Scenario Planning Process Prompted by COVID-19

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## CONTEXT

### What is the general context in which your example takes place?

Graduating to Resilience is a seven-year USAID/BHA-funded activity implemented in the Kamwenge district in Western Uganda. Led by AVSI Foundation, in partnership with Trickle Up and IMPAQ International, its goal is to progress extremely poor refugee and Ugandan householders in the Kamwenge district from conditions of food insecurity and fragile livelihoods to self-reliance and resilience using a cohort model. The activity engages 13,200 households who are economically active yet unable to consistently meet their basic needs without some form of assistance.



Photo Credit: Esther Ruth Mbabazi / Save the Children

## ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT IN ACTION

### Describe your adaptive management example.

#### What problems were you trying to solve? Why did you choose to implement it this way?

In early February 2020, during our second period of change refinement workshop, a Graduating to Resilience team member asked if we needed to consider COVID-19 in our assumptions. She was quickly dismissed, and team members asked her if COVID-19 was even in Uganda. However, one month later, on March 17, 2020, activity leadership provided guidance to all staff to be certain that accurate and consistent information about COVID-19 reached every employee and, subsequently, all project participants. The situation escalated quickly. On March 18, 2020, the president of Uganda addressed the nation and announced 13 restrictions, including a ban on convening groups larger than ten people for 30 days. Then, on March 31, 2020, the president of Uganda officially locked down the entire country. Management was faced with unprecedented challenges during a time of extreme uncertainty that not only tested our external assumptions, but also went beyond anything we could have predicted.

In the midst of unprecedented uncertainty, our team decided to develop a context monitoring and adaptive scenario planning tool and process to help us anticipate and plan for the ways in which lockdowns provoked by COVID-19 could influence our programs.

Creating the tool was a learning experience in itself. It took time for those who had never participated in scenario planning to understand why we were doing this exercise when we did not even know what was going to happen. We had a heated debate on whether to base our scenarios and adaptations on the potential context (for example, full lockdown versus partial restrictions) or base it on the length of time (since a lockdown occurring for one month is very different from a lockdown occurring for six months). We finally decided we had to consider both and include timespans on all of our scenario descriptions.

It was also a challenge to know how many scenarios were sufficient. The possibilities of what could happen were truly endless. In the end, we decided to start with two scenarios as we felt that, between the two scenarios, we would be able to adapt accordingly. Too many scenarios would result in over planning while only one scenario would result in being ill-prepared for potential outcomes.

## IMPACT

**Describe the impact your adaptive management approach had on your activity and its objectives. If it is too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?**

Using a scenario planning approach helped our team identify factors within our operating environment that could affect our ability to implement our activity and proactively determine alternate approaches. Scenario planning enhanced our decision-making processes and allowed for smoother activity implementation despite the uncertainty around us (such as national elections and planning for our activity's second cohort). Being prepared for various scenarios allowed us to act quickly and design new modes of implementation, preventing large-scale interruptions.



Photo Credit: Save the Children / Esther Ruth Mbabazi

## REFLECTION

**What enabled your adaptive management approach? What might you do differently next time?**

Many factors contributed to the successful implementation of our adaptive management approach. The activity already had a culture of Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA), allowing for easier implementation of scenario planning, conducting context assessments, accepting failure, and piloting new ideas. Using the scenario planning approach allowed members of the Technical Steering Committee to plan for situations prior to them happening, thus thinking through challenges and partnerships, preparing for implementation, and allowing for swift rollout when situations occurred.

We believe our experiences implementing these CLA approaches during COVID-19 led to a mindset change for Graduating to Resilience personnel. When restrictions began to increase leading to the full lockdown, our first reaction was “there is nothing we can do.” However, as we studied the data from our context assessment, conducted the first scenario planning exercises, and learned from other organizations, in just two weeks, our thoughts changed to “let’s try, see what happens, and go from there.” From that day forward, the mindset of all staff became more exploratory, open to new ideas, flexible, and willing to accept failure as an option.

When rolling out the adaptive scenario approach in relation to COVID-19, our team could have started earlier (as soon as the first government restrictions were put in place). However, the full lockdown was not something any of us had experienced before and would have been difficult to foresee. Additionally, as the Strategic Learning Advisor, I could have led an informational session on scenario planning and its importance as I think this would have increased buy-in and understanding from the beginning.

## TOOLS

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**What tools enabled or resulted from your adaptive management approach?  
Please describe them and link to or attach, if possible.**

Comprehensive instructions for using a slightly modified version of our scenario planning tool are available via [this free online course](#) produced by IDEAL.