

## USING A NARRATIVE INQUIRY APPROACH TO GUIDE PROJECT INTERVENTIONS: SENSEMAKER IN PRACTICE



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### MEL Practice Paper 3

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### About Smart Peace

Smart Peace is a four-year programme funded by UK Aid for strategic conflict resolution in fragile and conflict-affected regions. It is implemented by a specialist global consortium comprising Conciliation Resources as the consortium lead, The Asia Foundation, the Behavioural Insights Team, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zürich, Chatham House and International Crisis Group. The Smart Peace consortium combines expertise in conflict analysis, community dialogue, political-level mediation, evaluation, policy influence and behavioural science to deliver targeted and adaptive conflict resolution interventions in Central African Republic, Myanmar and Nigeria.

The combination of diverse methodologies and approaches used across Smart Peace requires a diverse range of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) tools. This paper is the third in a series of short practice papers introducing the various MEL methods utilised in Smart Peace: peer review, outcome harvesting, SenseMaker and strategy testing.

SenseMaker is a complexity-aware, narrative-based method that involves collecting, analysing, debating and sharing large numbers of short stories about people's experiences. SenseMaker asks storytellers to interpret their own stories; by doing so, it shifts the power of interpretation of the narratives to the respondent, instead of the external researcher or expert. Patterns and trends across stories are then identified, giving insights into the drivers, behaviours, dynamics, contextual factors and actors in people's lives. The methodology is specifically developed to enable a better understanding of reality through the respondents' eyes.

### About SenseMaker

SenseMaker is used for assessments, monitoring, evaluations and research. It can be used as a stand-alone method or in combination with other MEL methods. It lends itself well to participatory monitoring and evaluation and an adaptive management practice.

SenseMaker recognises that personal narratives allow better access to contextualised knowledge. The method enables users to gather and analyse large numbers of experiences from people. Nuanced insights into their experiences are then revealed through visual data pattern analysis, statistical analysis and text analysis. Collection and analysis is supported by licensed SenseMaker software developed by Cognitive Edge, often complemented by third party statistical, visualisation and dashboard applications.

### **SenseMaker has a few key features that make it unique in comparison with other MEL approaches:**

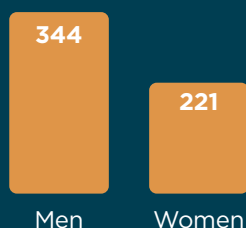
- The starting point is the personal experience of citizens around the topic of inquiry, and not the collection of opinions or scoring against pre-defined indicators. It is not a collection of long and in-depth stories from a small group of people, as with some other storytelling methods, but a listening exercise gathering day-to-day experiences, moments and events from hundreds and sometimes thousands of stories. From this, we are able to 'read' a system through the eyes of the people.
- A unique feature of SenseMaker is that people self-interpret their own stories. By answering follow-up questions, storytellers provide further

## SenseMaker in Smart Peace – by numbers

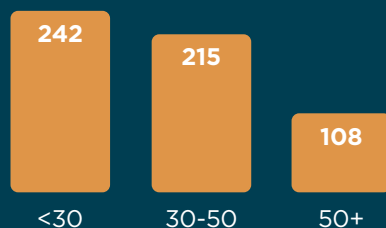
- 12 story collectors were selected from across Bossangoa, with 1 local supervisor
- Story collectors were trained for 3 days in Bangui, by 2 online trainers
- 565 stories in total were collected from across the 6 communes of Bossangoa
- 60% of stories collected were from men and 40% from women
- Over 40% of stories were from people under 30

**Figure 1: Number of stories collected by gender, age and commune**

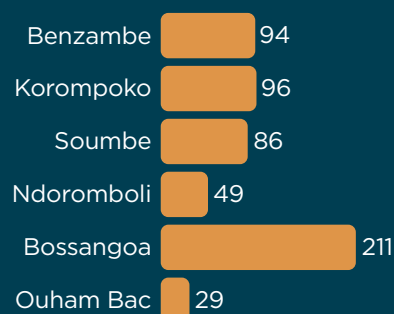
### Gender



### Age



### Location



information and give additional layers of meaning to what is expressed in their stories. They make a primary assessment of their own stories and by doing so reduce the bias of external researchers or analysts.

- The responses to the follow-up questions are transformed into patterns and trends across the multiple experiences, generating insights about specific (sub)groups. Strong clusters, trends, and outliers give rapid insights into the drivers, behaviours, dynamics, contextual factors and actors in people's lives. It is particularly useful for insights into less tangible aspects of change under conditions of complexity, based on the nuance of people's lived experiences.
- SenseMaker uniquely combines qualitative and quantitative data, which connect to and complement each other to generate better insights. Narratives are turned into numbers and patterns, which in turn derive meaning and context from the underlying narratives. The SenseMaker software and associated dashboards allow for a rich analytical process.
- Valuing each person's experience means there is no capture or selection of the best or most significant stories. People share stories and experiences that matter to them, which can be both negative or positive, or a mix of both. Dominant voices are not favoured above others: every voice, every story is used equally to visualise and analyse emerging patterns and trends. It is therefore an ideal method to give equal voice to those people who are often not heard.

## Use of SenseMaker in Smart Peace

As part of the Smart Peace project, Conciliation Resources piloted the SenseMaker methodology in Bossangoa sub-prefecture (Ouham prefecture) in northwestern Central African Republic (CAR), one of the key centres of the conflict that engulfed CAR from 2012. Bossangoa was the site of fierce fighting between Séléka and Anti-balaka armed groups at the height of the crisis, displacing nearly the entire Muslim population from the area. In more recent years, Bossangoa was reported to be relatively stable. However, tensions remained high, in particular around the potential return of Muslim communities. In December 2020, the electoral crisis and the emergence of the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) rebel coalition led to a renewed wave of armed mobilisation in Bossangoa. While the CPC has since left the town, the recent mobilisation of armed groups has served to underline the continued fragility of peace in Bossangoa.

The Smart Peace team working in CAR decided to use SenseMaker for all the features listed above, but particularly to listen to people's experiences and learn what matters to them, and to understand the complex context and the effects of the programme. As the consortium partners did not have previous experience with the methodology, expertise was brought in from Voices That Count to guide the process. The bulk of the SenseMaker work took place over a year in 2020: designing the signification framework, training data collectors, and two months of face-to-face story collection, followed by an emergent pattern analysis and two online SenseMaking workshops.

Periodic or continuous story collection can be used to regularly scan the context, monitor changes and trends over time, feed into the monitoring and evaluation system, and guide and adapt the project intervention strategy.

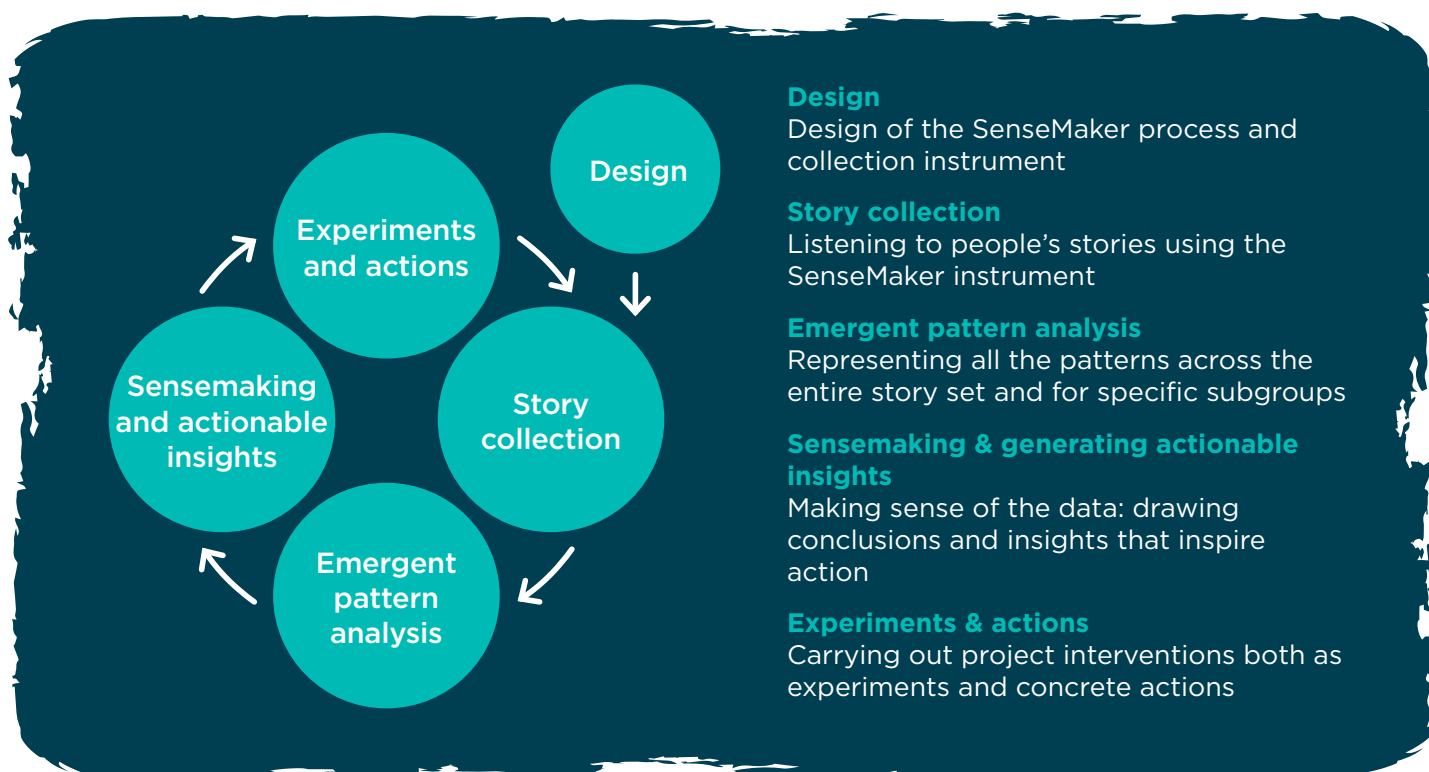
## SenseMaker in practice

### Design

The process starts with clarifying the purpose of applying the SenseMaker method. Periodic or continuous story collection can be used to regularly scan the context, monitor changes and trends over time, feed into the monitoring and evaluation system, and guide and adapt the project intervention strategy. It is helpful to decide in advance what will be the main use and who will be the main users of the SenseMaker process and results. If SenseMaker is used in combination with other methods as part of a mixed methods approach, it is important to discuss how the processes and data complement each other.

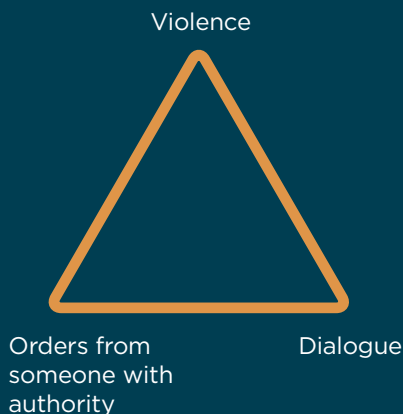
Based on this, a decision is made about whose voices need to be heard and how many stories should be collected, and if necessary a sampling strategy is developed. A critical task of the design stage is the development of the **signification framework**: the main collection instrument – a set of core questions – that reflects the thematic focus of the narrative inquiry and provides structure for sharing and self-interpreting the stories.

Graphic 1: Stages of the SenseMaker process



## Graphic 2: Example signifier questions

### Example triad question In my story, what helped (change) the situation?



### Example dyad question The story I shared, resulted in...



### Example multi-choice questions My story makes me feel...

- ☐ Very positive
- ☐ Positive
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Negative
- ☐ Very negative

### My story is mostly about...

- |                                |                                      |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Security | <input type="radio"/> Justice        |
| <input type="radio"/> Trust    | <input type="radio"/> Cooperation    |
| <input type="radio"/> Peace    | <input type="radio"/> Discrimination |
| <input type="radio"/> Violence | <input type="radio"/> Forgiveness    |
| <input type="radio"/> Fear     | <input type="radio"/> Revenge        |
| <input type="radio"/> Trauma   | <input type="radio"/> Other:         |

## Signification framework

A signification framework usually consists of a prompt question, a set of signifier questions, and a limited number of socio-demographic questions.

- The **prompt question** triggers a respondent's memory to share a specific, concrete experience or event. The prompt question used in Smart Peace was:

Can you give an example of a recent peace or conflict situation that you witnessed in your community that made you hopeful or worried? Describe what happened. How did you or others react and how did it end?

- A set of **signifier questions** is framed around the topics of interests and asks the storyteller to provide additional insights about the experience shared in the story. The storyteller answers these questions immediately after sharing their story. SenseMaker typically uses a combination of different type of signifier questions: the most common ones are multi-choice questions, triads and dyad questions.
  - Triad question: the storyteller is asked to indicate the relative importance of three elements or concepts, placed at the corners of a triangle, by positioning their response within the triangle. Triad questions are used to explore a concept, test an assumption or understand constraints and enablers.
  - Dyad question: the storyteller positions an answer along a spectrum between two opposing extremes. A dyad question helps us understand the relative presence of a single concept or aspect.
  - Multi-choice question (MCQ): the storyteller selects one or multiple responses from a predefined list of answers. MCQs allow us to disaggregate findings into sub-clusters and compare differences between subsets of respondents (e.g. to understand the drivers or impacts of different conflict situations, or how stories with positive and negative emotions differ).
- **Socio-demographic questions** about the storyteller are used to make comparisons between different (sub)groups such as age, gender, geographical location, etc.

## Story collection

The stories and answers to the signifier questions are collected through an individual or group-based process facilitated by trained story collectors. The data is recorded using paper-based forms or the Collector app on a tablet or mobile phone. The story collection process usually takes 25 to 40 minutes for individual face-to-face collections, or 45 to 90 minutes for group-based collections. In a group-based collection process, we still collect individual stories from people.

The advantage of face-to-face collection is that story collectors can ask additional questions while prompting a story, which can lead to richer stories. Experience also tells us that when SenseMaker data collection is deliberately structured to engage people in deeper conversations, it shifts their understanding about their context and

## Story collectors

Story collectors can be staff or volunteers from partner organisations, or (as in Smart Peace) citizens from the respective communities or the target group. In some cases, stories may be collected by a group of people external to the project and communities (e.g. students from a university or college, professional enumerators, etc).

**When SenseMaker data collection is deliberately structured to engage people in deeper conversations, it shifts their understanding about their context and situation.**

situation. The collection process itself is equally as important as the results and insights generated.

In Smart Peace, stories were collected through both individual and small group-based collection approaches, facilitated by story collectors from the targeted communities in and around Bossangoa. Story collectors used both the SenseMaker Collector app and paper-based forms. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the story collectors could not be trained in an on-site training workshop, but instead were trained through a series of online sessions.

In 2021, following the decision to reduce the UK's spending on Overseas Development Assistance, and similarly to many other UK Aid programmes, Smart Peace received notice of early programme closure and will be closed over a year ahead of its original closure date. This meant that we were unable to run several rounds of data collection as was originally planned. However, a useful approach for periodic collection processes is to install a 'human sensor network': a large group of people in targeted communities that are willing to share a story at given times. This reduces the time and effort spent on finding people that want to share a story and helps to ensure rapid and real-time collection of stories. If people have access to a mobile phone, the SenseMaker Collector app can be installed, enabling them to record their stories themselves over time.

## Emergent pattern analysis

The power of SenseMaker is to easily detect patterns across the multiple narratives based on the answers to the signifier questions. The SenseMaker analysis starts with the entire story set – rather than an in-depth reading of individual stories – in order to spot dominant, interesting and surprising patterns, outliers, key differences between groups, and correlations between different signifiers. During this phase, we identify the main questions, issues and themes that should be further explored during the collective sensemaking workshops.

The analysis usually starts by looking at the socio-demographic characteristics of the storytellers, which gives an indication of the potential to compare subgroups. This is followed by an exploration of the general nature of the stories, such as feelings associated with the stories, themes in the stories, type of conflicts, etc. (see figures 2, 3 and 4). Interesting insights can be generated through a comparison of emerging patterns across subgroups such as age, gender, location or feelings associated with the stories, and these are potentially critical filters for further pattern detection.

**Figure 2: Feeling associated with the stories (n=565)**

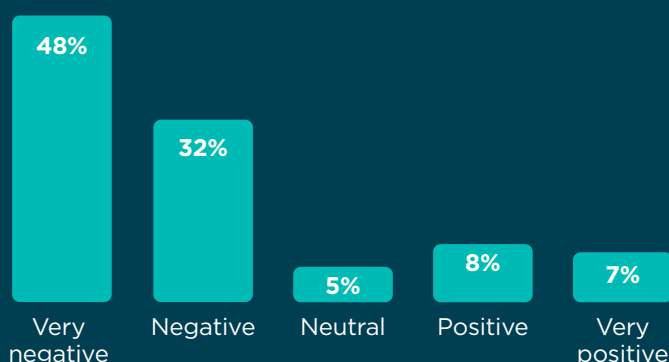




Figure 3: Type of conflicts appearing in the stories (n=565)

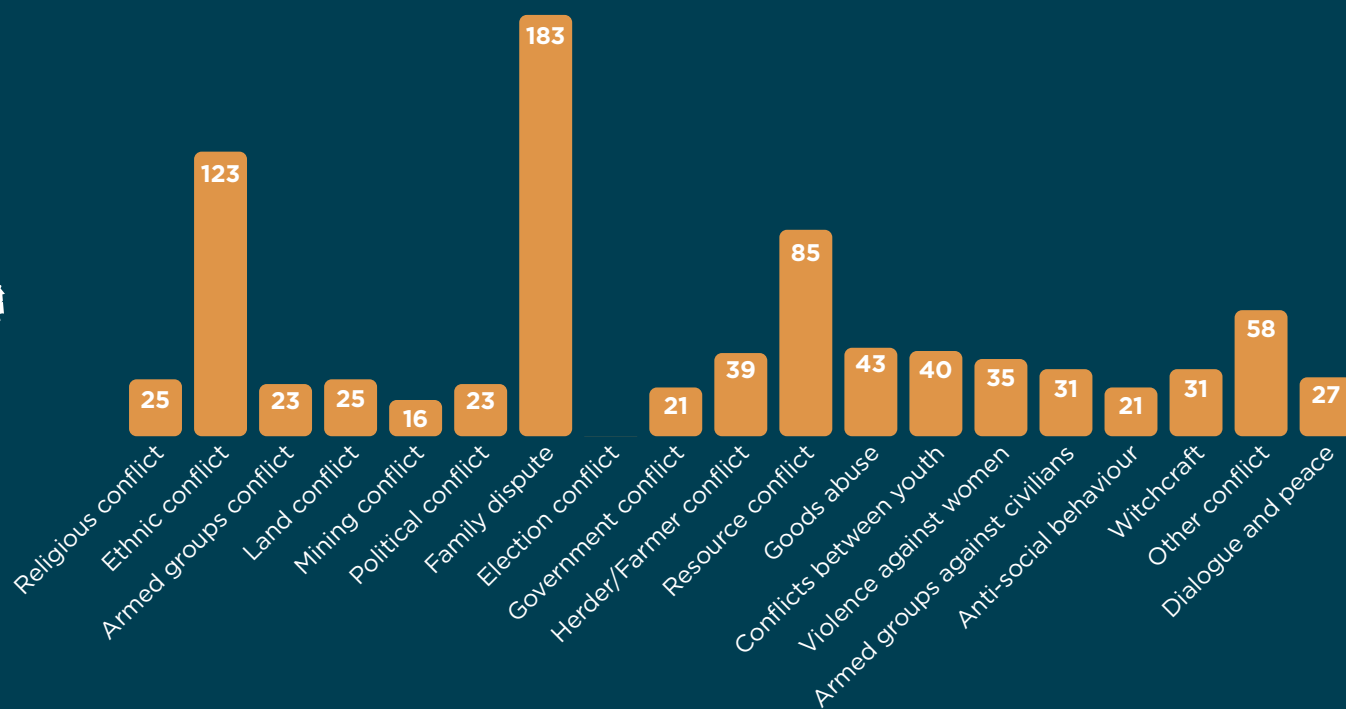
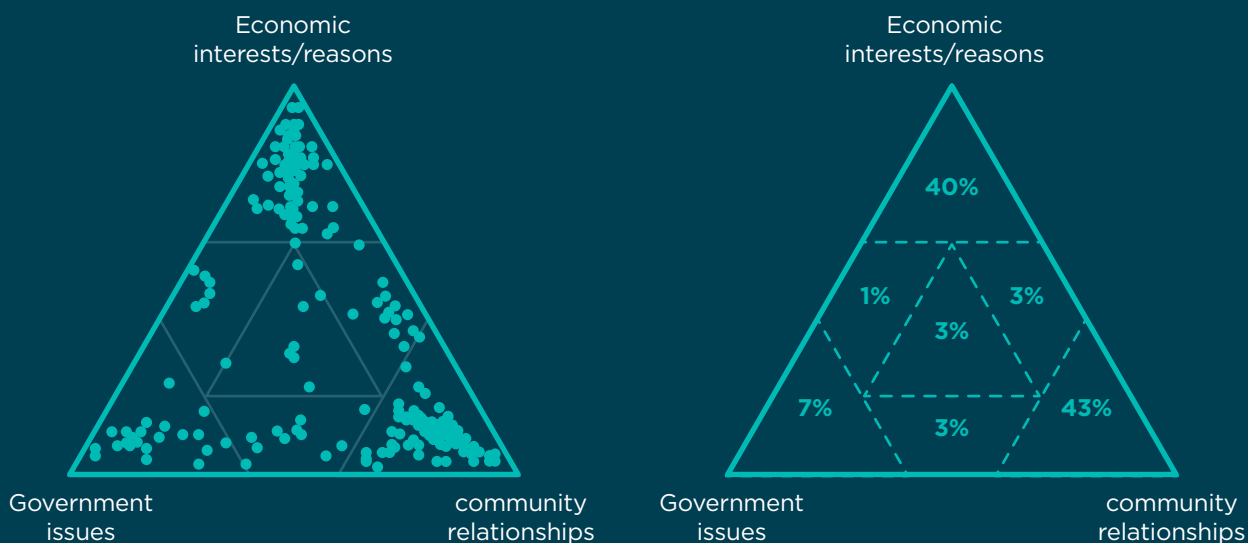


Figure 4: Causes of the situations described in the stories



The pattern shows that most situations in the stories are caused by economic interests/reasons or community relationships, and much less by government issues. Stories in the respective corners provide more context; for example, government issues are mainly related to the explicit absence of the government and the distrust in the justice system.

This step is usually concluded with an emergent pattern report focusing on the main patterns across the different subgroups and the first conclusions that can be drawn from these. At this stage, we do not yet engage in the interpretation or sensemaking of the results and the reading of stories is kept to a minimum. Once the first analysis is done, subsequent rounds of analysis will be quicker and main insights can be generated within one to two days.

## Example of a story collected for Smart Peace

"It was in March 2019 in the village of Cana on the road to Bangui. Elements of the armed group 3R of Abass Sidiki invaded our area – we don't know why they are here. One day I was in the field of a pastor of the Protestant church. They came to take two of the pastor's children hostage and asked him for 2 million [Central African CFA franc] for the release of his children. The young people of this village have mobilised with weapons to go and free these children. They went to attack them until the children were safe and sound. The whole village and I were happy with this victory of the young people. The 3R elements fled the area."



## References & background reading

Guijt, I., V. Gottret, A. Hanchar, S. Deprez & R. Muckenhirn. *SenseMaker Practitioner Guide* (Catholic Relief Services & Oxfam GB, 2021 – forthcoming)

Deprez, S. & I. Guijt. 'Can Voices at Scale Really Be Heard? Reflections from Ten Years of Innovation with SenseMaker' in D. Burns, J. Howard, & S.M. Ospina (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Enquiry* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2021 – forthcoming)

Emergent pattern analysis is preferably done or guided by someone with expertise in data analysis who understands the logic of the SenseMaker dataset and is skilled in using the SenseMaker analytical software. For the pattern analysis we used the data visualisation and analysis tools available in the SenseMaker suite. The data collected through the SenseMaker Collector app can also be easily exported and used in third party analysis and visualisation software. For continuous or periodic collection, it is recommended to work with pre-set dashboards to allow for quick pattern detection and analysis. Voices That Count developed a tailor-made dashboard for Smart Peace that can be easily accessed and used (online and offline) by staff and partners.

## Sensemaking and generating actionable insights

The sensemaking stage brings together quantitative and qualitative data to be analysed in a collective interpretation process. The visual patterns generated in the emergent pattern analysis make it easy for anyone to visualise the findings and engage in discussions to interpret them. Involving key stakeholders in the sensemaking improves the depth, quality and robustness of the insights; different people bring unique experiences and expertise when looking at the findings and raise different questions for further inquiry. The collective nature of sensemaking contributes to the uptake of findings by building wider analytical capacity and, in the process, informing decision-making and action.

Sensemaking workshops should include those staff who will be using the findings in their daily work to adapt the project interventions, and those who need to make strategic decisions. Who exactly needs to be involved depends on the purpose of the workshop, e.g. to share findings with key stakeholders, reflect on project adaptation, inform strategic decision-making or stimulate collaborative action. The workshops can be organised at different levels in a project: with a representative group of citizens, key partner organisations, relevant stakeholders or the project coordination team.

An important part of the sensemaking workshop is the reading and analysis of stories – typically a few hundred stories can be read in a day session with 10-20 people. Collective reading, 'unpacking' and discussing the stories is a powerful process that creates new levels of understanding of the context. While it is often not possible to read all stories, a good emergent pattern analysis will point to interesting groups of stories (story packs) for further exploration.

Under normal circumstances, the sensemaking workshop would be followed by local dialogue meetings. These form an important part of the SenseMaker process as they bring back the data to the field, thus closing the feedback loop. Unfortunately, the insecure and violent political situation in the Bossangoa communes meant that local dialogue meetings did not take place.

## SenseMaker for adaptive programming

SenseMaker provides project teams with a powerful analysis tool which helps to ensure that strategic decisions and programme adaptations are well informed and well considered. This is particularly valuable for adaptive programming and helps teams to deliver more effective results through better decision-making that takes into account more diverse voices.

## Common approaches to analyse stories

1. **A 'seeking surprise' lens:** let the data speak for itself, spot the 'unknown unknowns', see trends in the narratives – for example, the role of witchcraft in stories related to conflict in the communities in and around Bossangoa.
2. **Understand particular issues or topics** that are critical or that emerge from the pattern analysis – for example, how people perceive 'family conflicts' or 'conflicts induced by the government'.
3. **Focus on the outliers** in the patterns (weak signals). These help to identify opportunities for innovation, indications of emerging trends or behaviours, and challenges or threats that need to be addressed – for example, specific measures and actions that fostered dialogue or peace in communities.
4. **Understand the situations corresponding with favourable patterns** and those with patterns that the project does not want to see. What can we learn by comparing these stories, and how can we create more 'stories like this' (reflecting a favorable situation) and fewer 'stories like that' (reflecting a non-desirable situation)?
5. **Unpack the stories and situations into their core elements** (critical factors, issues, causes, solutions, etc.) and create a system map to understand the dynamics in a system.

It is a method well suited for multi-year adaptive project grants. The main investment of time and funds occurs at the beginning of the project, in designing the data collection process and instruments and training data collectors. After the first round of data collection, it becomes a relatively inexpensive method to run.

Insights and benefits that can be derived from the SenseMaker process for a peacebuilding consortium project such as Smart Peace include:

- **Improved understanding of the context**, including how people perceive the conflict and how it affects their lives. Concrete experiences provide contextual information that can be used to validate (or not) the assumptions on which the project and its strategies were built.
- **Understanding the critical factors and actors** influencing the situations described in the stories, as well as the actors that people trust to improve the situation. Through the stories and emerging patterns, the project can identify the positive or negative influence of key societal actors on conflict, peace and people's lives, and adapt its intervention strategies accordingly.
- **A clear understanding of situations associated with negative or positive feelings.** Situations associated with negative feelings (such as feelings of insecurity) provide direction for potential project interventions, while those associated with positive feelings (feelings of safety or bringing people together) illustrate project achievements or potential leverage points for project actions.
- **Greater bottom-up accountability** when sensemaking reflections bring together project staff with project participants. Such opportunities better connect staff to the 'on the ground' reality and help them to understand the quality and impact of their work. They allow project participants to assess what has been achieved (or not), how they contributed to these achievements, and the changes they need to make or actions they need to take to improve their own lives.
- **A set of alternative indicators** based on the signifier questions. The emerging patterns can be used to reflect on what can we do to move in the right direction – i.e. to have more 'stories like this' and fewer 'stories like that' in the next collection round – and form the basis of a monitoring approach around key topics of interests.

**Voices That Count** is a collaborative network of experts supporting organisations and projects in the use of narrative approaches for strategic planning, context analysis, programme design, monitoring, evaluation and research. We support not-for-profit, public, academic and corporate organisations to understand and communicate about social impact, and to generate actionable insights through narrative sensemaking approaches.  
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The opinions expressed in this publication represent those of Steff Deprez and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the UK government or other Smart Peace consortium partners.

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