# HOW DECENT IS DECENT WORK?

## Using SenseMaker to understand workers' experiences

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**This paper explores the challenges of measuring aspects of decent work that go beyond established compliance metrics. It proposes the SenseMaker research method as a way to expand the measurement and understanding of decent work, particularly by helping to identify 'known unknowns' and uncovering 'unknown unknowns' of decent work through workers' own stories. The report uses data from an Oxfam Intermón/ETI project with women workers in the agricultural sector. It illustrates the importance of capturing and understanding workers' perspectives for ensuring working conditions that are truly decent, beyond the basics needed for compliance.**

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# CONTENTS

# ACRONYMS

| | |
|---|---|
| CRS | Catholic Relief Services |
| CSO | Civil society organization |
| ETI | Ethical Trading Initiative |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| NGO | Non-government organization |
| SDG | Sustainable Development Goal |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |

# GLOSSARY

**SenseMaker process**
The process of implementing a SenseMaker-based assessment, monitoring, evaluation or research study from start to end.

**Signification Framework**
The fundamental SenseMaker tool, which is the equivalent to a survey or a set of semi-structured questions when using conventional quantitative or qualitative data collection methods respectively. Includes the prompt question, the story title, a group of signifiers, multiple choice questions about the story, and respondent characteristics (demographics).

**Prompt question**
An open-ended question used to generate or trigger the participant to share a story or narrative of personal significance, related to the topic of interest.

**Narrative**
A respondent's spoken or written account of connected events that tells a short story about a specific experience. Narratives are prompted by an open-ended question; they form the entry point for additional questions and analysis in SenseMaker.

**Tagging**
The act of giving meaning to an experience shared in a narrative. This process aims to add layers of meaning to a narrative.

**Multiple choice questions**
Follow-up questions used to help storytellers add detail to their experience by allowing them to select one or multiple choices among a list of possible answers related to the experience they have shared.

**Slider**
A type of follow-up question (also called a dyad) in which respondents are asked to signify what happened in the experience they shared, by indicating where that experience sits along the spectrum between two extremes.

**Slider with stones**
A type of follow-up question in which respondents are asked to signify what happened in the experience they shared by selecting different options, called 'stones', and indicating where the options lie along a line between two extremes.

**Triad**
A type of follow-up question in which respondents signify the relative importance of three predefined elements in their experience by indicating where in a triangle their experience lies in relation to the three elements.

**Data set**
An organized collection of narrative and quantitative data. It includes raw data downloaded from an online server, and has been cleaned and prepared for analysis.

**Stakeholders**
All the potential users of the SenseMaker process findings for varying purposes, such as beneficiary accountability, adaptive project management, programme design, strategic decision making, or influencing processes.

**Collective interpretation**
Process involving a group of people (stakeholders) to give meaning to preliminary findings that result from a primary analysis of SenseMaker-generated data.

**Sensemaking**
The act of giving meaning to data and emerging knowledge to make decisions and act on the findings.

# PREFACE

This research paper is based on work undertaken by the authors for the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) and with Oxfam Intermón. It is also informed by a wide range of other research by Irene Guijt, who has used SenseMaker to explore the experiences of coffee producers in Colombia (for Catholic Relief Services (CRS)) and tea and banana chip producers in Vietnam and Ecuador respectively (research for the Belgian organization Rikolto, formerly known as VECO *Vredeseilanden*). It has been inspiring to see that both organizations have gone on to use SenseMaker at a much larger scale; it clearly meets an information need that is not being fulfilled by other forms of research.

Interest in using SenseMaker is growing, as companies and civil society are stepping up efforts to listen to the voices of the hundreds of millions of workers around the world who deserve better working conditions. This paper gives a flavour of what is possible when using SenseMaker to better capture and understand workers' perspectives. It aims to inspire anyone working in the private sector, within civil society organizations (CSOs) and government agencies responsible for strengthening decent work, inclusive business and responsible sourcing. By sharing these insights, we want to show that these approaches are eminently feasible, highly practical and allow innovative, meaningful insights.

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**What is SenseMaker, and how is Oxfam using it?**

SenseMaker is a research method that analyses the experiences of large numbers of people to help understand their perspectives on a specific issue or question. Stories about experiences, or 'micro-narratives', are collected from hundreds or thousands of individuals. Each respondent shares a story about their experience that relates to the topic of inquiry. They then interpret what they have said and provide additional information by answering a set of predetermined follow-up questions. Oxfam is using SenseMaker to understand a specific group of people or issue to inform programming and advocacy, as well as for monitoring and evaluation (M&E). It helps Oxfam listen at scale to the perspectives of those whose voices are often not heard but who are critical to making progress to end poverty.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Decent work for all is a shared global concern. It is enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, which seeks 'to achieve full and productive employment, and decent work, for all women and men by 2030' as part of the overarching goal of peace and prosperity for all. Countless initiatives by companies, governments, CSOs and global aid agencies are dedicated to making this happen. These efforts are labelled as 'decent work', 'inclusive businesses', 'responsible sourcing' or 'economic empowerment'. They share a concern for raising the standards of working conditions – globally, nationally, and across many sectors.

The basic parameters of decent work can be defined using indicators on incomes, safety breaches, and formality and reliability of employment. Tracking the achievement of these standards is critical to ensure that good intentions are implemented and sustained. But measuring the extent to which existing labour standards are being met does not reveal everything that needs to be seen. Objective measures can be the tip of the iceberg, obscuring values and norms on key issues such as safety, dignity or transparency, which, if not seen, cannot be addressed. How can we understand what garment workers consider to be respectful and dignified treatment? How much agency do women have to improve their working conditions in strawberry fields and processing plants? What risks do they run if they seek to improve their working conditions? What constitutes 'fair' governance in value chains for small-scale producers? Such questions require a multi-dimensional definition of decent work that includes aspects such as workers' relationships with management, the nature of their employment, their sense of safety, and compensation. There also needs to be consideration of whether and how dimensions of decent work affect female and male workers differently.

The pursuit of decent work has three critical measurement challenges: (1) measuring significant but less tangible aspects of workers' conditions, such as satisfaction; (2) understanding better-known but undefined aspects that emerge as relevant for decent work, such as 'dignity'; and (3) identifying completely novel aspects that matter, all at a scale that gives confidence in the robustness of the data. How can organizations track these three factors – the 'known knowns', the 'known unknowns' and any 'unknown unknowns' of decent work? To advocate for change, we need data that is authentic and at a scale well beyond anecdotal experiences.

This paper introduces a promising approach that can respond to some of these measurement challenges. This approach, known as SenseMaker®, has been used since 2012 by several non-government organizations (NGOs) such as Rikolto (formerly VECO) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to understand inclusive business and decent work. By now, it is sufficiently well-grounded in practice to know that it is feasible, useful and inspiring. This paper describes its potential application for improving data on decent work from the perspective of workers themselves.

Section 1 presents the 'beyond compliance' agenda in terms of data needs, identifying six areas of improvement sought after by decent work and sustainability approaches. It also discusses the need for data that incorporates strong gender analysis to understand men's and women's respective experiences in the workplace.

Section 2 explains the fundamentals of the SenseMaker approach. Examples from practice are described in detail in Section 3, in terms of the data needs that SenseMaker can help satisfy: tracking indicators, unpacking emerging dimensions, and identifying new dimensions. These uses of SenseMaker are richly illustrated from recent research with women agricultural workers in an African country, with additional examples from other value chain projects. Section 4 briefly looks at the critical step of collaboratively interpreting data in order to act on it. The paper closes with observations on six conditions that are necessary to ensure the effective and rigorous use of SenseMaker to strengthen the measurement of what makes work decent, and to support efforts to implement change.

# 1 THE 'BEYOND COMPLIANCE' AGENDA AND ITS MEASUREMENT NEEDS

## 1.1 DECENT WORK DATA

In diverse sectors and industries, a growing number of employers are seeking to improve the implementation of decent working conditions and responsible sourcing (see Box 1). These encompass the treatment and well-being of workers, as well as the ethical and responsible procurement of inputs and production process. Such improvements can range from more transparent decision making to paying a living wage as an integral part of responsible sourcing. Oxfam's focus is to ensure that all workers in global supply chains have dignity in the workplace and fair compensation for their labour.

Oxfam is one of many NGOs that have been working for several decades to encourage and support companies to improve working conditions in their operations and supply chains. It was one of the founding members of the multi-stakeholder Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) in 1998. Oxfam has also developed bilateral engagements with companies, including long-term dialogue that has led to collaboration and research with large companies such as Unilever and Mars.

Civil society action has also helped raise awareness among consumers of the negative environmental and social impacts of production that either falls short of compliance with established international standards or that meets minimum standards but is driven by unsustainable and exploitative practices. Companies have responded to campaigns such as Behind the Brands, they have joined alliances such as ETI and the Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH) and signed up to other certification schemes such as Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance. Through a flagship Ethical Tea Partnership, IDH, Oxfam, Tea Association of Malawi and GIZ project – Malawi Tea 2020 – brands, retailers and plantations are working together to find ways to deliver a living wage to tea pickers in Malawi by 2020.

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**Box 1: Basic definitions**

- An **inclusive business** is a sustainable business that benefits low-income communities. While retaining its for-profit nature, it contributes to poverty reduction through including low-income communities in its value chain (source: World Business Council for Sustainable Development).
- **Responsible sourcing** means businesses work closely with suppliers to make sure that they respect human rights, promote decent working conditions and improve sustainability across the supply base (Traidcraft).
- **Decent work** means productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equality, security and human dignity. It involves opportunities for work that delivers a fair income, provides security in the workplace, and affords social protection to workers and their families (International Labour Organization (ILO)).

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Putting these intentions into practice requires agreeing on specific aspects of improvement. For example, at the global level, the four elements of the ILO's Decent Work Agenda encompass employment creation, social protection, rights at work, and social dialogue. The United Nations (UN) Global Compact has 10 business principles linked to upholding human rights, labour conditions, environmental impacts and anti-corruption. ETI's Base Code consists of nine key

principles that form an internationally recognised code of labour practice based on ILO conventions. Yet whether it is Rikolto's inclusive business scan or Oxfam's version of the living wage concept, these framings converge around six main areas: human rights; labour freedom; security and income; safety; sustainability; and corruption.

1. **Human rights should be supported and respected**, with businesses proactively seeking to improve how their processes and standards can uphold human rights and ensure that they are not complicit in human rights abuses.

2. **Labour freedoms** concern the free choice of employment, absence of compulsory labour, absence of child labour, and freedom to associate and bargain collectively. Some organizations include fair and transparent governance, while others include the elimination of discrimination due to employment and occupation.

3. **Security and income** is enshrined in commitments to paying a living wage and to regular, reliable employment.

4. **Working conditions** focus on personal safety and hygiene, on ensuring that working hours are not excessive, that employees do not experience discrimination or harsh treatment, and that all employees have equitable access to services.

5. **Sustainability** is about actively taking environmental responsibility to do no harm and invest in environmentally friendly technologies, with a precautionary approach to environmental challenges.

6. **Corruption** concerns the active combating of corruption in all forms.

There is widespread agreement that the compliance approach has failed to address modern slavery and the many labour rights abuses that persist in company operations and supply chains. One reason for this failure is that snapshot audits and tick-box approaches do not necessarily develop a culture of upholding labour rights, allowing less scrupulous businesses to find ways to pass an audit that does not accurately reflect the experiences of the workforce.

Oxfam has been encouraging companies to go beyond compliance, so that senior managers and investors ensure a cultural transformation, rewarding staff for upholding labour rights and integrating ethical policies into how the company does business. Oxfam wants to see companies commercially rewarded for ensuring decent work, so that the companies and countries that are driving the 'race to the bottom' find that it is in their best interests to change their ways. In the past few years, a trend in new legislation has emerged that might help encourage this transformation. Certification may promote or ensure adherence to higher minimum employment standards by comparison with non-certified goods or services, but it does not necessarily reflect the reality of workers' experiences. Global supply chains and modern slavery are complex issues that we still need to understand in greater detail. A lack of transparency and honest dialogue, coupled with fears about being fined for breaching competition laws, have prevented meaningful progress. New norms, and now legislation requiring companies to carry out human rights due diligence, provide an opportunity to more clearly understand the issues as well as what works to identify, mitigate and respond to abuses, without doing further harm to those involved. Cost and competitive pressure can make businesses reluctant to change their purchasing practices to enable decent working conditions

We need new approaches that are capable of going beyond compliance to deliver safer, less precarious and more dignified employment for all.

## 1.2 DECENT WORK AND GENDER: WHAT WE NEED TO MEASURE

Women face specific and additional forms of discrimination, and unjust and harmful working conditions, in a range of contexts and sectors. Any organization working to achieve SDG8 must therefore understand the gendered aspects of decent work, and what is needed to achieve

gender justice in the workplace. Different research and measurement tools can help capture the complexities of decent work and gender.

Gender-responsive research is not just about collecting data that count women and men separately. Changes in men's and women's employment, incomes and consumption can be measured relatively easily through collecting sex-disaggregated data. But understanding gendered trends, impacts, roles and responsibilities at work, as well as relationships, cannot be captured easily by quantitative surveys alone. Qualitative research can provide valuable insights into power relations between men and women in the workplace, as well as gender relations in specific sectors or industries, or the impacts of women's paid labour for individuals and their households.

Incorporating a gender perspective into measuring decent work means thinking about the entire data collection and research use cycle. In practice, this means that any measurement approach must choose methods that can capture nuanced experiences, beyond sex disaggregation, to understand the dynamics between gender and other identities such as ethnicity, religion, social status, and age. It must also ensure that data can be analysed for gender differences by establishing disaggregated sampling frameworks.

Data should adequately reflect differences and inequalities in the situations of women and men and should challenge gender biases that can creep in at each stage of the research process, affecting how problematic narratives around gender and women's rights/empowerment are perpetuated rather than confronted – for example, that 'poor women' or 'powerful men' are not homogenous groups. There are vast differences among women and among men depending on an individual's age, education, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, migration and/or citizenship status, urban/rural residence, and whether they have a disability. It is also impossible to separate workers' experiences from their household responsibilities and roles in doing unpaid care work. Understanding the extent to which workers benefit from decent working conditions requires researchers to seek out and show how such differences influence individual experiences in the workplace.

## 1.3 OPTIONS FOR LISTENING TO WORKERS' VOICES

What measurement approaches can speak to the different facets of decent work or inclusive business practices, ensure a gendered perspective, and capture data on anticipated and unexpected variables? The ILO has collated existing indicators of decent work, such as degree of formality and occupational injuries, on a measurement portal. These indicators do not usually take workers' first-hand experiences into account. Instead, they repackage data from national, regional or sectoral surveys and audits.

Methods for collecting data on workers' experiences generally involve a trade-off between quality and quantity – either gaining an in-depth understanding based on qualitative data from a small number of individuals or compromising on depth and detail in order to gather quantitative data from a larger number of respondents.

There are three types of inquiry commonly used to understand and assess the extent to which workers' experiences reflect progress towards achieving decent work.

- *Case studies* are a common qualitative research method, alongside focus group discussions and interviews. While case studies are a powerful way to relay first-person experiences in a specific context, they do not speak to the scale or scope of experiences in that context or across contexts. Examples of case studies by Oxfam include research into the experiences of garment workers in Myanmar (Gardener and Burnley, 2015) and an analysis of Unilever's progress on labour rights in Vietnam (Wilshaw, 2016).

- ***Worker surveys*** offer quantitative data on workers' experiences but are limited in their explanatory capacity and in identifying unanticipated dynamics or factors. Two commonly used tools include the LaborVoices mobile platform and Elevate's Laborlink.

- ***Audit techniques*** are tools that track company compliance with minimum standards. For example, members of the Supplier Ethical Data Exchange (Sedex) use the Sedex Members Ethical Trade Audit (SMETA) tool, which is based on the ETI Base Code. The audit covers four areas: health and safety; labour standards; environment (optional); and business ethics (optional).

Companies can benefit from alternative ways of enabling workers' voices to be heard at scale without losing depth of insight, while also providing the opportunity for unexpected issues to emerge based on workers' own priorities and realities. SenseMaker is one such option.

The rest of this report discusses how SenseMaker can help further the compliance agenda – and take it further. It draws on a study for Oxfam Intermón and ETI, led by Oxfam Great Britain. Oxfam and ETI have been collaborating for several years to improve working conditions and increase respect for workers' rights. Activities to address specific labour rights abuses in specific locations and retail relationships is well underway. Ongoing information is essential to understand progress and see where new priorities for action might lie. But how can women workers' voices be heard well in order to generate concrete ideas for further improving the work? SenseMaker was selected as a method to collect and analyse women workers' narratives of conditions, aspirations and concerns in one value chain in an African country.

# 2 AN OVERVIEW OF SENSEMAKER

SenseMaker is a research method that uses personal stories from large numbers of people to help understand different perspectives on a specific issue or question and to uncover what matters to whom. Stories, or 'micro-narratives', are collected from hundreds or thousands of individuals, either through face-to-face interviews or online data collection. Each storyteller, or respondent, shares a story about a particular issue of interest, and then interprets and analyses their own story through a series of predetermined follow-up questions. SenseMaker is the name used to describe both the method and the accompanying analytical software.

SenseMaker has evolved largely for diagnostic and strategic planning purposes, but is increasingly being used for M&E (Guijt *et al.* forthcoming). Oxfam is interested in using SenseMaker for all these purposes, particularly because it focuses on listening to the perspectives of those who are rarely, if ever, heard in mainstream research. Such voices might include those of small-scale coffee producers describing specific aspects of inclusive business models, or women agricultural workers talking about their day-to-day working conditions.

## 2.1 KEY FEATURES

While adopting aspects of both qualitative and quantitative methods, SenseMaker has a number of distinct features that in combination make it a unique approach to research.

**Micro-narratives (stories)**

Narratives collected using SenseMaker are short (see Box 2). They describe a specific experience prompted by a carefully chosen and bounded question. The short 'stories' shared by respondents form the basis for further probing using specific questions. SenseMaker applications lend themselves best to efforts for which several hundred short stories (at a minimum) can be collected. This makes it a particularly useful method for understanding decent work, as large companies typically employ hundreds or thousands of people. Collecting stories from large numbers of people reflects the recognition that any situation consists of many diverse and dynamic interactions and influences, and researchers need to hear enough of these experiences to be able to generalize and to recognize outliers. Understanding the range of experiences around the topic of inquiry and deriving robust conclusions from the data requires a large sample.

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**Box 2: Example of a story collected using SenseMaker (story title given by respondent)**

*'They despised people.'*

*One day at the factory I had an accident and crates fell on top of me. I hurt my hand and my chest and I am still suffering. They paid me for a half day when I had the accident but I returned the next day to work because I needed the money.*

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**Self-tagging**

Most qualitative research methods require researchers to code interviews, interpreting text using pre-defined or emerging categories. SenseMaker, on the other hand, asks respondents to give meaning to their own stories by asking them to tag them against pre-defined concepts or topics of interest. This self-signification process generates additional data that forms the basis for quantitative analysis. Importantly, self-tagging reduces researcher/evaluator biases from the

initial stages of data interpretation. Therefore, the interviewer plays a crucial role in ensuring that the respondent understands the process well and feels safe and confident about sharing a relevant story.

**Software for pattern detection**

Due to the hundreds or thousands of stories that are collected for a given study, a specifically developed software package helps visualize data patterns and make sense of strong and/or weak trends in the data.

**Shared sensemaking**

After detecting any patterns, collaborative interpretive processes can produce rich insights. Bringing together a group of individuals – including researchers, experts, corporate management, workers, or other relevant stakeholders – can lead to in-depth, grounded interpretation of the data from different perspectives and a deeper shared understanding of the findings.

## 2.2 SENSEMAKER IN PRACTICE: FROM QUESTION TO ANALYSIS

**Figure 1: SenseMaker research process**
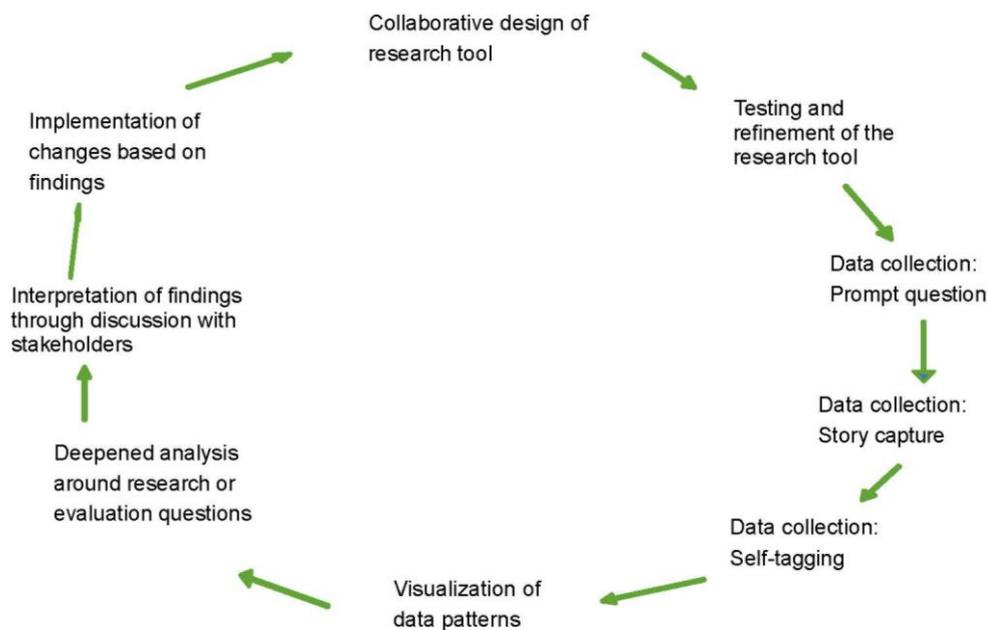


## The prompt question

The first question in a SenseMaker interview asks people to share a micro-narrative. To trigger the story, a 'prompt' question or image is used (see Box 3). The prompt asks people to share a meaningful experience (the phrasing is tailored around the specific topic of interest).[1] For example, the prompt could ask lettuce pickers on farms or workers in tanneries to share a recent experience of trying to improve their working conditions. But the prompt could also ask people to describe an experience about relationships within an agricultural cooperative or with the buyer of a given type of produce. For diagnostic purposes, a more open-ended prompt can invite a greater variety of narratives, while for M&E purposes, a prompt that elicits 'outcome' stories is useful to assess the nature and extent of any change as a result of the intervention.

> **Box 3: Examples of prompt questions used in SenseMaker interviews on decent work**
>
> • Think about the agricultural value chain in which you are actively involved. Think of a specific moment or event (that happened in the last 6 months) when you felt particularly encouraged or concerned about producing tea and selling to the company/buyer? Please describe what happened briefly. Who was involved? Why did it happen? (Rikolto)
>
> • Think about all the seasons that you have spent working in the X sector. Please tell me about a specific situation related to your working conditions that you experienced and thought should change. It can be a situation that ended positively or negatively, or in a way that had both some good and some bad parts. What happened? Who was involved? How did that specific situation end? (Oxfam Intermón/Ethical Trading Initiative)
>
> • Share a recent example (something that happened since your last engagement with the project) that made it easier or harder to support how your family lives. (United Nations Development Programme/Narate)
>
> • Think about your experience of selling your coffee during the last coffee harvest (2014). Please share a story about it that you hope will happen more often or that you hope will happen less often in the next harvest (2015). (CRS)

## Interpretive questions

Any inquiry is guided by questions. The choice of questions to unpack someone's experience will depend on what aspects or concepts need to be understood better. For studies about decent work, concepts will relate to the six areas listed in Section 1 – for example, dignity or collective bargaining power. These concepts are then translated into a question, of which there are five kinds (see Tables 1 and 2). Any single set of questions (typically between 15 and 30) will be a mix of these five kinds of questions. Fewer questions help maintain the interest of the person telling the story. But a more limited set of questions can also reduce the depth of insights. Section 3 gives examples of all these questions and how responses are interpreted.
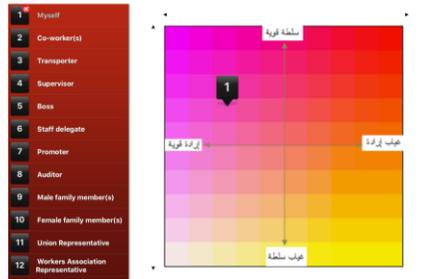
In practice, the respondent codes (tags) his/her own experience using these questions, with help from a trained interviewer (see Section 4). The coding questions not only gather more details about the experience, but also ask respondents to interpret what they meant and what was important about the experience.

**Table 1: Multiple-choice question types used in SenseMaker applications**

| Question type | Purpose | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| **Multiple-choice questions about the story** | To understand stories in depth from the workers' point of view | Feelings linked to story, themes best describing story, location of story |
| **Multiple choice questions about the respondent** | To facilitate differentiated analysis (per respondent sub-group) and understand characteristics of the sample | Gender, age, place of work, type of work, length of employment |

What sets SenseMaker apart from other research methods is the use of *relational* questions, which aim to capture the *relative* presence of different elements in the respondent's experience. Examples for each question can be found in Section 3.

**Table 2: Relational questions used in SenseMaker applications**

| Question type | Image | Purpose | Examples |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Sliders** | 11. In the situation I described, women workers had… [N...er] <br><br> No control over outcome — Direct control over the outcome | To assess *one* quality, concept, belief or outcome along a continuum between two extremes; to test a hypothesis | Level of control over decision making; level of trust; change in specific result area (e.g. profitability) |
| **Triads** | 16. In my story, the people trying to achieve change wanted more… <br> Dignity/respect at work <br> Job security/stability — Wages/benefits | To understand the relative importance of *three* concepts or elements, and how strongly each is present in a specific story | Different expressions of individual agency; factors influencing decision making; factors affecting the outcome of a situation |
| **Stones (canvas version)** | 1 Myself / 2 Co-worker(s) / 3 Transporter / 4 Supervisor / 5 Boss / 6 Staff delegate / 7 Promoter / 8 Auditor / 9 Male family member(s) / 10 Female family member(s) / 11 Union Representative / 12 Workers Association Representative <br> سلطة قوية / إدارة قوية / إدارة ضعيفة / غياب سلطة | To make a relative comparison of more than 3 elements along 2 interrelated continuums, each containing 2 extremes of a concept, belief or outcome | How different types of risks (from low to high) are shared by farmers or by companies; levels of will and power to change a situation |

Source: Authors, from SenseMaker software

# Data collection

When using SenseMaker, one can collect stories in different ways, depending on the research context. The research team must decide whether to collect data on electronic devices (smartphones, tablets, or computers) or on paper. If using electronic devices (see Figure 2), respondents can either use an app to answer questions or an online platform with a unique URL. Data entered electronically will upload automatically to an online server as soon as a device connects to Wi-Fi or a mobile data connection. It is most efficient to collect data on tablets or other mobile devices, as this reduces time and minimizes potential errors in transcription and data entry that can arise from paper-based collection. However, sometimes research conditions are such that it is only possible to collect data on paper, with each set of responses uploaded to the database afterwards by a transcriber.

The research team must also decide what level of support respondents need to complete the data collection process. Respondents can share stories one-to-one in an individual interview setting – an approach that may be necessary for respondents with low literacy levels (for example), which prevents them completing the process independently. In contexts where literacy rates are high but there is limited time for data collection, stories can also be collected and self-tagged, with interviewers supporting small groups. The interviewer guides the group through each question while respondents fill in responses on their own individual tablet (or paper form), in a setting that keeps stories and responses private.

Interviewers can normally conduct four or five one-to-one interviews per day. Collecting data in group settings requires more time than individual interviews but collects much more data. Collecting data online is only an option for respondents who are literate and in areas with good connectivity.

**Figure 2: SenseMaker data collection using an Android tablet**



Working with a respondent on a digital SenseMaker signification framework. Photo: Franziska Mager/Oxfam

# Interpreting and using data collected through SenseMaker

Once the stories and answers to the pre-determined follow-up questions have been entered into the online database, interpreting the data involves several steps, which each add a layer of analysis.

The first step involves a preliminary scan of data for each response to the analytical question set. Having descriptive data for each question creates an overview of the full data set. This step may reveal some emerging patterns – converging or diverging kinds of responses.

After this, in the second step data is parsed for different variables and examined for apparent associations between variables. Patterns are generated by visualizing all storytellers' responses for the interpretive questions – not through qualitative text analysis of the stories themselves. For example, data for certain categories of female or male workers will be compared to see if their lived experiences and needs appear similar or not. Strong patterns can include visual clusters where many responses converge or where there are noticeable outliers.

The large number of stories collected means that SenseMaker's visual pattern detection software is useful. Interpreting the data requires input from people skilled in using the software (see Section 3 for examples of visual response patterns, and Section 4 for conditions for effective use), and can be enriched by drawing in these stakeholders early on in the research process. Producing a set of descriptive visuals capturing all stories before they are parsed provides a rich starting point for inviting stakeholders to reflect on the data and help prioritise questions and lines of enquiry for more in-depth interpretation. In response to this preliminary phase, project stakeholders might suggest additional questions or areas of enquiry, to investigate particularly surprising or confusing patterns in more depth.

A third step involves exploring the extent and nature of patterns in the data (see Box 3 for what constitutes a pattern). This process may use specific research questions or hypotheses as a guideline for narrowing lines of enquiry or could be more exploratory in approaching the data to see what emerges organically without being theory-driven.

A fourth step consists of **collective interpretation of data patterns**. This effort is most powerful and sensitive to the data at hand when it involves different stakeholders who are very familiar with the study context. Making sense of the information means asking stakeholders to look at visual patterns and the sets of stories that relate to and give context to those patterns. For example, in looking at a triad question, strong patterns may emerge where there are obvious clusters of many data points.

Figure 3 shows how a sample of 204 women workers responded to a triad question that asked them to explain what motivated them to pursue the change they shared in their stories. Each dot within the triad relates to one unique story. Figure 3 shows that the strongest cluster of stories sits near the top of the triad, relating to the concept of 'wanting things to change'; but there is also a notable cluster near the corner 'trying to meet daily needs', and a smaller cluster that sits midway between these two concepts. Very few stories have been indexed by respondents towards 'keeping with traditions'. At this stage, it is helpful to isolate different clusters of dots and, using the software, pull out those narratives that correspond with the data points in order to read those stories. Moving back and forth between quantitative data and the content of stories gives those involved in analysing the data the context needed to understand dominant response patterns.

**Figure 3: A triad depicting responses to a question asking women workers about worker attitudes reflected in their story (n=204)**
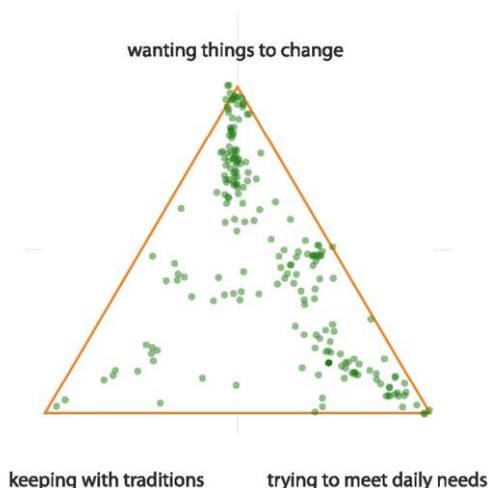


**Source: Oxfam Intermón /ETI**

Collective interpretation by a group of diverse stakeholders can help give a clearer understanding of the data from different perspectives. Together, they can identify where findings are strong, contradictory or confusing when compared to prevailing assumptions and other evidence. Stakeholders can include diverse groups (e.g. government officials, programme staff, respondents, community members, experts, policymakers, or any other actors relevant to the interpretation process). The team should include researchers experienced in using SenseMaker but also (preferably) those with experience of qualitative and quantitative data management. Both ends of this research spectrum require vital skills to interpret this particular type of data (see Section 4 for more detail on the analysis and interpretation process and good practice). For example, a quantitative data analyst will understand the limitations of drawing inferences from visual patterns and/or small subsamples that may otherwise tempt stakeholders to confirm prior beliefs.[2]

## 2.3 HOW SENSEMAKER CAN STRENGTHEN RESEARCH ON DECENT WORK

As explained in Section 1, there are many aspects to 'decent work', and research methods need to provide sufficient data for different purposes. For example, if one simply focuses on whether companies are meeting basic benchmarks, workplace audits and surveys would suffice. But there is a need for other approaches to generate in-depth and nuanced experiences at a scale that can reveal new insights into how to improve working conditions. Case studies are a useful way of revealing such insights; but as only a few case studies tend to be undertaken, it remains unclear whether the individual worker's experiences are typical/representative or an outlier. Resource constraints usually make it impractical to carry out a sufficient number of case studies from which to make generalizations.

SenseMaker can complement in-depth case studies by uncovering generalizable insights. It also complements surveys that can illustrate changes in easily quantifiable indicators but that are often unable to explain underlying values, causal mechanisms and norms. Capturing a large number of experiences is crucial – a minimum of 200 stories offers a basic level of confidence in stronger trends. An increased sample size boosts this confidence exponentially. The patterns revealed through SenseMaker show which experiences are typical and which are anomalous. It allows users to confidently put forward specific narratives as illustrations of a strong pattern at a scale that goes beyond anecdotes. Therefore, this method serves as a methodological bridge between large-scale quantitative surveys and small-scale qualitative research.

SenseMaker, like any research method, is not a catch-all solution to different data needs. But those companies that value workers' knowledge and are strongly motivated to improve practices could benefit from using SenseMaker. To understand decent work in its complexity, SenseMaker is best suited for situations that meet the following conditions:

• A *large number of respondents*, such as first-tier workers in value chains or shop-floor staff, with a well-defined sampling frame that makes it very clear whose perspectives are informing the analysis.

• Stakeholders who *value the voices of workers* for whom they are trying to achieve improvements and who are receptive to suggestions for changes in policy and practice on workplace conditions.

• *Interest in the whole distribution of pattern data, including outliers.* While dominant patterns inevitably draw people's attention, SenseMaker's added value lies in breaking down the distribution of responses instead of fixating on averages, and taking seriously the weak signals about what is happening that are embedded in outliers. Such outliers can highlight the need to take adaptive action, as well as unanticipated emerging issues (see sections 3.2 and 3.3).

• *Openness to receiving data in new and unfamiliar formats.* Many organizations and companies are most comfortable with descriptive statistics and qualitative data – the latter in the form of quotes and case studies. To make SenseMaker findings actionable, those involved in communications and strategic decision making need to be curious and open about engaging with other types of data. Stakeholders must be prepared to actively engage in making sense of the data – in its visualized, quantitative form as well as through reading clusters of stories.

The next section provides real-world examples of how using SenseMaker can add value to decent work initiatives.

# 3   WHAT SENSEMAKER DATA CAN TELL US

This section discusses how SenseMaker can help meet the three measurement challenges set out in the summary. It describes three aspects of data interpretation and shows what kinds of questions (Table 1) are needed for each task. Examples are taken from a 2017 study of working conditions among women in the agricultural sector in Africa that was commissioned by ETI and Oxfam. The conceptual framework for the study drew on the ETI Base Code to identify six focal areas for the research: (1) workers' agency, including the ability to organize and collectively advocate for improvements; (2) dignity; (3) safety at work; (4) job security; (5) rewards (income, benefits, and opportunities for advancement); and (6) aspirations for the future.

## 3.1 TRACKING PRE-SET VARIABLES: THE 'KNOWN KNOWNS'

'Known knowns' are variables that companies, governments, and civil society view as necessary in order to see how well they are delivering against stated values or performance indicators. These can be derived from existing evidence (including surveys and monitoring data), international benchmarks and theoretical work. Such variables are determined prior to data collection and are tracked to compare them against agreed targets. At the global level, one example of 'known knowns' are the SDG indicators – e.g. the number of people living in poverty; the adolescent birth rate; the parity index for educational achievements.

### How to track 'known knowns' using SenseMaker

When it comes to decent work, we can track 'known knowns' through simple quantitative metrics. For example, these might include: the proportion of workers who possess documentation; the number or percentage of workers with formalized labour contracts; logs of overtime hours worked to ensure fair pay; and the number of complaints reported by workers. Figure 4 shows quantitative data on the types of documentation held by women workers in the Oxfam/ETI project – an issue that Oxfam has been raising awareness about among women workers in recent years.

**Figure 4: Types of documentation held by women workers (n=210, multiple answers possible)**
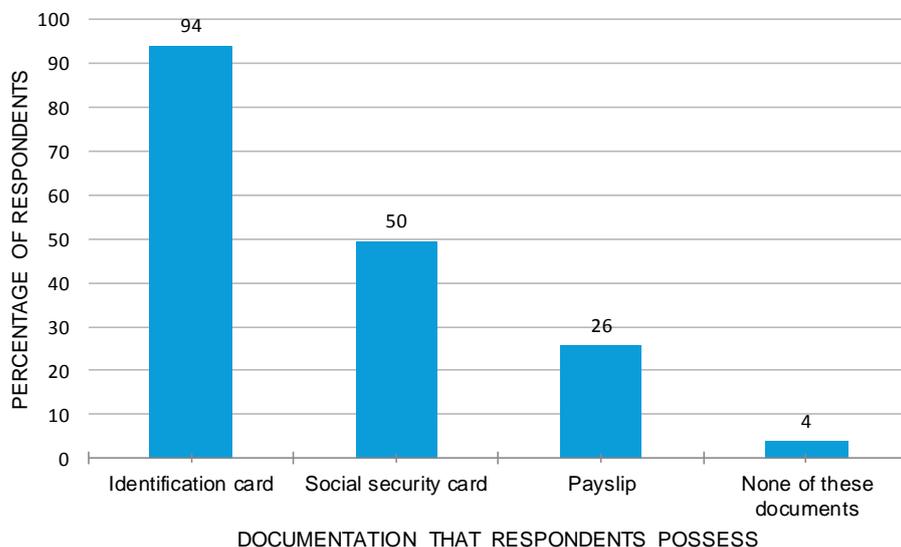
When analysing a SenseMaker data set, predetermined 'known knowns' can be measured at a basic level through multiple choice questions. For known knowns that are not categorical but continuous (such as consumption), standard survey tools (e.g. consumer expenditure interviews) can be used to record precise characteristics for each respondent or household.

To get a more in-depth account and elicit nuanced experiences, descriptive data on known knowns generated from multiple choice questions can be combined with responses to triads, sliders, stones or other multiple choice questions. For example, one could analyse the data in Figure 4 further by disaggregating by job type (e.g. jobs done by those working in fields, packing or processing), which could highlight disparities between different types of workers when it comes to owning different forms of documentation. While it is possible to use only sliders, triads and stones to measure this data dimension, doing so will not produce easily digestible descriptive statistics.

## Laying the foundation for analysing 'known knowns'

- Identify what variations or differences (e.g. based on gender, age, job type, length of service, etc.) are important to understand in order to improve working conditions for specific sub-groups of workers, such as migrant women workers.

- Include multiple choice questions in the question set and cross-check the resulting data with other such questions and/or other question types (sliders, triads, stones).

- Minimum agreed working standards can easily be tracked through multiple-choice questions. More aspirational aspects that extend beyond compliance can also be probed using such questions. For example, asking workers to select their preferences from a set of possible complaints processes, or which aspect of labour conditions most need improving could offer ideas that lead to important insights.

---

**Box 4: What counts as a 'pattern' in SenseMaker?**

- Even though it produces quantifiable data points, SenseMaker is a qualitative research method. As with most research, the degree of certainty with which it is possible to make inferences from the data increases with the size of the sample.

- In SenseMaker terminology, 'patterns' refer to how data appears after visualizing responses to sliders, triads and stones questions in particular. Patterns can look like tight or dispersed clusters and/or have outliers. Where they are located within each slider, triad and stone offers insights on people's experiences. Patterns do not need a minimum numbers of data points and therefore clusters can refer to few or many data points. A pattern is one entry point for exploring the narratives in more depth. Patterns are an initial reading of how answers appear to be distributed.

- When stakeholders first start identifying patterns, it can appear that the stories tagged to each data point may have few things in common, and/or that they 'should' have been tagged to a different pattern in a different area. It is important to remember that patterns are the result of *respondents* tagging their stories to add new information to the narrative. Tagging is not a summary of what was shared in a story; rather, individual stories are snapshots of a given experience at a specific moment in time, and tagging adds additional layers of meaning to the narrative, rather than being a summary.

- Where there is a need for greater precision to understand and quantify trends in patterns, SenseMaker data sets can be exported into statistical analysis software (e.g. R). Data points from slider, triad and stones questions are captured as coordinates. They can be used to calculate correlations, to test for statistically significant differences between groups, and more (see Bartels *et al.* 2018).

## 3.2 IDENTIFYING THE 'KNOWN UNKNOWNS'

The second measurement challenge is figuring out how to assess variables that are recognized as important but are poorly understood in terms of causes or effects. In relation to decent work issues, 'known unknowns' are dimensions that are important or relevant for understanding workers' conditions and whether companies adhere to ethical labour practices. Examples include assessing levels and aspects of dignity afforded to individuals on the work floor or employees' agency to improve working conditions. There may be a considerable amount of uncertainty around incidence, extent, operationalization and/or measurement, as well as around the nature or degree of interaction between multiple variables within these aspects of decent work.

## How to unpack 'known unknowns' using SenseMaker

SenseMaker can shed light on two kinds of 'known unknowns'. The first example in this subsection highlights a known area of concern about which there is limited insight in terms of scope and intensity. The subsequent examples show how hypotheses about a known unknown can be validated or challenged.

Physical safety is part of the ETI Base Code, which stipulates that working conditions should be safe and hygienic. In the Oxfam/ETI project in Africa, the organizations committed to improving working conditions knew that safety was an important aspect for women – being able to travel to and from the workplace safely, as well as conditions in the workplace itself. So while they knew that this was a significant concern, they had no way of assessing what types of safety concerns workers had, or how safety considerations affected women. Questions about safety were therefore integrated at different points and through different question types in the research framework. The study findings helped the implementing organizations to understand workers' safety considerations, which included but went beyond their physical well-being. Findings also highlighted concerns around workers' mental health, their sense of dignity at work and their use of transport to get to work, which the women respondents saw as being clearly linked.

Indeed, the data revealed that safety issues such as transport to and from work were a major concern, confirming information that Oxfam was aware of at a more general level. However, the analysis also revealed the prevalence of injuries due to falling crates or unstable palettes on site – even though this was not a 'known known' that had been counted in audits or surveys. This insight indicates the need for better preventive measures, such as training for workers and enforcement of safety precautions on farms and in processing plants.

The second example shows how SenseMaker-generated data can help validate or challenge hypotheses, which is ideal for unpacking known unknowns. Figure 5 shows responses to a question capturing workers' perceptions of their own degree of control over situations in the workplace. Prior to the study, it was anticipated that women workers would report feeling very low levels of control in the situations described in their stories. However, while the overall distribution is inclined toward 'no control', there is still a sizeable proportion of stories suggesting that workers have some or complete control over the outcome of their story. The assumption of 'no control' was thus challenged, requiring further exploration.

**Figure 5: Women workers' responses to a question about their control over outcomes of events in their stories (n=209)**



No control                                                                    Complete control
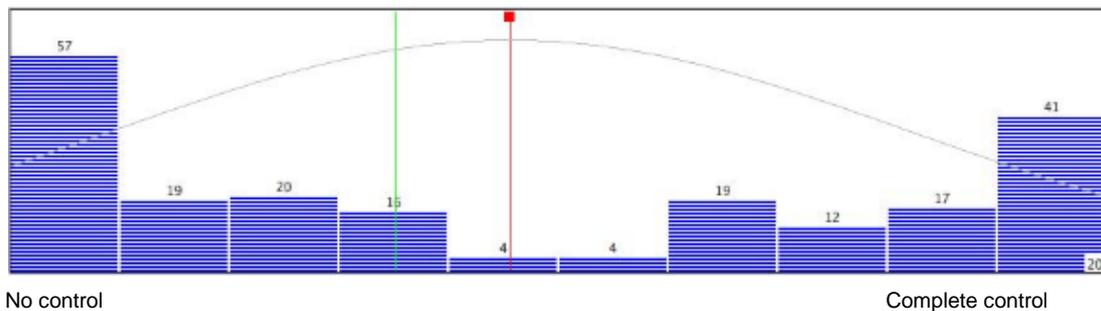
**Red line = median**
**Green line = mean**
**Source: Oxfam Intermón /ETI**

SenseMaker software can help give a more nuanced analysis of this general pattern – for example, by looking at story themes (one of the multiple-choice questions). In Figure 6, the same slider is filtered thematically to only show stories for which respondents have tagged that it is about a 'Relationship with a boss or supervisor'. The distribution shifts towards respondents reporting having direct control over the outcome. This observation suggests that women workers may feel a *relatively* stronger sense of agency when interacting with management at work than they do for other themes, but this is only a hypothesis. It can be explored in more depth by reading the set of relevant micro-narratives (tagged for 'Relationship with a boss or supervisor') and combining that data with other questions in the framework that relate to 'worker agency'. If this aspect is considered critical, more follow-up research can be planned.

**Figure 6: Women workers' responses to a question about their control over the outcomes of events in their stories, for stories about the theme 'Relationship with a boss or supervisor' (n=56)**



No control                                                                    Complete control
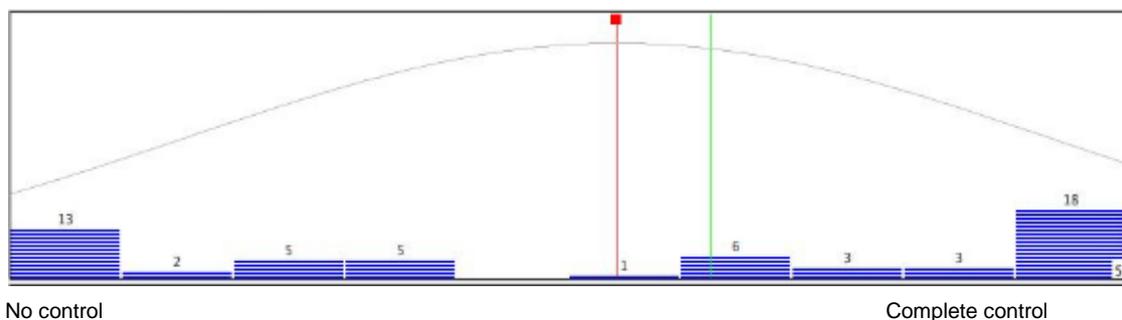
**Red line = median**
**Green line = mean**
**Source: Oxfam Intermón /ETI**

Another issue that had the same 'known unknown' quality in this study was around workers' perceptions of their agency. Oxfam and ETI had been making efforts to strengthen women workers' agency but were not clear how to make workers' experiences of agency visible through data. This example is thus about deepening insights into an aspect of work that is known to be important, and about questioning assumptions.

Figure 7 shows the distribution of responses to a question about why women did what they did – seeking to elicit information on their sense of agency in the workplace. Project staff were somewhat surprised to see the large cluster of respondents who said, through their stories, that they did what they wanted. This response pattern aligns with the finding that many women respondents indicated they had a degree of control over the outcome of their situation. The tension between women facing largely negative challenges in the workplace while still demonstrating a relative degree of personal agency led to more nuanced understandings of the

ways in which women saw themselves as active agents in the workplace. Even in those stories which, for example, talked about women workers as the subjects of harassment, respondents still saw these women as having some power within the situation, and not just as passive. This was still the case even if action on behalf of the women concerned did not lead to change or a satisfying outcome for them. SenseMaker allowed for more detailed exploration of the kinds of situations and conditions under which women workers exert different forms of agency – for example, by looking at responses about who else was involved in the experiences shared.

**Figure 7: A triad depicting responses to a question asking women workers why they did what they did in their stories (n=207)**



they wanted

someone told them to do        they thought people
                                expected

**Source: Oxfam Intermón /ETI**

Another triad in the data set explored the relative importance of dignity/respect at work, wages/benefits, and job security/stability in women workers' narratives. Figure 8 shows a distribution where the largest concentration of stories (about 35%) falls in the middle of the triad. This suggests that all three elements may have been equally important for many women workers. One might assume that 'wages' would be most important, but in this case, 'dignity' and 'respect' emerged as stronger motivation. This finding supports the argument that efforts to promote decent work should strongly consider workplace relationships and workers' everyday treatment. Fair treatment and fair compensation should not be seen as mutually exclusive or as substitutes for one another.

**Figure 8: A triad depicting women workers' responses to a question about what they were pursuing in their story (n=207)**



dignity/respect at work

job security/stability              wages/benefits
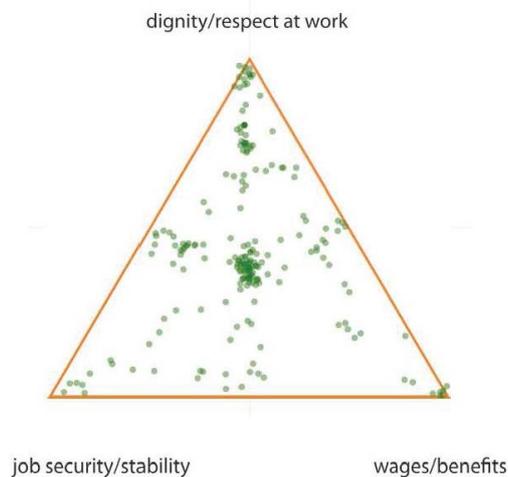
**Source: Oxfam Intermón /ETI**

Relationships between workers, supervisors and bosses emerged as an area of 'known unknowns' within this study. Figures 9 and 10 show responses to a stones question about the respective levels of will and agency that different actors had to effect change in women's stories. Figure 9 shows responses for stories tagged by respondents as 'involving supervisors' and Figure 10 shows stories tagged as 'involving bosses'. While there are fewer stories about bosses, there is a relatively higher concentration of stories in which workers said that bosses had both 'high power' and 'high will' to achieve change (see shading). This provides an entry point for scrutinizing whether supervisors and bosses may be differently placed to strengthen decent work conditions, and whether there is scope for different kinds of decent work initiatives with these two sub-groups.

**Figure 9 (left): Women workers' perceptions of supervisors' power and will to achieve change in their story (n=74)**

**Figure 10 (right): Women workers' perceptions of bosses' power and will to achieve change in their story (n=56)**
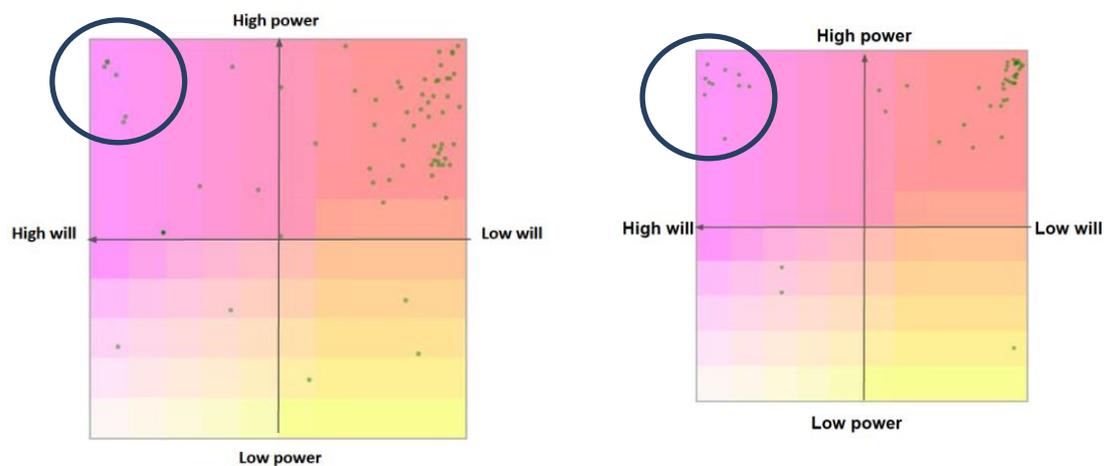


Source: Oxfam Intermón /ETI

Reading through the narratives from the Oxfam/ETI study, based on patterns related to the theme of stories about 'verbal harassment', revealed that unequal power and gender dynamics were leading to abusive behaviour by supervisors towards women workers. While most supervisors in the stories were male, women workers described incidents of abuse perpetrated by male and female supervisors, indicating their power disadvantage within a workplace hierarchy. Thus, one area to explore further (as a 'known unknown') would be to understand the incentives and corporate/management culture that drives the behaviour of supervisors towards women workers, in order to reduce harassment and discriminatory behaviour.

## Laying the foundation for analysing 'known unknowns'

• Include SenseMaker question types (triads, sliders, stones) along with multiple choice questions in the question set. Sliders and multiple choice questions can help test assumptions. Triads and stones are particularly good for exploring aspects of a story that have multiple influences or factors present, to varying degrees, in a given situation.

• Minimum agreed working standards can easily be tracked as explained under 'known knowns'. This gives mono-dimensional yes/no answers, or might identify a range between 'poor' or excellent', for example. Going beyond compliance requires adding nuance to such responses or adding specificity to a generic value. First, creating a more nuanced picture can be achieved by asking about the same aspect of workers' experience using different question types to allow for triangulation. For example, in the Oxfam/ETI study, the question set included 'safety' and 'accidents' as possible response options for a multiple-choice question about story themes. The framework also included a triad on women workers'

physical state at work. This meant that safety could be analysed from different perspectives. Second, 'known unknowns' can be hard to make visible in concrete terms. Taking a concept like 'dignity' can be understood in greater detail to encourage, for example, improvements in worker–supervisor interactions that go beyond simple aspects of working conditions. Figures 9 and 10 illustrate this potential well.

## 3.3 IDENTIFYING NEW DIMENSIONS: 'UNKNOWN UNKNOWNS'

'Unknown unknowns' fall completely outside of existing metrics and preconceived notions of what matters in a specific context. They are not tracked, explored or addressed through hypotheses or assumptions, and there may be little or no existing data on these factors. Actively looking for 'unknown unknowns' can reveal new problems that need to be tackled and new opportunities that can be supported. This type of finding can shed entirely new light on what matters to people when it comes to decent work. SenseMaker offers a structured way in which unanticipated or unintended factors, relationships or dynamics can emerge through story content and/or through patterns in the data.

### How to spot 'unknown unknowns' using SenseMaker

With SenseMaker-generated data, the content of stories and certain types of data patterns can reveal completely unexpected aspects that open up new avenues for decent work initiatives. The strongest insights occur when story content is read in parallel with analysing data patterns.

The open-ended nature of the SenseMaker story prompt encourages respondents to share diverse experiences. This diversity is important in understanding the range of experiences that describe the many facets of (in this case) the workplace. Analysing stories using the structure of the question set and the intentional ambiguity of triads, sliders and stones can lead to the emergence of completely unanticipated issues. Even where multiple choice options limit the range of responses (for example, the themes present in a story), respondents usually have the option to select 'other' and add relevant details. Where multiple respondents independently choose the same 'other' option, it may indicate a need to identify knowledge gaps or to interrogate a dimension previously considered to be a lower priority or no priority at all. (A high rate of 'other' responses can also signal a poorly designed research question.)

'Unknown unknowns' can also be spotted by tracking whether there are clusters of data outliers within a triad, slider or stones question. Such a cluster might be small (a weak signal) or large, but clearly deviates from the dominant location of responses. This may indicate that there is an unexpected sub-group experiencing a particular issue. Looking at the narratives related to that outlier cluster can help shed light on underlying issues or the context that enables such experiences to emerge.

In the Oxfam/ETI study, reading micro-narratives revealed such a sub-cluster about supervisors' treatment of pregnant workers (see Box 5). This sub-cluster of stories was identified by running a word search for several pregnancy-related keywords. Looking at this set of stories revealed how the well-being of pregnant workers was being compromised due to the physical demands of their jobs and harassment by supervisors and bosses. Pregnant women also attempted to hide their pregnancy for as long as possible due to the precarious nature of their employment, knowing that workers who became pregnant were often fired.

> **Box 5: Sample story about specific issues related to unfair treatment of women workers who become pregnant**
>
> *'Difficult life conditions'*
>
> *My colleague became pregnant but, wanting to work, she always put a band around her stomach to hide the pregnancy, and presented a fake medical certificate. But the boss was told by another colleague and he insulted and humiliated her in front of everybody and fired her without pity, even though she really needed the work because her husband wasn't working.*

Another 'unknown unknown' concerned links between safety, worker–management relationships, and job security. While some stories told of managers who supported workers who became injured while at work, most stories about workplace accidents described a lack of responsiveness from management. From the workers' perspective, these supervisors and bosses did not provide sufficient support for receiving medical treatment. Women clearly felt that having to pay their own medical bills was an abrogation of employer responsibility (see Box 6), reflecting unequal power dynamics between supervisors and first-tier workers. It may also show a difference in understanding between workers and management in terms of workers' rights and employers' obligations – an area that would need to be investigated further to determine if there is a systemic issue or if these conflicts are specific to particular work sites. Such divergent views of what constitutes employer responsibility could present a new area of attention for organizations and companies striving to create decent work conditions.

> **Box 6: Story linking safety, security and employer responsibility**
>
> *'Isn't this injustice?'*
>
> *With non-existent working regulations and sanitary facilities, one day a worker was seriously injured by an iron bar while working on one of the machines. She remained on the ground, and then left, alone, to consult the emergency room. The 3-day certificate she was issued was refused, and the worker was fired.*

## Laying the foundation for analysing 'unknown unknowns'

- Check the response patterns for each question specifically to spot outlier clusters in triads, sliders and stones questions, and mentions of 'other' in multip le choice questions.

- Read through stories and create sub-sets of stories with unexpected common themes or dynamics. Where there is a prohibitively large number of stories in a data set, use patterns in the data to identify relevant story sub-sets for reading and content analysis.

- When potential new themes start to emerge, such as 'pregnancy', use text search in the full story set to establish incidence (how many stories mention this issue). While such sub-sets can be small given the overall size of the data set, they can be extremely valuable to project stakeholders in indicating future areas of work or investigation.

- Listening deeply to workers' experiences and identifying new aspects of their working conditions that they value, yet sit outside current minimum standards, can pave the way for inspiring employer actions beyond compliance. Working conditions of pregnant women, respectful interaction, additional health support beyond that on the work-floor – are all examples that may sit outside minimum standards, yet are highlighted as important for the workers in this study.

# 3.4 HOW SENSEMAKER CAN ADD VALUE WHEN IT COMES TO UNDERSTANDING DECENT WORK

Using multiple choice questions in SenseMaker generates data about the 'known knowns'. But surveys can do that, at lower cost and/or more directly. So what is it about SenseMaker research that adds value for actors like Oxfam, and specifically in the context of decent work?

SenseMaker adds value to the research Oxfam undertakes in two main ways: (1) it combines responses to different types of questions that allow for easy and unusual triangulation; and (2) it links quantitative data with first-person narratives, which can significantly strengthen the analytical potential of a set of stories as well as of a quantitative data set. Most research methods tend to collect and analyse these data separately, while SenseMaker allows each to complement the other during the data analysis process.

Responses to each question can be displayed as a series (see for example Figures 9 and 10), enabling data analysts to spot any unexpected patterns. For example, showing two images of the same triad – one with women's responses and one with men's responses – can highlight whether there are any obvious differences or unexpected similarities. Alternatively, having three versions of the same slider – showing responses from pickers, processors and packers, for example – could lead to similar observations. Figures 9 and 10 showed how this can generate interesting insights for a stones question. Any multiple-choice questions can be used to filter for specific demographic attributes or other response options.

Scanning the data (particularly visuals) in this way shows whether the distribution of stories seems to change and opens up avenues for further questioning. If there are enough stories, the variables can be probed in sub-sets – for example, by combining gender, age, positive/negative tone, or thematic focus. Any speculation about novel factors or 'unknown unknowns' can then be analysed further to see if any substantiated conclusions can be drawn.

SenseMaker gives those who are keen to challenge assumptions a robust way go beyond the presumably objective metrics of compliance frameworks underpinning labour standards. To gain a greater understanding of what constitutes decent work, the data interpretation process can generate two kinds of surprises.

1.  *Mismatched-based surprises.* Surveys and audits are efficient ways to quantify what stakeholders already know they need to know, based on information needs at the time of inquiry. Such information about pre-defined indicators, targets and milestones can provide evidence that challenges expectations – for example, if more progress towards safety might have been expected than was found. Users can look at visual patterns and stories to check whether pre-defined assumptions and expectations are met (or not), verifying whether there is a match or mismatch. This kind of surprise may help organizations or companies to plan and implement further research to explore why the situation is not as expected.

2.  *Novel surprises.* Totally unexpected, unplanned and novel issues can also jump out from the data. The research team can explore the data, clustering and linking and comparing different sub-sets of responses and stories to see if there are any surprises. This kind of analysis sheds further light on the issues and allows the team to identify and explore 'unknown unknowns'. It may also help organizations or companies conduct further research or implement additional interventions on new aspects of decent work.

Compared with using approaches such as large-scale worker surveys, SenseMaker provides respondents with the opportunity to share stories of their own choosing, and to provide additional information to help researchers understand the importance, relevance and underlying relationships, norms and dynamics in their setting. The SenseMaker story prompt becomes the door through which respondents share significant experiences with others. In doing so, workers can help organizations and companies to refine their approach to a given area of intervention to promote decent work.

Minimum standards are easily tracked using multiple-choice questions. It is what we know matters – the 'known knowns' of compliance. Yet using SenseMaker can stretch the aspiration levels by pointing to novel aspects that are under-highlighted, the known unknowns, and shed light on completely new areas for improving worker conditions – the unknown unknowns. Together these aspects of working conditions can encourage companies to look for where there is robust compliance and aspire to more.

## 3.5 PUTTING THE DATA TO USE

Making sense of the data generated is an iterative process of looking at visual patterns and the stories that pertain to each pattern. Who is 'at the table' when this process happens is important; ideally, there should be a mix of people involved in interpreting the data, with varying degrees of knowledge about the context in which the stories were collected. Those who know the context bring much relevant knowledge to the analysis, while those who do not know the context can help overcome any bias. Rikolto's analysis, for example, included farmers, staff, and representatives from private companies and government. CRS's interpretation of coffee value chain research included local staff from the organization, staff from other NGOs, and academics. Other applications of SenseMaker have brought together activists, NGO staff, bilateral aid agency staff, religious leaders, and technical specialists.

Opening up the data interpretation process to include more stakeholders can generate shared, unexpected insights which in turn lead directly to agreed actions and strategy adjustments. However, the uniqueness of interpreting SenseMaker data and its emphasis on extending interpretative power beyond researchers or evaluators may also fuel speculative conclusions, and confirmation bias by seeking patterns that confirm existing assumptions. It is therefore important to be aware of good practice on data interpretation.

### Data interpretation good practice

Before showing the actual responses, it is helpful to ask stakeholders to state how they would expect certain patterns to appear – for example, whether they would expect one option in a triad to be tagged more strongly than the other two options. This step helps to make any assumptions explicit; data interpretation can then be conducted with greater awareness of possible biases. The interpretation process can be systematized by asking stakeholders to group insights into three clusters: (1) those that confirm existing assumptions or strategies; (2) those that challenge assumptions or strategies; and (3) those they simply did not understand and need follow-up or clarification.

To further reduce the risk of bias, it is better to first look at data patterns and only then let stakeholders read the relevant stories. It is common for people to expect all patterns to closely reflect the first few stories they read; since they will constantly be referring back to the stories they read, they can get confused if the stories and patterns do not align exactly as they expect them to.

When using SenseMaker, it is important to understand the ambiguity that is inherent to this method. It is possible to encounter findings that need to be explored further using other research methods, to triangulate and complement the findings that SenseMaker data may suggest. Section 4 offers advice on the conditions in which SenseMaker can be used to greatest effect to generate effective and robust data.

# 4 CONDITIONS FOR USING SENSEMAKER EFFECTIVELY

It is tempting to hope that one measurement approach will work in any context and can meet all data needs. Like any research method, however, SenseMaker is no magic bullet; it works best under certain conditions. The following conditions will increase the utility and rigour of any SenseMaker study.

1. **Make sure it is possible to capture stories at scale in order to give people greater voice.** Using SenseMaker well requires strong commitment and skill to ensure that previously unheard voices remain central in the inquiry. For example, extra time and planning may be needed if respondents have low literacy levels. The location of data collection may also influence respondents; while capturing stories in a workplace is an efficient way of reaching workers, it may affect how comfortable they feel to participate and share information openly – particularly if potential participants fear it could negatively affect their relationship with their employer and their livelihood.

2. **Check that the end user of the research (the organization or company) really needs to explore the 'unknowns' and will be accepting of the ambiguity inherent in SenseMaker-generated data.** The SenseMaker approach has met with scepticism on the part of those who favour methodological traditions that offer the unequivocal certainty of numbers. The approach can take some people and organizations outside their 'comfort zone' by introducing ambiguity into design and interpretation, reducing the certainty of simple findings that the data can generate. Where an organization needs to ask direct questions that have a 'yes/no' or 'either/or' response option, a survey may be the preferred option.

3. **Collectively engage in framework design.** It is essential to invest time in designing any research tool in order to meet data needs. The SenseMaker end user must have some involvement in setting out the conceptual framework and research questions, even if they will not be involved in collecting or interpreting the data. During the collaborative design process, a SenseMaker expert should work with subject matter experts to map dimensions of interest and to craft questions, in consultation with end users, to ensure that the data generated meets their needs.

4. **Guarantee sufficient time for high-quality training.** Due to the use of personal stories and the unusual way in which triads, sliders and stones questions work, it is vital that researchers, enumerators or fieldworkers who will collect the stories are well trained. Past experiences may well be unhelpful or even hinder effective application of the SenseMaker method. For example, data collectors with qualitative experience need to refrain from asking probing questions and deviating from the predetermined set of follow-up questions. Likewise, researchers may also need training to acquire the skills needed to elicit a relevant and concise story in response to the prompt question. Data collectors who are using SenseMaker for the first time may need some time to feel confident that they understand how to explain the questions (e.g. triads) to respondents. Developing these interviewing skills requires time for training and for debriefing, to ensure high-quality data collection.

5. **Invest in collective interpretation.** SenseMaker offers unique opportunities to engage a range of stakeholders in data interpretation, facilitated by software that helps visualize patterns in the data. However, it is important to be mindful that collective interpretation is shaped by who is in the room or at the table. This makes it even more important to include diverse perspectives (see Section 3.5). Sensemaking brings together those with SenseMaker analytical skills and stakeholders and research users, by sharing preliminary findings and inviting different perspectives on the data. Stakeholders provide valuable feedback on findings that may appear confounding or surprising, or may confirm existing assumptions. Such discussions can also elicit useful ideas from stakeholders as to where to

focus a second round of more in-depth analysis, or where different types of follow-up analysis or research may be needed.

6. **Be mindful of what can be inferred from the data and involve researchers with a range of experience, bearing in mind biases inherent to perceptions.** SenseMaker does not come with an exact data interpretation protocol or step-by-step manual for the data analysis stage. This is the case for the collective, visual, qualitative type of sensemaking, as well as the advanced statistical analysis some researchers use. Hence there is a spectrum of confidence with which definite conclusions can be drawn, especially after collective data interpretation.

To maintain a clear view of what can and cannot be inferred from the data (stories and responses) and with what level of confidence, two considerations are essential. First, remember that while collective interpretation of visual patterns has many benefits, scanning data for perceived differences (for example, between job types) may confirm biases that arise when data is processed visually, or a (sub)sample is small. A certain pattern or distribution may purely be the result of chance, rather than reflecting a significant variation in the statistical sense. Second and following on from this, it is important that the interpretation process involves researchers who are skilled in quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Both skill sets involve different logics and thinking patterns – both of which are important to understand what SenseMaker data is offering and what cannot be inferred. For example, to understand whether the distribution of answers in a triad is mathematically truly different between men and women workers (or whether this is just a chance effect that the eye perceives as different), a skilled analyst will first ask stakeholders to express their assumptions about gender-specific responses, and then explore visual patterns with sub-sets of stories. If a greater degree of certainty is required – for example, for important strategic decisions or outward-facing communications – the analyst can run the data through statistical software or undertake follow-up research.

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## NOTES

1   As with any research, especially those methods inviting respondents to share personal information, SenseMaker interviews need to comply with strict ethical and safeguarding standards. Respondents need to give informed consent and need to understand the implications of sharing information with the interviewer, since the resulting data may be shared with external stakeholders.

2   If a respondent sample is large (i.e. above a couple of hundred stories), data can also be analysed using any conventional statistical software package and tested for statistically significant differences between sub-groups. See section 5 for examples of when this may be particularly important.

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