In the current debates around evaluation, quasi-experimental methods are considered by some to be the best way to know what works. They view narrative-based evaluation with some disdain. Stories are, they say, only perceptions. They can’t give you the ‘hard facts and figures’ that are needed to know what works and what to do next. And a handful of stories, no matter how in-depth, cannot lead to insights with wider relevance.

Yet story-based evaluation has many advocates. A vibrant global community has grown around the ‘Most Significant Change’ method, for example, with other examples of story-based evaluation being the Listening Project, Swedish Reality Check Approach, and the Swiss Story Guide.

But what if there was a way to gather more than just a ‘handful’ of anecdotes? What if we could combine the power of people’s narratives with ways to discern statistical patterns? This could bring together the all-important context and diversity of people’s experiences with the ability to detect trends over time with spatial, thematic and demographic patterns.

Cognitive Edge has developed an approach based on asking people to share a significant story and code their own stories to put them into context, thus adding additional information to the story being shared. The self-coding is done with multiple-choice questions and polarities, but also through an innovative triangle.

For example, people are asked whether their story about community change efforts is more about social relations, economic opportunities or physical well being. They show how their story relates to those three potentially intertwining meanings by placing a dot on a triangle (see Figure 1 below).

Hundreds or even thousands of small, self-signified experiences are then analysed using the software SenseMaker® in order to reveal salient visual patterns. People then debate these patterns, by reading story clusters, in order to gain insights about what this diversity of ‘voice’ is at scale.
telling them that might improve the work. In standard evaluation practice, outside experts interpret the stories being shared, bringing in their own cognitive and cultural biases.

**Accessing Insights that Matter**

Since late 2009, GlobalGiving has been pilot- ing a SenseMaker-based approach in Kenya, with expansion under way in Kenya and now also Uganda. GlobalGiving is a global network of thousands of smaller, mostly national organizations that place their projects on a web platform to seek funding. More than 200,000 individuals and organisations have donated to these causes to date.

GlobalGiving’s interest in this approach was fuelled by recognition that the lack of quick feedback seriously hinders development work. Also, being a very lean organisation means little money is available for elaborate external evaluations of these many, often small efforts. How then to obtain timely feedback, and importantly, hear local perspectives on the projects posted on the GlobalGiving platform?

Rather than waiting for years for a formal evaluation based on outsiders’ views, this approach is a way to gather diverse community views and share it quickly to come to actionable insights. Understanding change as it emerges and making real-time adjustments based on new insights that challenge existing practice, are key to meeting people’s needs efficiently.

After a trial in 2010, GlobalGiving has consolidated and scaled up this work. Since January 2011, more than 21,000 stories have been collected in Kenya and Uganda through a unique system of scribes that is costing only around 0.50USD per story. Compared to standard approaches, this storytelling approach is a fraction of the cost.

And surprising insights are emerging (see ‘Chewy Chunks’ blog), which are finding their way back to some of the organizations mentioned in the stories. Below is one example that Marc has blogged on in some detail twice.

**Example of Analysis: Rape in Nairobi’s slums**

VAP, a slum project, was interested to see whether their stories, frequently about the problem of rape, were typical of Kenya as a whole. Using the SenseMaker® software, Marc scanned the 110 stories that mentioned either rape or Sita Kimya (the name of a project). Each story has varying degrees of relevance to the idea or the people who benefited.

Two of the survey questions asked storytell- ers to indicate if their story was about: a ‘good idea, succeeded’; ‘good idea, failed’; or ‘bad idea’, as well as the extent to which it benefited ‘right people’, ‘wrong people’, ‘nobody’ (see Figure 1). Combining both answers with SenseMaker allows you create a plot like this (Figure 2).

Each dot is where the storytellers located their stories. Are they more about ‘Good Ideas’ that succeeded and helped the right people (top), or are they ‘Bad Ideas’ that benefited nobody (lower right)? Moving the six labels around with the software allows one to obtain a clear visual pattern that parses the data into two major groups.

The most represented organisations are Sita Kimya, an anti-rape messaging campaign, and USAID, which funds this campaign in Kibera, Nairobi. This plot shows that 28 of 110 stories are related to Sita Kimya or USAID and the pattern is much like the whole set (Figure 3).

However, most of these stories - 21 of the 28 - are from men who tell stories as observers. What are the women talking about? 20 of the 29 stories from women are tagged as “NONE” or “None” – meaning the women did not identify any organization as the subject of their stories.

Sita Kimya, as the USAID website explains, is clearly targeting men. And they seem to be reaching their target demographic (Figure 4).
The above plot represents men who talked about Sita Kimya: 21 of the 78 stories about rape are about Sita Kimya specifically. Every single one of these men identifies himself as either an observer or an actor in the story they told. None are “affected by” the events in the stories.

So who is helping the women? The stories showed that Box Girls International is teaching them self-defense skills, and VAP tries to reach young women in Majengo with some straight talk about sex.

This kind of searching for patterns in story themes is much richer than the geo-mapping that is all the rage right now in big development agencies, of which Ushahidi is perhaps the best known example. But of course it is much harder to do successfully. How do you know when you've found the right pattern? There are multiple interpretations and this is where people’s own critical faculties – and their sensemaking – becomes crucial (see below).

Three Critical Elements to Get Right

Using a SenseMaker-based approach to evaluation requires clarity about what to ask, a solid story collection system, and processes to help organisations make sense of story patterns. Let’s take them one by one.

Getting the questions right means designing your question framework to be short, answerable in less than 15 minutes, and focused at overarching goals. Rather than worry about mid-level indicators that can become redundant quickly, the question framework zooms in on the absolute minimum core set of values, beliefs, and concepts that are important. GlobalGiving’s framework has just 14 questions about the story being shared, plus another three about who is telling the story.

The question set should, ideally, be designed with the people and organisations who are going to get the story feedback. But if this is not possible, at the very least, keeping their questions at the centre. The trick for evalua-
Figure 3

Figure 4
tion professionals is to reduce the tendency to include directive, evaluative questions and aim to balance these with open-ended questions.

Ensuring a solid story collection system means figuring out whose stories are crucial and then how these can be safely and continuously collected at low cost. Stories can be collected in different ways from people. In Kenya, we used basic pen and paper with community volunteers. But stories are also collected through dedicated web sites and trials with smart pens and mobile phone applications are underway.

In Kenya and Uganda, Marc has pioneered a system of volunteer scribes who are given a token 7 eurocents per story in recognition of the effort. It is explicitly not promoted as a wage - and yet the stories are flooding in.

The scribes are trained, receive paper copies of the questionnaire to be filled in, and the filled in stories are then collected and transcribed into a database. A system of quality checking of stories and transcriptions filters out the junk stories and corrects transcribers’ interpretation errors.

But this is GlobalGiving’s approach to story collection. Other organisations using this story-based process develop other collection modalities that suit their relationships and budgets.

GlobalGiving is investing increasingly in ensuring that feedback happens, as seeing what the stories can tell may be a much more powerful incentive to keep sharing stories than simply hoping that your voice is being heard somewhere by someone.

The challenge is that while paper can extend the collection process to every community, dissemination is much more difficult to do using paper-based methods – and facilitated discussions are crucial. We also hope that SMS will soon put the power of story searching in the hands of every storyteller.

Sensemaking to ensure useful evaluation is crucial. We don’t need more dusty data on a shelf far from where the action is. But making evaluations useful is hard. Most organisations would murmur that ‘yes, evaluation needs to be useful and improve our work’. In practice, much evaluation is never returned to the organisations it was supposed to serve. The information extracted and analysed is not relevant, not translated into meaningful insights, or simply not shared.

Organisations need to be hungry for insights. So time is needed to help them identify salient questions. Once this clarity exists, then software and visualization tools can be used to analyse and focus discussions around the root causes of complex social problems.

Dialogue driving development

Dialogue among implementers, storytellers, and community leaders must increasingly drive development. To support this, an evaluative mindset needs to be closely connected to impact-oriented monitoring.

An effective monitoring system is needed to encode the complexity of the world and produce a reasonably accurate reproduction of nature. And then evaluation processes are needed that allow people to generate and share multiple interpretations of that data.

Reality, according to physicists, is what we have in common. Much of the confusion about impact in international development stems from the reality that we have many realities, and many subjective interpretations of the information we use to make decisions.

Getting back to the original question: “what would it mean if we could turn qualitative data into much more than a bunch of anecdotes?”

It would mean we all have much greater power to understand that common reality. It will take the encoding of many more perspectives than has been done before, and much great data interoperability among those searching for answers.

Qualitative data often looks less powerful because the number of perspectives is too limited. But the GlobalGiving Storytelling Project shows that we can do this at scale. The challenge remains how to parse such a large and growing body of information to identify what we need to know in order to guide our actions.
Dr. Irene Guijt is an international expert in the application of learning-oriented knowledge processes in international development. She provides research, advisory, and training services on social and organizational learning, in particular being known for her work on innovative thinking on monitoring and evaluation that enhances learning, most recently engaged in experimenting with SenseMaker for the international context. She has worked with a wide range of multilateral and non-governmental international development organizations and foundations working in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Marc Maxson is a PhD neuroscientist who helps coordinate the GlobalGiving Storytelling project in East Africa, a monitoring and evaluation experiment that aims to provide all organizations with a richer, complex view of the communities they serve (www.globalgiving.org/story-tools/). He was formerly a Peace Corps Volunteer in The Gambia (1999-2001) and did a Fulbright research project around the impact of computers and the Internet on rural education in West Africa.

**FURTHER READING**

- http://www.globalgiving.org/stories/
- http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/amplifying_local Voices1/
- More theoretical information on SenseMaker® concept with many videos: