

Assembly kit

Cyclone Sidr



This assembly kit provides all teachers need for a school assembly or drama class about the impact of the cyclone that hit southern Bangladesh in November 2007. The material can be used in any educational setting with young people – informally or as part of citizenship education. It is part of the British Red Cross humanitarian education programme.

Summary

This resource aims to encourage young people to think beyond the mix of horror and despair, sadness and grief that follows disasters. Although it is prompted by Cyclone Sidr, it raises questions that are common to many emergencies, such as climate change and how communities prepare for disasters.

The performance, or assembly script, below can be adapted through discussion and rehearsal. Or it can be performed more or less as it is by staff or students or a mixture. The add-ons that follow it suggest possibilities for variants and additions. The follow-up activities suggest ways to explore the issues in more depth in class after the assembly.

Age group

This assembly is suitable for 9 to 16 year olds.

Aims

- > To help young people understand how communities and countries prepare for natural disasters, and how this can help reduce injuries and loss of life
- > To encourage young people to consider the common human reactions to natural disasters
- > To help young people begin to think about how the tasks of rebuilding after a disaster and being prepared for future ones continue mainly out of the public eye

Performance

The script below takes the form of an active discussion, with different voices questioning and trying to make sense of the news they hear of the cyclone in Bangladesh. They are suitable for young people to read out as part of a school assembly or as a drama performance in class. For some schools and settings, they may be most appropriately read by adults.

When it comes to casting parts, please note that:

- > voice one is questioning, an averagely informed person trying to learn
- > voices two and three are knowledgeable and do most of the explaining
- > the narrator could be the senior member of staff who normally leads the assembly

Read the parts with young people in preparation for the performance. Ensure they understand the meaning and the language and discuss any issues that arise. To reinforce their understanding, you may like to ask them to use their own words in places.

Narrator

Thousands of people died following the cyclone which struck the southern coast of Bangladesh on 15 November.

Cyclone Sidr brought winds of up to 155 miles per hour and a five-metre tidal surge. It devastated hundreds of thousands of homes and destroyed crops and fishing equipment.

There are up to three million survivors who need assistance. They are the people who were evacuated from the low-lying southern coast and those people whose homes and villages were destroyed.

Those people living in areas cut off by water or by damaged and blocked roads will be trying to cope. They will be waiting for the local authorities and aid agencies to arrive with food, clean water, medical help and some temporary shelter.

Voice one

This cyclone must have been because of climate change. We have to do more to tackle global warming or this will keep happening.

Voice two

Well, yes, climate change is making natural disasters like cyclones more frequent. But when people talk about global warming, they often talk about the future – about suffering caused by floods, storms or other adverse weather in ten or 20 years' time.

Voice three

Imagine starting up a conversation in southern Bangladesh today, warning people of the potentially disastrous extreme weather events caused by climate change.

Voice two

They'd tell you they know all about it. It's happening now.

Voice three

They might also argue that more resources should be allocated to people coping with natural disasters. People living a hard existence in places with a high risk of disasters, would, if they had a choice, build stronger houses out of a more expensive material than bamboo. That way, they wouldn't have to start from scratch every time a disaster hits their village.

Voice two

That's not to say we shouldn't think about the future too – but perhaps that needs to be balanced with supporting people who are already vulnerable.

Voice one

Okay, so people need to be learning how to prepare for a cyclone or floods?

Voice three

Yes, what to do when they happen and afterwards. The thing is, Bangladesh has been doing that for years. The planning saved thousands of lives this time round. Experts fear the loss of life from Cyclone Sidr could be as high

as 10,000 people, but it could have been even greater.

Voice two

In 1991, one storm of a similar size and strength claimed 139,000 Bangladeshi lives. In November 1970 a cyclone killed 300,000 people.

Voice one

So it's not just the force of the cyclone that determines how many people die – it's also how prepared people are for it.

Voice three

This time, the weather forecasting system worked well. The government's early warning system triggered the tens of thousands of volunteers who operate in every district from organisations like the Red Crescent. They explained how villagers could protect themselves and warned people to move to safer places.

Voice two

There were announcements on the radio and from mosque loudspeakers warning people of the approaching storm.

Voice three

There are several thousand cyclone shelters along the coast made of reinforced concrete and elevated from the ground. Bangladesh has also built new schools designed in the same way so they double up as shelters.

Voice two

Communities also spend time preparing themselves years in advance, with the help of experts. Women had been particularly vulnerable in the past because they were often ignored or forgotten.

Voice three

Some communities addressed this by using female volunteers to pass on advice to other women – such as which dress to wear to make it easier to swim and run, instead of a long sari. They also advise women to bury valuables so they aren't washed away.

Voice one

I heard that some people were reluctant to evacuate. It seems strange – surely you'd want to get out to somewhere safe like a shelter, especially when many people's homes are made of fragile bamboo.

Voice two

It's actually very common for people to be reluctant to leave their homes and hard-earned livestock, crops and equipment in situations like this. People have similar reactions to disasters like this all around the world. Rescuers working during Hurricane Katrina and in the UK during the summer floods also found people were reluctant to abandon their homes.

Voice three

And, just as in Bangladesh, the poorest people are those worst affected. Think of the scenes of the New Orleans stadium full of people who couldn't drive to safety in their cars, or those people in the UK whose homes and belongings weren't insured for flooding.

Narrator

Bangladesh is battered by cyclones and floods every year. Do you think fewer people died because communities were better prepared? You've heard about how Bangladeshis prepare for disasters. What could they teach the world about living in a vulnerable area and coping with risk?

End of performance

Add-ons

Use the add-on ideas to enhance the performance.

Music add-on

Music can be an important additional dimension to any assembly performance, but it is not always easy to know what kinds of music would be appropriate. Discuss with young people the kind of music that might suit the assembly. What mood of music would suit how people feel?

Do any young people have music which originates from the region affected by the cyclone?

Words and pictures add-on

Consider using topical photos from newspapers or from the internet and first-hand witness accounts from survivors. You could use this as a basis for discussion to prepare for the assembly, to help young people empathise with those affected.

If you have the technology, you might scan them in then project them as a backdrop to the assembly. A montage or selection could be an effective beginning or ending to the session.

Speaker add-on

Is there a local speaker available to meet your group and talk about the situation in the area affected by the cyclone? Ideas might include:

- > a local representative from an aid agency who can speak about the relief effort taking place
- > a journalist who has reported on a disaster and can speak about the motivations behind a story
- > a member of the local community with links to the region who can give young people some background about the area to increase their understanding.

Follow-up activities

Use these follow-up activities to look in more depth at the topic. Share the ideas with other teachers who may wish to discuss the cyclone in their lessons after the assembly.

Stay or go? follow-up

The assembly script mentions people's reluctance to leave their homes during a disaster. A university lecturer was faced with evacuation in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Explore the complexity of this decision and his story by downloading the lesson plan based on his experience from www.redcross.org.uk/stayca

After following the lesson plan with your students, consider what his experience had in common with those people in Bangladesh who had to evacuate, and how it differed.

Media coverage

The more you look at reports of disasters, the more you see a familiar pattern. It is not just the frustration among survivors that occurs over and over again. It begins with the initial reports, and the estimated death tolls, the pictures of local rescue workers with little equipment pulling at rubble with their bare hands, the foreign relief teams flying out, the launch of appeals for funds.

Then comes the criticism of the relief effort, and after that the search for "miraculous" survivors – the few who are pulled out days after experts said it was unlikely that anyone would still be alive.

Groups who are interested in the media coverage of disasters, might like to see the advice given to aid agencies by media experts. Here is advice published in the World Disasters Report. Called "Tricks of the trade – how to 'sell'

forgotten emergencies", it helps aid agencies boost the media visibility of long-term, complex emergencies.

These are the practical tips:

- > Invest in media relations, communications training and expertise, down to the local level.
- > Keep up a dialogue with the media: provide background material on complex emergencies, but not 15 minutes before deadline.
- > Put a number on it: death tolls give journalists pegs to hang their stories on. And they go some way towards quantifying the unimaginable.
- > Bring in the big names: it's controversial, but enlisting celebrities can work. The press follows the famous face and ends up reporting on the cause.
- > Make it visual: nothing sells a story like a good picture. In disasters, aid agencies may have the only photos available.
- > Be creative and proactive: tell the bigger story through the eyes of individuals. Fit what you're doing into the news agenda. Organise trips for reporters.
- > Never give up: in this game, persistence really does pay off.

You might like to start a project in which young people monitor the news coverage of this or a previous disaster. Arrange a follow-up session and discuss the extent to which the tips given here match how the news is covered on television and in newspapers.

This assembly kit is part of the humanitarian education programme produced by the British Red Cross. Teachers and other educators are free to use it, copy it and circulate it for their work. Please include this notice and contact details.

This assembly kit was produced in November 2007. For more information contact:

Schools and community education

British Red Cross

44 Moorfields

London EC2Y 9AL

rededucation@redcross.org.uk

This resource and other free educational materials are available at redcross.org.uk/education