

# VISUALIZING HUMANITARIAN CRISES AND INTERVENTIONS

## SNAPSHOT

Student groups are each assigned a region experiencing a humanitarian crisis to research. They produce a visual timeline representing the processes precipitating the crisis and the relief efforts undertaken in response. As a final project, each group produces an infographic representing a theme or typology it observes across the different crises explored throughout the timeline exercise.

## LESSON PLAN

### Goals:

Students learn to:



- **identify the wide array of social, political, cultural, religious, and ecological processes that precipitate a humanitarian crisis, and key agencies that offer relief.**
- differentiate between different types of humanitarian crises and the aid strategies that help address each.
- translate knowledge into visual forms.
- apply knowledge of humanitarian crises and relief efforts to produce a shared resource that they may use for their individual term papers.

### Class:

Humanitarian Activism and Civil Society

### Background:

This course teaches students to situate social suffering in the context of long-term historical processes. In particular, in the context of humanitarianism, the course aims to attune students to the cultural,

## SPOTLIGHT

This activity is distinguished by its creative way of advancing learning goals that tend to be addressed separately: making real-world connections and interpreting primary sources. Students have the opportunity to consult a variety of sources to research urgent real-life crises, some of which may be familiar to them, and develop an appreciation for the complexity of these issues that is often smoothed over in political discourse or by the media. They emerge with nuanced perspectives on pressing issues and an enriched ability to present these nuances in an accessible manner.

The basic structure of the activity offers abundant opportunity for adaptation. The infographic timeline can be used not only for sociology classes but also for history, law, policy, and other classes that address historically situated events.

## WAYS TO ADAPT

One way of helping students track their learning is by having them identify their initial misconceptions and assumptions about the material. Build up to the activity with a full-class discussion on what students *believe* are the key drivers behind the crises they have been assigned. Notes on student responses should be tracked somewhere that will be accessible later on (e.g., a poster or Word file). After students have completed the activity, they can revisit these notes and reflect (either individually, in writing, or orally, as a group) on the ways in which their research has challenged their pre-existing notions.

environmental, political, and social dynamics that precipitate large-scale humanitarian crises. The timeline assignment asks students to investigate the progression of humanitarian crises in different countries, helping them identify commonalities across cases, which they then represent in their infographic. For example, rather than simply attributing a famine in Sudan to misfortune, students study the role of broader issues, e.g. infrastructure neglect, political and ethnic violence, and environmental processes underlying the famine.



The exercise historicizes social problems and **helps students translate academic knowledge about them into visual forms.** Any course focusing on the causes and effects of social problems would benefit from adopting this activity, because it deeply sensitizes students to the effects of long-durée processes behind seemingly self-explanatory phenomena.

#### Procedure- Before Class:

The instructor prepares a detailed handout specifying the various stages of the exercise. **In addition, the instructor selects 10 regions for research based on the United Nations Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) list of areas of highest concern.**

#### Procedure- During Class:

Students have 15 minutes in class to mingle and self-organize into **4–5 person groups** based on interests and work styles. One member of each group draws a note from a hat naming the group's assigned region. Students follow the instructions on the handout provided by the instructor.



**They collect information from UN reports, NGO sites and reports, and news sources about their region.**

Each student group is charged with constructing a timeline of events and processes based on the collected information. Within each group, each student constructs 10 slides (40–50 slides

#### THINGS WE LIKE

This activity teaches students to translate research into different media forms, which they can use for designing presentations throughout their careers. The infographic is an especially powerful tool that can help synthesize narratives, evoke emotions, and engage diverse audiences. Knightlab ([knightlab.northwestern.edu](http://knightlab.northwestern.edu)) and Canva ([canva.com](http://canva.com)) are free resources for getting started with infographic design.

#### WAYS TO ADAPT

Have students practice presenting their specialized research to non-specialists by organizing a symposium or other event where they can present their final products to a public audience. This will enable them to appreciate how visual formats can make information more accessible.

#### WAYS TO ADAPT

Alternatively, you can choose which regions students investigate based on student preferences. If you do, make sure that there is enough English-language research available for students to access and use.

#### WAYS TO ADAPT

This group size is a guideline. Adjust group sizes based on class size or student interest, but ensure that the size facilitates coordination and a fair division of labor.

#### THINGS WE LIKE

The range of sources fosters an appreciation for the strengths and weaknesses of each and for how different motivations influence sources' distinct approaches. Whereas a news story may emphasize the on-the-ground impact of a crisis, for example, a UN report may emphasize high-level political factors. Students learn that interpreting primary sources requires assessing the validity of different sources. They also compare and contrast their research with team members, reflecting on how the various pieces fit together.



overall per group), using information from primary sources and a video or an image (e.g., an infographic or an illustrative picture). **During each course meeting, one group presents and walks the class through its timeline.** Each group meets with the instructor and one of the TFs ten days before their in-class presentation date to ensure a proper division of labor between students and to answer any lingering questions or concerns. An example of the timelines students created in this class is available [here](#).

### Post-Activity:



**Toward the end of the course, the students attend a "hackathon" organized by the Bok Center for training on visual software and construct an infographic representing a theme or a typology they observed across the various presentations.** During the last course meeting, they view and discuss these infographics in class. (The technical side of this exercise requires some hand-holding, so it is recommended that instructors conduct short check-ins with students to address timeline technicalities.) **In addition, students independently write a policy memo based partly on the information in the timeline.**



### Materials:

The students are not required to do any specific readings for this assignment beyond the course's regular assigned readings. However, the instructor familiarizes the students in class with the key resources for their research, such as the main UN agencies that produce relevant reports and the main NGOs that would be good to check.

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### WAYS TO ADAPT

For a course of a shorter term (e.g., a half-semester or J-term course), this frequency of presentations might prove excessive. Adjust the timeline to fit your class time needs, but ensure that all students have an opportunity to present their research, both so that they can practice their presentation skills and show what they have learned and so that other students can learn from their presentations and make connections to their own research.

### THINGS WE LIKE

The infographic is a unique, fun presentation tool students can use in a range of careers beyond just research. Moreover, designing and giving a presentation in collaboration with a team is a task that will appear and re-appear throughout whatever careers they pursue.

### WAYS TO ADAPT

The writing assignment can be tailored to fit the course. For a law course, for example, students may write a legal memo that examines legal issues (e.g. human rights or international law issues) at issue in the crisis. For a history or sociology class, students may write a paper on some aspect of the crisis. In any case, some form of writing assignment is strongly recommended so that students can engage individually with the material and show how they might approach it independently of their groups.



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