

# STORIES THAT MATTER

A toolkit for youth  
groups to explore  
the power of  
storytelling



**trōcaire**



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Trocáire partner SAWA provide a 'Safe Haven' centre for refugee families. Children do art, play games, receive psychological support and meet other children. Photo credit: Simon Walsh, Trócaire.





# INTRODUCING THIS RESOURCE

Welcome to **Stories That Matter**, a toolkit for youth groups. This resource aims to support youth groups to explore the power of storytelling as a tool for understanding and advocacy.

This resource aims to support young people to increase awareness of the world in which we live, through a process of interactive storytelling. The activities will take participants on an exploration of the power of their own individual stories, the power of stories in their local communities and finally the power of stories from a global perspective.

The theme of **land rights** offers a framework to our storytelling and in part three of this resource the we connect to the global by sharing the stories of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon.

## About Trócaire and development education



Like youth work, development education is an active and creative educational process. It increases awareness and understanding of the world we live in. It challenges perceptions and stereotypes by encouraging optimism, participation and action for a just world. For an educator's guide to development education, please go to: [trocaire.org/education/resources/what-development-education](http://trocaire.org/education/resources/what-development-education)

Trócaire is an Irish NGO and the overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in Ireland. We work with partners in over twenty countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East to provide humanitarian assistance and long-term support to poor communities. Trócaire works with partner organisations to empower communities to improve their lives, meet their basic needs and ensure their human dignity is respected.



## SDGs and Land Rights

In September 2015, seventeen Global Sustainable Development Goals (referred to as the SDGs) were adopted by world leaders at a United Nations summit.

Although there is no explicit SDG that addresses the issue of land rights, many of the goals can be considered land-related goals, meaning goals that cannot be achieved without addressing issues linked to land ownership and use; for example, the goals have land related targets and/or indicators.



## Useful Links

Take some time to familiarise yourself with the UN website explaining the Global Goals. You can encourage young people to explore them alongside this resource: [un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda](http://un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda)



**Trócaire and The Global Goals** is a complementary resource which will help introduce the theme of sustainable development. The resource can be found at: [trocaire.org/education/globalgoals](http://trocaire.org/education/globalgoals), or a hard copy can be ordered by contacting Trócaire's Youth Education Officer on 01 629 33333.



# HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

The activities in this toolkit explore how we tell and listen to stories. When delivered together, these activities will achieve the following outcomes for young people:

Develop an understanding of the power of storytelling. Through storytelling and story-listening, recognise stories as a pathway to advocacy and action.

Actively engage with people's stories and develop empathy and alliance with people globally who are deprived of their basic human rights.

Inspire young people to take action to support and stand in solidarity with others to achieve a more equitable world.

The activities are designed primarily for use with young people aged 12 and over. We recommend you read each activity thoroughly and decide if it is appropriate for your group. The toolkit has been developed to deliver a three-part programme of ninety-minute activities that uses the power of storytelling to link individual stories to global stories.

Below is a suggested breakdown of each part; however, it is possible to use and adapt the activities individually without delivering the full programme.

## PART ONE: Our Stories Matter

- 1) What Makes an Inspiring Story?
- 2) The Power of Sharing My Story
- 3) A Story that Changed My Story

## PART TWO: Their Stories Matter

- 4) Pictures Speak Louder than Words
- 5) The Story of Land in My Community
- 6) Story of Land in Lebanon – Stay or Go?

## PART THREE: Stories in Solidarity

- 7) The Hero's Journey
- 8) A Hero's Journey – Human Rights Defenders Case Study
- 9) Trócaire Game Changers

Facilitator notes and tips are at the top of each activity and they provide insights into how best to guide each session. The key symbols and terms below will also guide facilitation.

## KEY TO SYMBOLS:



**MATERIALS**



**AIMS**



**DURATION**

## Key Terms

Storytelling	The activity of telling stories
Active listening	The act of fully concentrating on what is being said rather than just passively 'hearing' the message of the speaker
Being a supporter/ally	Being willing to act with and for others in pursuit of ending oppression and creating equality
Advocacy	Organised efforts to effect change
Bear witness	To show that something exists or is true
Inspire action	Examining the specific ways others have attempted to achieve social change or how activists gain the confidence necessary to take the first steps towards change
Rights	Legal, social or ethical principles of freedom or entitlement
Human rights	A right which is believed to belong to every person
Human rights defenders	A term used to describe people who, individually or with others, act to promote or protect human rights
Land rights	The rights of indigenous peoples to land, either individually or collectively. Land and resource-related rights are of fundamental importance to indigenous peoples for a range of reasons, including: the religious significance of the land; self-determination; identity; and economic factors.
Solidarity	Unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest; mutual support within a group



# CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR STORYTELLING

This activity workbook highlights the use of stories as a tool for understanding advocacy and action.

## Telling stories is part of our human nature.

From visual stories such as the cave paintings of prehistoric times, to oral stories passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, to today's digital stories, storytelling has always been a part of human interaction. Storytelling reflects who we are and allows us to recapture, record, share and make meaning of our lived experiences.



The power of stories lies in their potential to connect people to one another in fundamental ways, transcending issues of race and ethnicity by uncovering basic themes that strengthen the common bonds of humanity that can potentially change existing systems of oppression.



When we engage in storytelling and story-listening, we experience new worlds and discover how other people travel in paths similar to our own. We find stories that have the power to move past borders, time and space. Stories tell us about the diversity of traditions, customs and ways of life that are an important part of our everyday. A story preserves truth and identity, and helps to create a sense of belonging. It also has the power to touch hearts and excite minds. Stories empower and enrich us, and can help us to build communities to challenge injustices and realise the power of change.

Good storytelling in a group depends on the ability of participants to express themselves comfortably. Therefore, the whole workshop relies on the comfort of the participants. As the facilitator, you must ensure that the space and atmosphere in the room is conducive to this type of sharing environment. Explain that the stories we are telling and hearing are people's truths and develop a group contract around how people should act in this space.

## Facilitator Notes

### RESILIENCE OF THE FACILITATOR

Storytelling can be profoundly personal and bring up emotions that are difficult to deal with, for both the storyteller and the audience.

Telling personal stories can sometimes trigger strong emotions and can be difficult. As a facilitator, you must be prepared to deal with this situation should it arise, not only for the well-being of the participants, but also for your own well-being. Facilitators should take the time before, during and after the workshop to reflect on their emotional reactions, their capacity to deal with challenging situations and their overall resiliency.

### FACILITATOR TIPS

- Create a space for a story circle that is safe from outside interruption
- Develop a group contract, the goal of which is to establish and agree upon a specific code of behavior which each group member agrees to follow
- Encourage participants to actively listen to one another during the story circle



# PART ONE: OUR STORIES MATTER

## ACTIVITY 1: What Makes an Inspiring Story?



Internet access, laptop, projector,  
mobile phones or flip-chart and markers



Explore what makes an  
inspiring story



30 mins

### FACILITATOR NOTES:

In part one we explore what makes an inspiring story and begin to understand the power of storytelling. A story that resonates with its audience inspires in a way that no other types of communication can. Why is that?



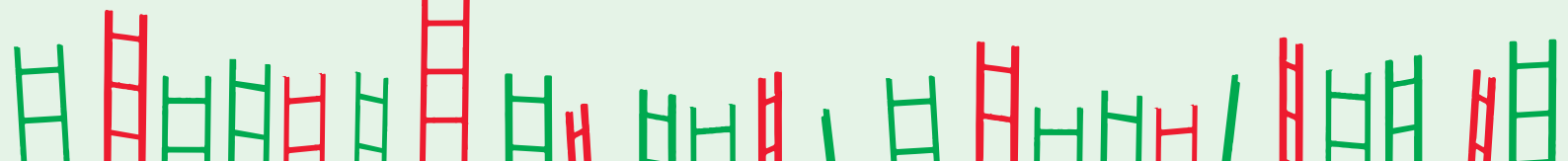
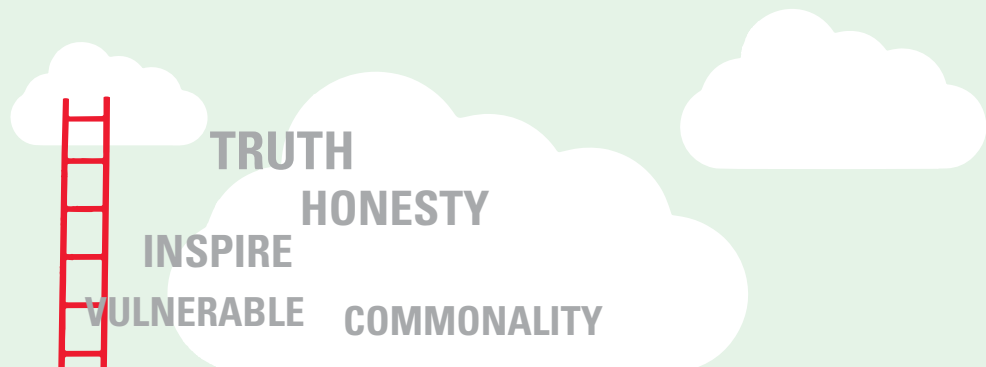
If you have access to computers/tablets, or if your young people are allowed to use their mobile phones, go to **mentimeter.com** and sign up for the free service. Mentimeter is a simple online tool which allows groups to interact and vote with smartphones during presentations. Follow the online instructions to create a word cloud presentation, with the question, 'What makes an inspiring story?' Give the young people the code and allow them to enter three words that best sum up a good story. Display the presentation on a whiteboard/screen so that the young people can observe the votes as they come in. If tablets or phones are not available, create a word cloud on flip-chart paper for display in the room and follow the above instructions.

Once everyone has voted, ask the following questions:

- What are the three most popular words?
- Do any of the suggestions surprise you?
- Would you change your three words now that you have seen other suggestions?

After the activity feel free to check out these clips on what makes an inspiring story:

- [theatlantic.com/video/index/374941/what-makes-a-story-great/](http://theatlantic.com/video/index/374941/what-makes-a-story-great/)
- [youtu.be/xTM-AdrilpaE](https://youtu.be/xTM-AdrilpaE)
- [ted.com/talks/andrew\\_stanton\\_the\\_clues\\_to\\_a\\_great\\_story?language=en](https://ted.com/talks/andrew_stanton_the_clues_to_a_great_story?language=en)





## ACTIVITY 2:

# Timelines – The Power of Sharing My Story



Worksheet 1, pens, markers

Experience the power of  
telling and listening to stories

30 mins

### FACILITATOR NOTES:

The aim of this exercise is to experience the power of storytelling and story-listening. Storytelling can be profoundly personal and bring up emotions for both the storyteller and the audience. Facilitator must be strong enough to hold these emotions in the space.

### TIPS:

- Create a group contract
- Create a space for a story circle that is safe from outside interruption
- Encourage participants to actively listen to one another during the storytelling

This activity will help the young people to share the major events in their lives, to understand the successes and challenges they have faced and identify people who have helped them, stood with them and offered support. We want the young people to identify their own personal advocate.

Working alone, and using **Worksheet 1**, ask the young people to fill in a timeline of their life. Ask them to include all their significant life events, such as the date and place of their birth, starting school, joining a sports team, completing exams, moving house, losing a loved one, birth of a sibling, and anything else they feel was a significant event in their lives to date.

When the young people have finished their timeline, ask them to identify and name on their timelines the people who helped them along their journey. As they think of people who helped them, ask the young people to consider the following questions:

- 1) **How did these people help me?**
- 2) **What did they do?**
- 3) **How did it feel when they helped?**

Split the young people into groups of three or four (or bigger depending on the size of the overall group). Explain that, in their groups, they have to each in turn share their own story and listen to other young people's stories.

Be mindful of participation. Encourage a group contract outlining what is expected of the young people during this activity; for example, respect, attentive listening, an agreement that what is shared stays within the group. If a young person doesn't want to share their story in the group that's okay.

Ask each group to choose a story or a particular event within a story from their group to share with the larger group. They must present it through the following guidelines.

**Introduction:** Pinpoint the character, the location, the environment and the situation in which he/she stands before 'something' happens.

**Development:** 'Something happens' can mean a range of different things. But, regardless of the specific event, we should create empathy and the audience should relate to the story. Answering the following questions will help: How did you feel? What did you do? Who helped and how?

Explain that when presenting the story to the larger group, one person introduces the story, one person tells the story, and one person explains why the story was chosen and what makes it an inspiring story. The hope is that young people experience first-hand the power of storytelling and story-listening.

After listening to each group's story, ask the whole group the following questions:

- How do you feel after sharing your stories?
- What was it like to share your stories?
- What is it like to be heard?
- What was it like to listen to other people's stories?
- Any similarities/any differences?



# WORKSHEET 1: MY PERSONAL TIMELINE

Expand or amend timeline to fit the events in your story

A horizontal timeline template. A central vertical line runs down the page. Branching off this line are several horizontal boxes, each representing an event. The boxes are arranged in a staggered fashion, alternating above and below the central line. There are five boxes above the line and five boxes below the line. The boxes are empty, allowing for personalization. The boxes are connected to the central line by short horizontal segments.



**ACTIVITY 3:****A Story that Changed My Story**

Internet access, tablet/phone



Understand how the stories of others affect and influence us



30 mins

**FACILITATOR NOTES:**

This activity helps participants to understand how the stories of others influence us and allow us to discuss different perspectives and understand other people's views. It is important that participants are not under any pressure to talk about particular times in their lives but can choose to say as much or as little as they want.

Ask young people to identify somebody who has told their story in a unique or different way; for example, through songs, music videos, poems, TED Talks, as an influencer.

Allow young people to access the internet to identify storytellers that have had an influence on them. Examples could include: Nonso Muojeke, whose classmates mounted a campaign against his deportation and a petition to stop it was signed by twenty-two thousand people; climate strikes and demonstrations ignited by sixteen-year-old Swedish student Greta Thunberg.

Ask them to share their ideas with the group, answering the following questions:

- **Why did you choose this story?**
- **Does the story impact people? If so how?**
- **What story is being told?**
- **Does the story influence any change? If so, what change and how?**
- **Do you know if it has reached more people than just you? If so, what is the power in that?**

If the young people would like to learn more about the story of Nonso Muojeke and of other young undocumented migrants, watch the following:

- [irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/offaly-student-overwhelmed-after-deportation-order-revoked-1.3659990](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/offaly-student-overwhelmed-after-deportation-order-revoked-1.3659990)
- [vimeo.com/132984011](https://vimeo.com/132984011)





# PART TWO: THEIR STORIES MATTER



Sticky notes, markers, photographs



Develop empathy and alliance through photo stories



30 mins

## FACILITATOR NOTES:

In part two we are moving from exploring the power of individual storytelling and story-listening to exploring the different ways stories are told. In this activity we explore photo stories.

## ACTIVITY 4a:

### Pictures Speak Louder than Words

On the following page there are four photos. Photocopy each picture and display them around the room. Ask the young people to move around the room, reacting to whatever thoughts/feelings/emotions they have when they see each image. Ask them to write their ideas on sticky notes and post them beside each photo. Discuss their reactions as a whole group.

Split the young people into groups of three or four. Give each group a photo to work with and challenge the young people to write the story of the photo in a strapline or headline and present back to the room.

Offer the following six-word stories as examples of how a few words can tell a powerful story.

- Painfully, he changed 'is' to 'was'
- Crazy enough to think we can
- My home out of reach forever

Explore as a group what themes are coming out of all the stories.

## ACTIVITY 4b:

### What Makes a Good Photo Story?

The following link showcases some photographers from around the world who use photography to highlight social, local and global issues: <https://www.cidse.org/newsroom/cidse-announces-winners-of-the-2017-inspire-change-international-photo-competition.html#swipebox>

Explore some photos\* with the young people, answering the following questions together:

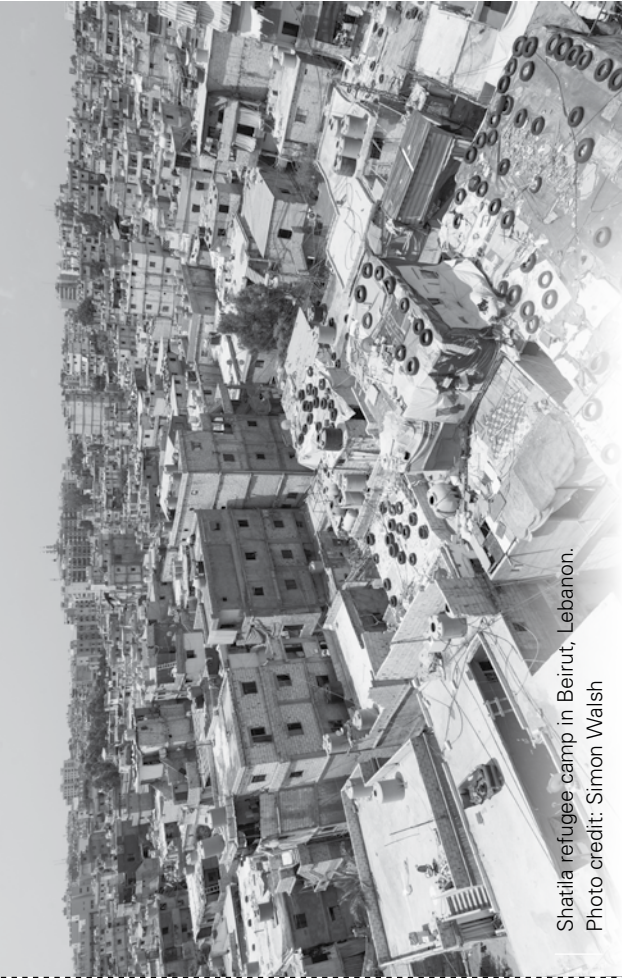
- **Why is it a good photo?**
- **What is the photo saying?**
- **Explain that the next activity will be taking photos of their own community to tell the story of their own land.**

\* Please only choose photos that you deem appropriate for your group.





Acholi District, Northern Uganda.  
Photo credit: Gary Moore



Shatila refugee camp in Beirut, Lebanon.  
Photo credit: Simon Walsh



Poloctic Valley in northern Guatemala.  
Photo credit: Mark Stedman



Border crossing point between the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Northern Ireland (NI).



## ACTIVITY 5:

### The Story of Land in My Community



Cameras

Develop empathy and alliance  
through photo stories

30 mins

#### FACILITATOR NOTES:

In this activity we introduce the topic of land and explore it through photos. The activity aims to connect individual stories to stories of our land/communities.

Invite the young people to take part in a community photo activity.

Tell the young people they have thirty minutes to photograph their local area through the lens of land use. Worksheet 2 presents questions that will help the young people to decide what photos to take and what story the photos might tell. Ask the young people to review the worksheet before they go out into their communities to take photographs. The questions might offer hints of how best to tell the story of land in their communities.

- Ask participants to analyse their photographs and select the three that best respond to the questions in Worksheet 2
- Encourage the young people to select the photos they find most significant and meaningful, and that tell the story of land in their community

## WORKSHEET 2: THE STORY OF LAND IN MY COMMUNITY

1) What is land primarily used for?

2) In what other ways is land used?

3) Is there any wasted land?

4) In what ways does your community cross boundaries?

5) What places, turning points and meeting points best show land in your community?

6) What barriers are there for land use in your community?

7) If you could change one thing about the use of land in your community, what would it be?

8) In 2025, my community would ...



**ACTIVITY 6:****Story of Land in Lebanon – Stay or Go?**Statement Set A, Statement Set B,  
map of SyriaDevelop understanding and empathy for people making the  
decision to leave their home and seek refuge elsewhere

30 mins

**FACILITATOR NOTES:**

The aim of this activity is to explore the stories of Syrian refugees and to develop an understanding of and empathy for people making decisions to leave their land and seek refuge elsewhere.

It is sometimes difficult to develop empathy for people in a situation that is so different from what we are used to in Ireland. This activity is designed to encourage young people to put themselves in the situation of a farming family living in rural Syria.

The stories in Set A are about rural to urban migration within Syria, the Set B stories are about making the decision to leave Syria and seek refuge abroad.

**Step 1:** Arrange the young people into groups (families) of four or five.

**Step 2:** Display a map of Syria.

**Step 3:** Explain that these are the real-life stories of people in Syria. After each story in Set A, the young people must decide if they would stay in their homes or leave to find a better life in the city. After the fifth story, all are forced to leave and go to the cities. The five stories in Set B are about having to leave Syria.

**Step 4:** Go through the debrief questions and facilitate a discussion on each one. Allow the students to dictate the tempo of this discussion, and focus on the questions they wish to discuss further.

**Debrief questions:**

- 1) How many people decided to leave at any point before they were forced to leave? How many people didn't leave?
- 2) If you left, what was it from the stories that convinced you?
- 3) Was it a difficult decision to make? If so, why?
- 4) What factors would have resulted in you making a different decision?
- 5) What causes of the conflict are evident in the stories?
- 6) Can you think of any other causes of the conflict in Syria that don't come up in the stories?





# STAY OR GO: STORY SET A – RURAL SYRIA

**STORY 1** | Your family lives in the Al-Hasakah Governorate, a key agricultural area in northeastern Syria. You make a living by growing crops and keeping livestock (sheep). The main crops you grow are cotton and wheat. You have been struggling due to a lack of rain over the past few years. Yet, the harvest still brings in enough money for food and to send your three children to school. Do you stay or do you go?

**STORY 2** | Drought continues to happen every year. Government investment in dams and irrigation ensures enough water for crops and livestock. General farming costs are rising. The amount of money left over for extras like education and healthcare is very small. Do you stay or do you go?

**STORY 3** | The worst drought for many years affects your area. All your fields have been planted, but water is scarce and you are going to lose money on your harvest. You must work on neighbouring farms as a labourer to earn some extra money to make ends meet. There will be no school for your children this year. The government promises to help, but nothing has happened yet. Do you stay or do you go?

**STORY 4** | The drought continues. The government has cancelled the fuel subsidies that you relied on to help with irrigation and transport. Fuel prices have increased by 250 per cent almost overnight. You plan to join with your neighbour to share costs and help each other with planting, harvest and other farming jobs. The government promises to provide financial help as soon as possible, but nothing has arrived yet. There is not enough food to eat, so meal sizes are much smaller than usual. Do you stay or do you go?

**STORY 5** | The drought has become devastating. The government has created a fund for the support of agricultural production. It is a very small amount of money and only available to landowners with title deeds. You have no title deeds for the land you farm, and so have no right to government support. Your family and your neighbours are starving. There are elections this year, but there is no point in voting as nothing will change. You decide to leave and go to Damascus to seek work. Your brother and his family decide to leave as well.

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# STAY OR GO: STORY SET B – URBAN SYRIA

**STORY 1** | You arrive in the Ghouta suburb of Damascus to scenes of chaos and despair. Many tens of thousands of rural Syrians have made the journey to the city before you. They have joined the many people who have sought safety and a better life in Syrian cities. Many of these people come from other parts of Syria and further afield places like Iraq. You rent a plot of land for about \$30 a month where you live in a Bedouin-style woollen tent, but you need to find work to earn money. Do you stay or do you go?

**STORY 2** | Your children find work on nearby urban farms. You sometimes get work as a porter or construction worker. Money is tight, but you are surviving on the plot of land that you rent. Many of the people who live in the area are angry. They talk about heading into the main square to join the protests that have started to take place. You don't feel that strongly about the government, but can't live like this anymore. Violent clashes sometimes break out at these protests and you fear for the safety of your family. Do you stay or do you go?

**STORY 3** | The government has had enough of the spreading protests. They have sent in security forces to crack down on the demonstrators calling for democracy and change. Your brother, who moved to Damascus at the same time as you, gets arrested by the security forces. He is beaten in prison before being released. You agree with the protests, and feel that democracy and change will make Syria a better place for your children to live. Yet, you wonder what it will take to achieve that. Some of your neighbours support the government and you argue with them constantly. Do you stay or do you go?

**STORY 4** | Things are much worse. The protesters started to pick up guns to defend themselves from the security forces and drive them away. The government has promised to crush what they call 'foreign-backed terrorism'. You don't go to the protests, but the violence is spreading to your area. You hear gunshots all the time. Some men have asked you to join the fight and have threatened you if you don't. You worry about who will look after your family if something happens to you. Money is running out as there is now no work anywhere. War and violence have spread to all parts of Syria. Your brother wants to go to Lebanon, but you have heard stories about how tough it is to get there. Do you stay or do you go?

**STORY 5** | Chaos is everywhere. The shells fall and the bullets fly all day, every day. It is no longer safe to be outdoors. Your brother left for Lebanon, but you don't know if he and his family made it. You had to move your family to a basement to hide from the bombs which have destroyed most of the buildings. You get some supplies from aid workers, but most times it is too dangerous for them to get to you. When you are out looking for food one day, you meet a friend. She says her family is going to make a run for the Turkish border. They think they know how to get there, but it is high risk. Do you stay or do you go?

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# PART THREE: STORIES IN SOLIDARITY



Internet access, Worksheet 3



Explore the idea of the hero's journey



30 mins

## FACILITATOR NOTES:

Our journey of exploration through the power of storytelling, from individual storytelling to the story of our land/community, leads to advocacy and action as we learn about the hero's journey and the stories of human rights defenders.

## ACTIVITY 7: The Hero's Journey

As we go about our daily lives, living our own stories, there are opportunities to become heroes and to contribute to the world we want. Being a hero in the struggle for a better world is not always about going away to find a place where the worst things are happening; sometimes it's about discovering what impact you can have in your own place.

Joseph Campbell, an American professor of literature, claims that most great heroes in stories and mythology take a common path and he called this path 'the hero's journey'. The stages of the hero's journey fall into three main areas, departure, commencement, and return, which are further broken down into stages.

**Step 1:** Introduce the idea of the hero's journey by showing the TED-Ed video found at: [youtu.be/d1Zxt28ff-E](https://youtu.be/d1Zxt28ff-E)

**Step 2:** Ask the young people to watch the video and to identify the twelve main stages of the hero's journey using the Worksheet 3.





# WORKSHEET 3: STAGES OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY

Stage 1	Stage 5	Stage 9
Stage 2	Stage 6	Stage 10
Stage 3	Stage 7	Stage 11
Stage 4	Stage 8	Stage 12



**ACTIVITY 8:****A Hero's Journey – Human Rights Defender Case Study**Sawa for Development and Aid  
Case Study, Worksheet 4Analyse the hero's journey of human rights  
defenders by exploring their stories

60 mins

Read the case study of SAWA for Development and Aid, then ask the young people to use Worksheet 4 to chart the different stages of Rouba's journey.

- How much of Rouba's experience can fit into the template of the hero's journey?
- Is Rouba's hero's journey over, or are there some stages for her still to go through?
- Has Rouba skipped any stages?
- How important is it to use story to explain how ordinary people sometimes do extraordinary things and become heroes in different ways?

Ask the young people if they can think of any heroes that they know in their own communities and areas.

- What is their story? If considered appropriate, and with parents' permission, ask the young people to arrange to interview with some of these people, or perhaps invite them into the class to talk about their journey.

Create a hero's journey display in your classroom or school. Ask the students if, as well as Rouba and the people they may have identified in their community, there are any other people in their lives, or from around the world, that would be good examples of ordinary people who have gone on a hero's journey?

**Facilitator Note:** The stories of the human rights defenders can be explored as group or individual activities. Below is a table that will help you guide the participants in their exploration of the stories.

Story Expanding	Story Processing	Story Reconstructing
<p>Help the participants to reflect on deeper meanings of the story:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why is the person in the story living this way?</li> <li>• How is this similar to how you live?</li> <li>• How would you feel in their position?</li> <li>• Imagine yourself as this person</li> </ul>	<p>Help the participants to interrogate the issues relevant to the story:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research facts and figures about the issues addressed in the story</li> <li>• Find out more about people living in a similar situation and what that means for them</li> <li>• Investigate and debate the causes of the injustice highlighted in the story</li> <li>• Critique information sources – challenge negative stereotypes and implicit biases</li> </ul>	<p>Help the participants to explore how they might be active and take a stance to do something 'to change the story':</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflect on the ways in which our society's patterns might act to perpetuate injustices</li> <li>• Investigate options for collective social action/activism for a more socially just world in response to this specific story</li> </ul>



# SAWA FOR DEVELOPMENT AND AID CASE STUDY

'It was winter, it was raining, and it was cold. I took a car and went to visit the families. They ran from Syria with nothing. They had blood on their clothes. When I came back home I was shattered. I wrote a message on social media. Then this message went viral. I had chains of people sharing my number and got many calls. In the first ten days we were able to raise \$20,000 USD and a house full of things.'

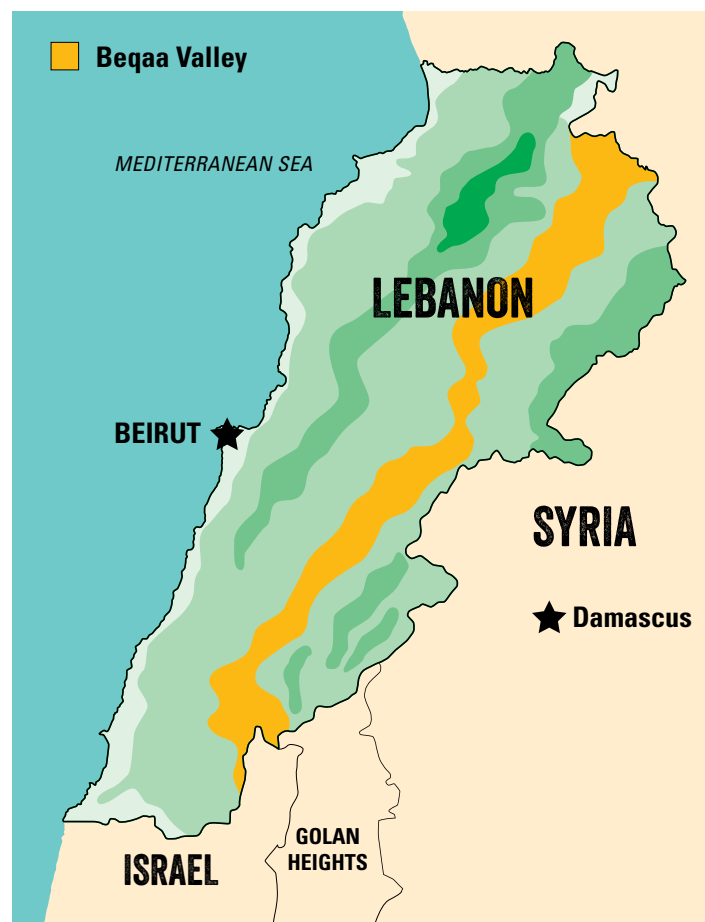
Rouba Mhaissen is the founder and director of Sawa, a development NGO based in Beirut in Lebanon, which focuses on supporting Syrian refugees living in camps in Beirut and in the Beqaa Valley in eastern Lebanon on the border with Syria. Rouba grew up between the two countries and feels like she has both identities. Rouba's family, in particular her father, believed strongly in the power of education, and when Rouba applied to study at the London School of Economics (LSE), she never thought that she would actually go. When she told her father she had been accepted, he was very supportive of her, and so Rouba went to London to study for a master's degree in International Development at the LSE.

It was during her time at the LSE that the Syrian revolution started, and Rouba found herself watching it from afar. Rouba visited Lebanon and Syria in the summer of 2011 but after her cousin was shot in the protests, she never visited Syria again. It was during a visit to Lebanon at Christmas 2011 that she decided to visit some of the Syrian families that had made the journey to Lebanon to flee the conflict. What she found when she visited them horrified her, and she felt compelled to take action.

What started off as a social media message grew into 'Sawa', and the work continued even when Rouba returned to London to continue her studies. Back in the UK, Rouba visited schools and universities, raising awareness of the situation for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, putting on fundraising events – gigs, selling cupcakes, soup for Syria – and sending the money back to Beirut to Sawa. What started out initially as emergency relief work (food, blankets and medical care) soon developed



Rouba Mhaissen, Director of Sawa for Development and Aid.  
Photo credit: Garry Walsh, Trócaire







Safe Haven Project Centre, set up by Sawa in the Beqaa Valley, with support from Trócaire. Photo credit: Simon Walsh

into more sophisticated support, like education and women's empowerment. Sawa supported one Syrian refugee with supplies and funds to create a tented school in one of the camps. This teacher took no salary, but was soon regularly teaching twenty children. Within one week of the school opening, there were two hundred and fifty families on the waiting list. Rouba was twenty-two years old when she founded Sawa.

In the eight years since Sawa was created, it has grown into an organisation that works in twenty-one informal refugee camps in the Beqaa Valley. Rouba has spoken at many international meetings about the plight of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and her concern about the possibility that many of these refugees may never be able to return to Syria.

Rouba has experienced many dark moments over the past few years, living through the crisis and seeing the desperation in the eyes of the survivors, describing it as 'crushing'.

'At some points I would go on Skype and the majority of my contacts would be offline. Because they're never going to be online again. It's these kind of small realisations that make you really down but then you go to the camps and you see one kid smiling and you feel like you can't give up. You have to continue what you are doing.'

Rouba values her partnership with Trócaire, recognising how difficult it is to find support from partner organisations.

'For a real partnership to happen you need shared trust, you need people who trust us as locals and for us to trust them and their support. We need a shared set of values, a belief in a shared humanity

and respect in the dignity we are giving to the people ... We see this as a humbling experience for all of us. I think this is what the Trócaire partnership means to us. It allows us to do what we want to do in a better way, to feel more supported and to do it more professionally and effectively.

'I think what I love about Trócaire is that they believe in us as local organisations and they believe in the importance of empowering local organisations on the ground because they know that we are the ones that come from the community. We are the ones that the community know and trust. We are the community actually; we work with and for the community. We are the ones who will be staying after the war has ended. When all the INGOs and the donors will pack their stuff and leave, we will be here, but more empowered and with a better ability to do our work. So I think that Trócaire knows this very well and this is why they invest in us as local organisations.'

Trócaire supported Sawa to set up a Safe Haven Project Centre in one of the camps in the valley. Maya and her family live in the camp, and regularly use the project centre for a variety of things, including education, somewhere to play in relative safety, and skills training. Maya's mother is currently learning to be a hairdresser in the project centre. One key aspect of the work that takes place in the centre is the activities that Maya and others her age are involved in to help them build a connection with their Syrian cultural heritage.

Maya and her family hope one day to return to Syria, but know that this will be difficult. Her father, Hassan, worked as a taxi driver back in Syria, and the family had a comfortable lifestyle, 'I wish I could go back to Syria, and get my life back the way it was. I don't need a better life than the way I used to live. I wish for a better future for my children and my wife. I still see hope somewhere. The future for me is to go back to Syria and go back to being a taxi driver.'

This sentiment is shared by many in the Beqaa Valley and all over Syria, but the question of how easy it will be for refugees to return to their homes in Syria is one that will continue to be asked for many years after the conflict comes to an end.



**The Ordinary  
World**

How do we meet your hero?  
Where does your hero's  
journey begin?

**The Call to  
Adventure**

What happens that starts  
your hero on his or her  
journey?

**Entering the  
Unknown**

What 'new world' does  
your hero enter?

**Magic/Flight Master  
of Two Worlds/  
Restoring the World**

How does your hero get home?  
What happens once the  
hero is home?

# WORKSHEET 4: THE HERO'S JOURNEY

Hero's name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Supernatural Aid/  
Meeting with the Mentor/  
Allies and Helpers**

Who helps your hero?  
How does your hero meet  
these helpers?

**Road of Trials**

What are some obstacles/  
challenges your hero and  
allies must overcome?

**Supreme Ordeal**

What is the climax/high  
point of your hero's  
journey?






The SAWA 'Safe Haven' centre, in Beqaa Valley, provides a space for young Syrian refugee children to play and to attend psycho-social activities. The playground uses colourful materials to help children feel safe and relaxed, so they can escape the hardships of daily life in the camps and have fun with other children. Photo credit: Garry Walsh





# TRÓCAIRE IS THE OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT AGENCY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IRELAND

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climate change and social justice issues, visit:  
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**Trócaire, Maynooth,  
Co. Kildare, Ireland**

**T: +353 (0)1 629 3333**

**E: Email Mary Boyce at:  
[mary.boyce@trocaire.org](mailto:mary.boyce@trocaire.org)**

**Trócaire, 12 Cathedral Street,  
Dublin 1, Ireland**

**T: +353 (0)1 874 3875**

**E: [dublincentre@trocaire.org](mailto:dublincentre@trocaire.org)**

**Trócaire, 9 Cook Street,  
Cork, Ireland**

**T: +353 (0)21 427 5622**

**E: [corkcentre@trocaire.org](mailto:corkcentre@trocaire.org)**

**Trócaire, 50 King  
Street, Belfast BT1  
6AD, Northern Ireland**

**T: +44 (0) 28 90 808 030  
E: [infoni@trocaire.org](mailto:infoni@trocaire.org)**

Front cover: Trocaire partner SAWA provide a 'Safe Haven' centre for refugee families. Children do art, play games, receive psychological support and meet other children. Photo credit: Simon Walsh, Trócaire.



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