

# Assembly Kit: Asia tsunamis

A secondary education resource from the British Red Cross

This is one of a series of assembly kits intended for educational use. It provides pretty much all you need to start planning a school assembly. It is also intended more broadly for any session with young people, particularly informal education outside the classroom or as part of citizenship education.



Following the recent tsunami disaster, it is natural to want to address this subject in a school or year group assembly. It makes sense to come together as a community to think about those hundreds of thousands of people, in a poor part of the world, whose lives have been suddenly devastated. Sharing thoughts and asking what we can do to help are important ways of coming to an understanding of what can seem incomprehensible.

This is an educational resource, not a fundraising one. Naturally people may well want to know how they can help - and for people in the UK sending money is one of the most valuable actions possible. The Disasters Emergency Committee is co-ordinating the fundraising appeal. The public can donate by telephoning 0870 60 60 900, donating online at [www.dec.org.uk](http://www.dec.org.uk) or by sending a cheque - made payable to DEC Tsunami Earthquake Appeal - to PO Box 999, London EC3A 3AA.

The assembly kit comprises a series of five questions which young people are invited to AGREE or DISAGREE with, and to be prepared to explain and debate their answers.

In an assembly, you might ask for a show of hands or “thumbs up” - allowing people to put up two hands if they strongly agree, level if they are not sure, and thumbs down if they disagree. If there is more space, or a smaller group, you might designate one wall as agree and the opposite wall as disagree, and invite young people to position themselves appropriately between.

But the important thing is the discussion. Invite young people to say why they think as they do, and encourage responses to questions. Young people will be well used to hearing other people’s views of this disaster, from television and radio programmes, from adults around them and perhaps from politicians or faith leaders. But they may have had little chance to articulate and to test out what they themselves think and feel. Use this opportunity to allow them to talk - and value everything. If you cannot do this during the assembly, find ways for it happen elsewhere.

Do feel free to adapt this format or content in any way. Although the text sets out a workable session, it is not a rigid set of instructions. It is intended more as a menu plan, from which you can pick and mix, adapt and omit to suit the group and your situation. You could, for example, use a choice of individual questions as a writing exercise in class, as debate topics or for art or music work.

More ideas for developing and enhancing the assembly performance appear as a series of add-ons following the main dialogues. There is also an associated resource intended for use with pupils at Key Stage 2 or P6 and 7.

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## Why are you doing this?

There is so much to talk about following what has been the most devastating natural disaster in recent years. Young people will already have a lot on their minds. They will have heard and seen much, from television news and from conversations with adults. It is important to be clear about what your purpose is in raising the topic.

Again, this is likely to vary depending on your school or setting. But the more precise you are, the greater the learning will be. Here are a few suggestions:

- To go beyond simple expressions of sadness and disbelief about the massive disaster and humanitarian crisis, and explore some of the particular issues about disaster relief that young people might have heard or want to raise.
- To help young people explore the role, complexities and limitations of the international relief effort, and to appreciate what kind of help is useful and what is less so.
- To provide young people with a ballast against despair. Explain that, although the loss of life and human suffering is immense, the various humanitarian actions of individuals and organisations are making a difference to many of the survivors.
- To help young people discuss, debate and develop their own understanding of topical issues, and how the media covers them.

You can get other ideas from the national curriculum objectives and outcomes listed at [www.redcross.org.uk/educationtak](http://www.redcross.org.uk/educationtak)

## Agree or disagree

The following series of questions are intended for open debate with young people. The usual technique is to state the opinion, and invite young people to declare, using an agreed method, whether they agree or disagree with it. Those who seem to have strong views, in either direction, can be asked to say why they think as they do. Failing that, or in addition, some of the points made in the “Facts, information and prompts” list can be raised. Use them judiciously. Not all of them will be pertinent at any particular time and, introduced unthinkingly, they may confuse the issue. But they can be a good way of introducing a new perspective and moving on young people’s thinking.

After a while, ask if anyone wants to change their views. Encourage this, while respecting those whose opinions stay the same. The idea is not to trap people into entrenched positions, nor to provoke them into uncertainty. Just try to create an atmosphere in which different voices can be respectfully listened to.

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## Agree or disagree (contd.)

**OPTION 1:** Western aid agencies didn't act fast enough in response. They should have been there in the first few hours following the earthquake.

Facts, information and prompts:

- This is a common complaint, often media-led, when there is a major disaster. It neglects the basic realities that some of the worst hit areas are simply a very long way from western bases, not equipped to accept large deliveries, and have transport systems affected by the aftermath of the disaster. In the Aceh province of Sumatra, for example, the nearest airport that can take heavy transport planes is 400km from the regional capital. Supplies have to be off-loaded onto smaller planes, helicopters or lorries. Shortage of vehicles and damaged roads and bridges make the process slow and difficult - irrespective of how fast the aid agencies respond.



- It also fails to recognise that in any disaster, the main initial relief effort will come from local people and organisations. That was true with the Asia tsunami disaster, and in previous disasters, such as the appalling earthquake in the south-eastern Iranian city of Bam just over a year ago. For some reason, media reports tend not to focus on the work of local governments, organisations and people.
- Within the first few days of the earthquake, the British Red Cross, just one of the relief agencies involved, had:
  - spent £210,000 on essential telecommunications and transport kit so its experts in Sri Lanka could effectively manage and distribute incoming relief cargo.
  - spent £884,000 on relief items such as tarpaulins to make shelters, blankets, cooking pots, jerry cans and soap.
  - chartered seven cargo flights and bought relief items for Sri Lanka at a cost of £1m.
  - chartered its own jumbo jet to ferry relief items around the disaster-struck region.
  - sent five specialists to the region, to provide medical help, search for the missing, buy relief items from within the affected region and assess need.

That is a lot of work, and though it may not have appeared on television news, the effects will have been quickly felt, and the planning structure will be invaluable in coming weeks.

- Some of the aid agencies which were already present in the affected areas will have helped survivors from the start. But some have staff who lost their lives, just as anyone might have done who was caught up in the disaster.
- If aid is to be used effectively it needs to be based on assessment. Agencies must send what people really need, not what someone thousands of miles away thinks they need. It needs to be co-ordinated, too. In some emergencies, too many aid agencies arriving at once in the same area, with the same intentions, can hamper relief work.

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## Agree or disagree (contd.)

**OPTION 2:** The government should have imposed a special tax and raised money from everyone in the UK. That would be fairer than relying on donations from the generous while the selfish keep their money in their wallets.

Facts, information and prompts:

- Public donations in the UK amounted to more than £76 million.
- Large sums were given by companies.
- The UK Government has pledged £60 million and is likely to match the amount given by the public.
- The UK Government, along with other developed countries, has a long standing promise to give 0.7 per cent of the country's wealth each year to overseas aid. In fact, it currently gives round about half that target. If it reached its target it would be giving a lot more than it does now, without needing extra taxes.
- Less well off people tend to give more to charity, as a proportion of their income, than wealthier people do. (Note: A figure often quoted is that the richest 20 per cent give 0.7 per cent of their household expenditure to charity while the equivalent figure for the poorest 10 per cent is 3 per cent. This trend, cited by C. Pharoah, *A lot of give*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2002, is backed up by other research into charitable giving.)
- Not all the countries affected are in urgent need of outside financial help. The Thai prime minister has said that the country does not need foreign aid to help it recover, and can afford to pay for its own relief and reconstruction with government spending and domestic donations.

**OPTION 3:** A lot of the work now being done by humanitarian aid agencies is a waste of time. Those who were going to be killed by the waves have already died and those left behind do not need much help.

Facts, information and prompts:

- A week after the earthquake, a representative of the World Health Organisation suggested that five million people were short of water, food or basic sanitation across the region. He estimated that a further 50,000 deaths from disease and other causes would be in line with previous humanitarian emergencies. In the coming weeks and months, the actions of the international relief agencies will affect these key areas of health, food, water and basic shelter.
- A big concern is the spread of diseases such as cholera, dysentery and typhoid. The dense population and tropical climate of the affected areas make these likely. If the risk can be reduced by actions of the aid agencies, many lives will be saved.

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## Agree or disagree (contd.)

**OPTION 4:** Massive tidal waves are caused by global warming - so this was a man-made disaster that we could have prevented, or at least had much more warning to allow people to evacuate the areas.

Facts, information and prompts:

- It is not true that this disaster was caused by people. The earthquake that caused the tsunami - or tidal wave - was a natural event. It has nothing to do with greenhouse gases, carbon dioxide emissions or any other activity of human beings.
- A tsunami is hard to detect while it is travelling over deep ocean. Ordinary observers, and even aerial surveillance and satellite photos, will not notice it. Only when a tsunami reaches shallow water, for instance near a coastline, does it reach large heights and become visible. Then there is only a short time left.
- There is no underwater tsunami detection equipment in the Indian Ocean. If there had been, an early warning system might have saved lives.

**OPTION 5:** Once the media attention has died down, the people within the disaster area will - as usual - be left to cope on their own.

Facts, information and prompts:

- Many of the aid agencies are committed to medium and long term help for the countries affected by the tsunami. They were already working in the area and are not likely to leave now.
- The United Nations will be holding a conference this month to discuss the next steps. This will show how committed governments of the world are to the rebuilding and reconstruction.
- This is the world's biggest natural disaster known in most people's lifetimes. It presents a huge strain on the resources of the affected countries and the aid agencies. They should use all their experience to join together on reconstruction work following the awful damage.

## Music add-on

Music can provide a useful additional dimension to any assembly. You might talk to young people about what kind of music might be appropriate to suit the discussion. Do they feel music is suitable at all in dealing with such an enormous disaster?

People in all cultures and throughout the ages have used music and songs to help provide comfort in times of trouble. Discuss any songs about disasters that children know. Can they imagine how such songs might help? Invite them to think about children who survived the Asia earthquake and flood disaster – these children would not want play and music and fun to stop. How might it be a comfort to them to have familiar melodies and rhythms?

Young people could write and perform their own song based on what they know about the Asia disaster. Or they could devise their own version of a fundraising song, like the Band Aid one for Africa.

## Reflection add-on

Think about other groups who are suffering and in need of help. Not long ago, the Band Aid single was launched to help raise funds for the people of Africa, particular in the Dafur region of Sudan. But since then, the situation has worsened, the fighting has escalated and aid agencies have been forced to withdraw.

Last Christmas and New Year the focus was on the earthquake in the Iranian city of Bam. Talk about how easy it is to forget these areas of need. Reports of the tidal wave and floods have dominated the media. But the people in other parts of the world haven't suddenly had their problems solved. Some people in Bam are still living in tents. How does the international community prioritise different demands? How can we ensure that the people of Africa, and those suffering in other parts of the world, do not "drop off the agenda"?

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## Words and pictures add-on

Newspapers, magazines and websites provide a good supply of eyewitness accounts and personal testimonies from those who saw the disaster or who have helped in the relief effort. Search some out that are appropriate to your group and add them to the assembly performance.

You can do the same with pictures, from printed sources or from the internet. If you have the technology you might scan them, then project them as a backdrop to the performance.

Young people might create their own art works - posters or montages - to demonstrate their feelings and understandings.

## Speaker add-on

Is there a local speaker available to meet young people and talk about some aspect of the situation in the disaster area? This can provide a vivid connection for young people and also reassure them that, despite everything, normal life goes on. You will have to ask around to find someone available in your local community. Ideas might include:

- Someone from a local community group with a connection to Indonesia, Sri Lanka or another affected country.
- An academic from a university who is familiar with the area.
- A local representative of the British Red Cross or other agency who has experience or knowledge of the relief effort.

Your local newspaper may be able to prompt ideas - as they may have made contact with local people with personal connections during their coverage of the early days of the disaster.

## Follow-up add-on

Inevitably, over time, the Asia tsunamis will cease to be headline news and other topics will fill the media. Plan for a follow-up event after a suitable interval, so that young people do not have the experience of an intensely focused discussion followed by total silence.

You might look at how the rebuilding process is going, picking up on interesting aspects of the reconstruction. You might focus on the lives of survivors and imagine what they are doing now and how their lives have changed.

Pick up on themes that emerged during or after the assembly kit discussions. Revisit aspects that have moved on or changed because of events since. Have you done any extra work since - based perhaps on the speaker or music add-ons? Incorporate what the young people have done and learned into the follow-up event. Don't stop with one follow-up. Make it a regular series.

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