

POLICY BRIEF



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Enhancing the Canadian Ranger Role in Disaster/Emergency Management (DEM)

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Purpose

The purpose of this brief is to explain how the Canadian Rangers build disaster resilience in at-risk, remote, and isolated communities, with small populations, limited infrastructure, few local resources, and little access to rapid external assistance. Additionally, this brief will provide options for how the Ranger role in disaster and emergency management (DEM) can be enhanced to build even greater community disaster resilience.

Summary

Rangers strengthen the disaster resiliency of their communities through their presence, organization, leadership, and training; the mobilization of their knowledge; their ongoing involvement in community preparedness and hazard risk analysis; their social relationships and networks; and the trust they have earned from fellow community members. Through modest additional funding and an increase in the number of paid annual service days, these attributes can be leveraged and

amplified to strengthen community disaster resilience moving forward – an important consideration with climate change exacerbating risks and hazards.

Background

Sustained action and investment are required to improve disaster/emergency management and search and rescue capabilities in Canada's remote and isolated communities, particularly in the North. A rapidly warming climate and an increase in human activity in the region continues to increase the risks posed by a broad spectrum of human-made and natural hazards. The isolation and limited physical infrastructure of these communities, and the vast distances involved that limit their access to rapid external assistance, often allow emergency events to cascade into more profound situations.

Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE) highlights the need to improve the ability of the CAF to respond to increasingly severe natural disasters at home, while the *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework* has

prioritized bolstering whole-of-society emergency management capabilities in Northern communities.¹

The much-publicized involvement of the Canadian Rangers in Operation Laser highlights a role that Rangers have been playing for decades: by virtue of their capabilities and presence, they regularly support other government agencies in preventing, preparing for, responding to, and recovering from the broad spectrum of emergency and disaster scenarios facing isolated communities. Rangers are a source of disaster resilience in their communities by helping to “anticipate, and where possible prevent or at least minimize the potential damage a disaster might cause” and to cope with the effects of a “disaster if it occurs, to maintain certain basic functions and structures during the disaster, and to recover and adapt to the changes that result.”²

Discussion

The Canadian Rangers are a clear example of how community resilience can be strengthened from the bottom-up, with the CAF empowering Rangers to use their existing skills and social relations within an organizational structure that provides them with the framework, training, and equipment they require to assist in every phase of disaster management.

The following building blocks of community disaster resilience are brought together in Canadian Ranger patrols:

- **Ready, Willing, and Present:** Canadian Rangers are present in their communities, ready to respond, and view the protection of their communities as one of their primary responsibilities.
- **Prepared and Engaged:** While many people join the Rangers out of a desire to safeguard

their communities, the modest pay, annual training, and additional tasks they are given also serve to keep them prepared and engaged. This is an important element that differentiates the Rangers from all-volunteer Community Emergency Response Teams that often struggle to maintain motivation, retain personnel, secure the funding they require for training and equipment, and have few opportunities to practice as a team or with other organizations. Pay is particularly important when Rangers need to be mobilized for sustained periods during prolonged emergencies.

- **Organization:** The organization of the Rangers into patrols at the community-level ensures that they can respond as a group almost *immediately* – an important consideration in remote communities, and particularly in austere northern environments.
- **Training and Experience:** The CAF provides Canadian Rangers with flexible training that is tailored to local terrain and environmental conditions but usually involves elements directly related to emergency and disaster management capabilities: First Aid, Wilderness First Aid, Ground Search and Rescue, constructing emergency airstrips on land and ice, and communications. Depending on the hazards faced by a Ranger patrol’s community, training might also include flood, fire, and/or earthquake evacuation, major air disaster response, and other location specific emergency scenarios. Patrols are taught how to work together as a cohesive

unit (a necessity during an emergency), and training exercises sometimes involve patrols from multiple communities and other CAF personnel with whom they might have to respond to a disaster. Ranger participation in disaster response exercises (such as NANOOK TATIGIIT) teaches them new emergency management skills and builds relationships and experience working with outside organizations that they can leverage during emergencies in their communities.

- **Mobilizing Knowledge:** Canadian Ranger patrols and the Junior Canadian Rangers they mentor also serve as platforms for the transmission of traditional and local knowledge and skills, generally from elders to younger members. For Indigenous people serving as Rangers, this traditional knowledge often includes traditional information on how to identify natural hazards, reduce risks, and determine appropriate responses (e.g. how to predict flooding).
- **Preparedness:** Rangers play important roles in planning, preparedness, and hazard risk analysis. Various Ranger roles are defined in provincial/territorial emergency frameworks and in the local plans of communities across the country. As the “eyes and ears” of the military and their communities, Rangers watch for potential natural hazards, such as ice and water levels in nearby river systems, dangerous wildfire conditions, and ongoing tundra fires. Ranger patrols often use their monthly meetings to conduct informal hazard risk analysis by discussing what they have seen on the land and what might pose a risk to

their communities. Given how well Rangers know their communities, they are well placed to execute whole-of-community resource mapping to identify capacity, strengths, and deficits (e.g. updating Local Area Resource Reports).

- **Leadership:** Strong formal organization and leadership, which delegates responsibilities and tasks in an expedient manner, are key enablers during an emergency. Rangers consistently highlight that the organization provides important opportunities and space to develop a deep pool of leaders at the local level, which can be leveraged during emergencies.
- **Relationships and Social Networks:** Few qualities enhance the impact of the Rangers on the disaster resilience of their communities as much as their relationships. Canadian Ranger patrols consist of individuals who are part of relationships, groups, and networks that span the social breadth of their communities. At the same time, Ranger patrols foster new relationships and associations between members, ultimately forming a nexus that a community can draw upon during an emergency or disaster. The intersection of multiple social networks in a patrol ensures that its members know most or all community members, understand who is vulnerable, and who needs assistance. When outside agencies respond to local emergencies and disasters, Ranger patrols provide a ready entry point into the community and offer immediate access to extensive networks, all of which facilitates response activities.

Considerations

The formal training provided to Canadian Rangers and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge that occurs amongst Rangers within patrols effectively address several gaps identified with disaster risk reduction in Canadian Indigenous and Northern communities. More specifically, scholars and practitioners have emphasized the need to create space for traditional knowledge and practices in Canada's broader disaster risk reduction efforts. Critics have also underlined the lack of opportunity provided to Indigenous communities to develop their local emergency response capabilities. Many remote Indigenous communities face difficulties in applying larger regional or national emergency response frameworks, such as the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary or the Civil Air Search and Rescue Association, to their unique contexts, and face challenges working with outside agencies, including the Canadian Armed Forces, stemming from limited interactions and lack of trust.³ Canadian Ranger patrols represent a community-based, culturally appropriate, and proven solution to many of these challenges.

Recommendations

As climate change exacerbates the natural hazards that threaten many of Canada's remote and isolated communities, the Ranger role in building community disaster resilience is likely to increase in importance. The following options represent practical ways to enhance this role through modest additional funding and an increase in the number of paid annual service days.

Further to SSE 108 ("Enhance and expand the training and effectiveness of the Canadian Rangers to improve their functional capabilities within the Canadian Armed Forces"), the CAF should provide

Ranger patrols with new training opportunities related to DEM:

- Courses on hazard risk analysis, prevention, and mitigation
- Consistent flood and fire watch training
- Earthquake and tsunami response
- Mimic training given to CERT/Neighbourhood Emergency Assistance Teams (extinguish small fires, remove fuel sources, shut off utilities, assess and communicate damage, and conduct urban and interior SAR)
- Annual exercises might include a disaster response component (e.g. including community evacuations, flood relief activities, community safety checks)
- Train for mass rescue operations/major air disasters

Ranger patrols can also be more engaged in planning and preparedness activities at the community and regional levels:

- Formalized hazard risk analysis during monthly meetings
- Conduct community-level hazard risk assessments in cooperation with other stakeholders
- Paid participation in prevention and preparedness measures
- Undertake low-scale mitigation efforts (clearing away underbrush to reduce fire risks, marking tsunami evacuation routes)
- Work with local governments to ensure that community emergency plans reflect their capabilities and provide patrols with clear roles and responsibilities
- Be tasked to complete Local Area Resource Reports on a regular basis

Conclusion

Through a relatively modest investment, the Government of Canada has supported the Canadian Rangers as a practical and celebrated tool to strengthen the resilience of over 200 communities in regions particularly vulnerable and exposed to

natural hazards. They have effectively responded to avalanches, forest fires, severe weather, power outages, and even pandemics. The Ranger role in disaster and emergency management is likely increase in importance as climate change exacerbates these natural hazards facing their communities and the CAF should explore ways to enhance their DEM capabilities.

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¹ Department of National Defence (DND), *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, 2017, 14; Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, *Arctic and Northern Policy Framework: Safety, Security, and Defence Chapter*, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1562939617400/1562939658000>.

² Justice Institute of British Columbia, “Rural Disaster Resilience Planning,” n.d. <https://rdrp.jibc.ca/> (last accessed 3 June 2020); and R. Cox and M. Hamlen, “Community Disaster Resilience and the Rural Resilience Index,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 59 (2) (2015): 220-237.

³ See, for instance, L. Benoit, B. Murphy, and L. Pierce, Sharing Lessons Learned About Disaster Resilience for First Nations Communities: A Summary Report, Canadian Risks and Hazards Network, 2016, https://www.crhnet.ca/sites/default/files/library/CRHNet%20Report%20to%20INAC_March%2031_Final.pdf; T. McGee, “Evacuating First Nations during wildfires in Canada,” *Fire Safety Journal* (2020): 1-12; Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, *From the Ashes: Reimagining Fire Safety and Emergency Management in Indigenous Communities*, House of Commons Canada, 2018, <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/INAN/Reports/RP9990811/inanrp15/inanrp15-e.pdf>.