

# SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON INDIGENOUS AND NORTHERN AFFAIRS

June 30, 2022



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Climate-driven disasters and emergencies are increasing in severity and frequency across Canada. Indigenous populations are the most exposed to the effects of climate change yet have the fewest resources to adapt and mitigate its impacts. In particular, northern communities are witnessing significant changes to their environment. Despite disproportionate impacts from climate change events, Indigenous populations are at the forefront of efforts for risk mitigation, response, and community-led solutions. Action is required across society to proactively support Indigenous communities' efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change impacts while at the same time planning, preparing, and responding to climate-driven disasters and emergencies.

As a result of historical and ongoing harms of colonization, many Indigenous communities are living with poverty, infrastructure deficits, and underfunded services that leave them less able to respond and recover once disaster hits. The direct and indirect health impacts of climate change on Indigenous people are interconnected and often exacerbate existing inequities. These inequities include food and water security, infrastructure, personal safety, livelihoods, mental well-being, and identity.<sup>1</sup> Climate-driven disasters and emergencies often intersect with other crises, affecting the health, livelihoods, and safety, as well as the cultural and spiritual well-being of Indigenous people.

While catastrophic climate events threaten the security of Indigenous and northern communities, the Canadian Red Cross believes **we must expand our view on security to include social emergencies and social crises**. A social emergency is an event or situation that exceeds a community's resources and capacities and requires the immediate response and support of external agencies and service providers. For example, a social emergency could be multiple suicides in the same community.

Broadening the scope of security to include social emergencies will help the Red Cross work alongside Indigenous communities to address these realities by building on existing tools, resources, and response and recovery systems. Cultural safety ensures there is no harm done to communities. This holistic approach to programs and services ensures that the Red Cross roots response, preparedness, and risk reduction activities in traditional knowledge and practices and frames activities with an Indigenous lens. This includes addressing the rise and severity of climate-driven disasters and social emergencies.

The Red Cross believes more must urgently be done to work alongside Indigenous and northern communities as they focus on reducing risk as well as preparing for and responding to climate-driven disasters and social emergencies. The Red Cross recommends the following actions be taken:

1. **The Government of Canada should ensure cultural safety is embedded in each strategic planning, policy, and program design and delivery.**
2. **The Government of Canada better support Indigenous leaders in preparedness, risk reduction including adaptation and response activities to climate-driven disasters and social emergencies.**
3. **The Government of Canada invest in virtual programming and improved digital infrastructure for Indigenous and northern communities.**

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<sup>1</sup> Health Canada, 2022: Health of Canadians in a Changing Climate, Chapter 2: Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples' Health in Canada <https://changingclimate.ca/site/assets/uploads/sites/5/2022/02/CCHA-REPORT-EN.pdf>

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## BACKGROUND:

### Canadian Red Cross work with Indigenous Communities:

The Red Cross is committed to having reconciliation guide our work. On average, the Red Cross stewards over 500 relationships with Indigenous communities each year across Canada, including many in the north. We partner with Indigenous communities in various program areas, including disaster management, community health and wellness, prevention and safety, and community wellness and protection.

The Red Cross provides emergency and surge support to Indigenous communities at their request. This can include evacuation support, registration services, emergency social services such as lodging, food, and basic needs, and cash distribution or provision of other relief items. In 2021, the Red Cross supported eight fire responses primarily serving Indigenous communities across Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. As part of fire response operations, the Red Cross registered over 10,300 people, totalling 3,400 households, from Indigenous communities. The Red Cross is currently supporting Peguis First Nation in Manitoba, where overland flooding has forced more than 1,870 residents to evacuate.

The Red Cross is actively engaged with Indigenous communities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the support of Indigenous Services Canada, the Red Cross developed the **Help Desk for Indigenous Leadership**, which is comprised of a workforce where 80 per cent of the staff self identify as Indigenous and services are offered in eight different Indigenous languages. The Help Desk was designed to support the diverse needs of Indigenous communities and leaders during the pandemic through the Red Cross' virtual operations centre and online toolkit. Since March 2020, it has provided 699 Indigenous leaders virtual support, and Red Cross emergency-response teams have deployed 53 times to work on vaccination campaigns, support long-term-care facilities, and enhance infection, prevention, and control measures to mitigate and contain outbreaks. Members also deployed as part of social emergency response teams to support community stabilization after crisis events, including suicide clusters. These activities have improved the quality, relevance, and appropriateness of service delivery and culturally safe programming, with the objective of supporting the resiliency of Indigenous populations in Canada. The Help Desk is a critical virtual addition to the Red Cross' emergency response work in Indigenous communities that focuses on understanding the health and wellness practices, and resources and information used by Indigenous communities. It works alongside communities to build on those strengths as they journey to health and wellness.

The Red Cross supports other programs and services for Indigenous communities, including Psychological First Aid training and violence prevention programs. Through our Psychological First Aid training we offer prevention and coping strategies for dealing with stress resulting from trauma, which can be accessed virtually. From March 2020 to October 2021, the Red Cross delivered 50 culturally safe and relevant Psychological First Aid programs to First Nation, Métis, and Inuit participants exploring topics and strategies related to COVID-fatigue and self-care, suicide awareness, and community wellness. This kind of on-the-ground education is only possible where there are good relationships and alignment between the response team and the community. In the Kitikmeot region in Nunavut, the Red Cross' Social Emergency Team provided virtual support and coaching to help manage grief and reduce stress. Virtual supports have been important tools for the Red Cross to expand and grow our relationships with Indigenous and northern communities.

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## Lessons learned from recent emergencies:

Through our experience working alongside Indigenous communities responding to disasters and emergencies and supporting risk reduction and prevention activities, the Red Cross has identified the following key lessons learned:

1. **Cultural safety is vital:** All prevention, response, and risk reduction activities must be done in a culturally safe way. This includes ensuring that no harm is done to the communities we work with, ensuring a holistic approach to programs and services with special attention to physical, cultural, spiritual, emotional, and social well-being, and including traditional knowledge and research data in a respectful way. Cultural safety also recognizes the inherent right to self-determination for Indigenous peoples as communities can identify what is important for their security and protection and preservation of cultural practices. Across operations, the Red Cross aspires to prioritize cultural safety throughout all phases of service provision.
2. **Supporting Indigenous leaders for improved readiness capacity:** Part of the Red Cross' mandate is to support Indigenous leaders, both in responding to disaster and reducing risk, by building local capacity for emergency preparedness in a culturally safe way. We have found that responders must be representative of the communities they serve and support, as we have seen through the success of the Help Desk. In our experience, working closely with Indigenous leadership to target community interventions, coupled with meaningful engagement through strong cultural capabilities, has led to success.
3. **Digital infrastructure support response & readiness activities:** In an increasingly digital world, virtual supports are essential for prevention, response, and risk reduction activities for Indigenous and northern communities. This need is evidenced in response efforts to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 including Red Cross support for Epidemic Prevention and Control measures using virtual walk-throughs and providing guidance through virtual question and answer sessions. Response to social emergencies have also been supported through online psychological first aid training. To be able to build and expand effective prevention, risk reduction, and response activities, quality virtual support is essential.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The Canadian Red Cross recommends the following actions to ensure that Indigenous and northern communities are better able to plan, prepare, and respond to the increasing severity and frequency climate-driven disasters and emergencies:

1. **The Government of Canada should ensure cultural safety is embedded in each strategic planning, policy, and program design and delivery.** This includes making space for Indigenous worldviews and traditional practices, which have guided their communities since time immemorial and fully understand historical harm and the impacts of trauma. It also includes recognizing the inherent right to self-determination for Indigenous peoples as communities can identify what is important for their security and protection and preservation of cultural practices.
2. **The Government of Canada better support Indigenous leaders in preparedness, risk reduction including adaptation, and response activities to climate-driven disasters and social emergencies.** This can be done through building local readiness capacity, supporting prevention education, and investing in Indigenous innovation, research, and development in disaster response and recovery.

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3. **The Government of Canada invest in virtual programming and improved digital infrastructure for Indigenous and northern communities.** This will ensure that humanitarian organizations, like the Canadian Red Cross, can provide critical prevention, risk reduction, and response services virtually. Barriers to digital infrastructure limits connectivity in communities and impacts the ability to respond to emergencies and contribute towards disaster, crises, and emergency prevention efforts virtually. Virtual tools are an important component in emergency management efforts.