

**Empowering Citizens:
A National Civil Protection Organization for Canada**

Eva Cohen

The Challenge

When emergencies escalate beyond the capability of local authorities, rapidly available, reliable additional help and expertise is required.

This capacity is missing on the local, regional and provincial level making it impossible to rapidly respond to larger scale disasters or catastrophic events, and to sustain longer term operations. Technical capabilities to mitigate escalation of the response phase and to ensure timely and cost-effective recovery are currently not tied into the response system thus prohibiting the continuum needed from immediate response to recovery.

A shift from ad hoc reactive response to pro-active capacity building, coordination, and cooperation of all available assets under a clear governance structure is urgently needed to adapt to the increase and severity of disasters.

Analysis

Since 2004, Canadian Armed Forces' deployments, as the federal response to domestic disasters, have increased by 1000%. The CAF, officially the asset of last resort, are invariably the first to be called. This demonstrates the need for a reliable, quickly deployable operational arm of government, but it points as well to a critical lack of local and regional capacity. It has also highlighted the missing technical capabilities that even the Armed Forces often don't possess, and brought into question the use of highly specialized and very expensive military equipment for disaster response.

Regular calls upon the CAF for domestic tasks that are not their primary role have seriously detracted from military readiness, at a time of heightened international tensions.

As we adapt to severe climate change impact and other challenges, a civil protection approach is needed. The role of government must shift from being the sole responders to providing the structure and framework to enable citizens and communities to be part of the solution. A new clear organisation and command structure of this all-hazard "second response" capacity guarantees rapid availability and reliability equal to the CAF and ensures coordination and interoperability of all available assets.

To support prolonged and large-scale disaster response operations technical units are needed which focus on tasks such as flood protection, assistance in wildfire fighting, emergency infrastructure repair, damaged building assessment, debris clearance, emergency bridge building, logistic support, water purification, emergency wastewater management, emergency communications and power supply, etc.

Help from outside is always reactive, and often late. It's not financially viable to establish a local expert capacity based on full-time, paid and equipped, professionals, to deal with a catastrophic disaster which may or may not occur. And spontaneous volunteers, though well-intentioned, often present a burden to already overtasked authorities and First Responders.

Without continuous training and integration of expert volunteers in non-disaster operations, they are not much more than a name on a roster, which is not comparable with the swift and reliable expertise needed to support authorities and first responders. The framework and policies that encourage citizens to commit as trained expert volunteers and enable them to step up when needed are missing. As a result, younger people are deterred from making a commitment to serve their communities.

Civilian expertise and social capital is a hugely underused resource. Nobody knows and cares more about their own communities than the people who live in them. Any approach that excludes citizens can create a false sense of security and may lead to widespread apathy toward both individual preparedness and collective prevention and mitigation measures. Introducing the needed mindset, capabilities and benefits of civil engagement early to young people translates into willing and capable adult capacity.

Resilience is much more than bouncing back. It means remaining in control and striking back. If people are part of a cohesive and trained team, they feel needed, valued and are able to help when disaster strikes, they are less likely to suffer from shock and long-term trauma.

Solution

The inspiration and the framework for a national volunteer civil protection force should be a federal responsibility. Government's role is to enable and support its citizens as they volunteer their time, their skills, and their professional expertise.

Under the mandate and guidance of the federal Minister of Emergency Preparedness, an operational Civil Protection Agency based on unpaid citizen volunteers would provide governance, structure, expertise, standards, training, and equipment while delegating operational control of local units to provinces, territories, municipalities and First Nations.

National training and equipment standards and a modular approach would enable surge capacity, rotation for prolonged operations, and regular drills and joint exercises across the various jurisdictions.

Based on trained and organised citizen volunteers, these units would respond directly and immediately to municipal and provincial requests for assistance. Local units could come together to scale up regionally, provincially or nationally. The CAF would truly become the asset of last resort.

This proactive support by all levels of government allows Canadians to have ownership of the problem and empowers them to be part of the solution. The volunteer aspect makes it a highly affordable government asset.

This approach is based on the successful model of the German Federal Agency for Technical Relief (THW). Like Canada, Germany is a federation, with jurisdiction for emergency management delegated to each of the German states. For 70 years, the THW has demonstrated its value at each level of government, allowing for the swift adaptation to new challenges and implementation of lessons learned and ensuring institutional knowledge of best practice for generations to come.

With an annual budget of EUR 460M, 80,000 trained citizen volunteers in 700 local detachments, and equipped with state-of-the-art vehicles and technical gear, the organisation works hand in hand with First Responders, states and local authorities, and the German Armed Forces, to ensure Germany is ready for any scenario.

Additionally, 15,000 THW youth are part of Germany's network of 500,000 youth, some as young as 6 years old, who learn to help themselves, their neighbours, and their communities. Giving them the opportunity to contribute to society and experience the benefits of civil engagement.

The THW is Germany's first response to international disasters. Experience gained in foreign countries benefits the organisation as a whole and increases its readiness. It fosters close international cooperation and joint efforts towards adaptation and readiness.

A solid bridge between Canada and the THW already exists, and the immediate implementation of capacity building efforts and establishment of the needed framework and structure can build on the work that has been accomplished over the last decade of close interaction and expert exchange. This is of tremendous advantage given the time sensitivity and fact that all Canadian resources for disaster preparedness and response have been stretched and over-tasked with non-stop requirements to often concurrent disaster events across Canada.

A nationally organised and funded Canadian Civil Protection Agency, with units spread across the country, in municipalities, First Nations, and remote Inuit communities, would largely relieve the Armed Forces of the burden of domestic operations. These local detachments would complement the day-to-day capabilities of First Responders and give federal, provincial and local governments a highly affordable, valuable and ready tool to respond to the increasing risks presented by climate change and other unforeseen causes.