



Summary of “Inside the Rez Cross: an assessment of hosting evacuees during a wildfire disaster in Beardy’s & Okemasis First Nation” by Sandra Betancur



In 2015, Northern Saskatchewan communities experienced one of the most impactful wildfires, resulting in the evacuation of more than 13,000 people. Amongst official and unofficial evacuation centres that were set up, Indigenous-led emergency measures stood out in assisting and attracting First Nation evacuees. The setup of the “Rez Cross” evacuation centre by Beardy’s and Okemasis First Nation (BOFN) was a pioneer experiment for Indigenous-based wildfire mitigation initiatives in Saskatchewan, which soon influenced other communities to open their own centres (e.g., Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation and Muskeg Lake Cree Nation). Despite being limited in capacity, “Rez Cross” became fully operational by providing not only physical assistance (e.g., food and clothing) but also cultural and emotional support (e.g., counselling). This pioneer effort provided an opportunity to learn from the experiences of the Rez Cross to inform efforts to prepare for future emergency events.

From the perspective of the hosting community, I aimed to understand how cultural values can inform effective emergency responses that address the needs of northern Indigenous residents displaced by wildfires. My central research question was:

“How can planning for and responding to wildfire emergencies in Saskatchewan become more inclusive of Indigenous culture and values?”

I addressed three research objectives:

1. To develop a draft evaluation framework for emergency planning that includes Indigenous culture and values in evaluating the planning process and outcomes;
2. To use an iterative approach in applying the framework to evaluate how Indigenous culture and values have been introduced in provincial and selected local-level emergency plans, including the plan of BOFN; and
3. To make recommendations that identify ways for including Indigenous culture and values in wildfire and emergency response planning in Saskatchewan.

I evaluated the work undertaken by BOFN from the perspective of processes (planning), and outcomes (implementation and follow-up). From the process perspective, five criteria were considered:

- community confidence in the plan and processes
- integrative decision-making
- cultural comprehensiveness
- accountability, and
- participation



From the outcome perspective, I considered four criteria:

- effectiveness drawn from material aspects of culture
- use of resources that strengthen Indigenous identity
- program effectiveness, and
- education and training opportunities

I conducted document analysis and semi-structured interviews to understand how various groups – governmental, non-profit, and Indigenous – addressed emergencies in their plans. I also conducted 5 interviews with individuals from BOFN, federal government, the Red Cross, and evacuated communities.

Most planning documents did not account for cultural values, however, the Aboriginal Disaster Resilience Planning Guide, prepared by the Justice Institute of BC¹, stood out because it considered socio-cultural dimensions of the planning process at a community level. The Guide may be useful to help communities in drafting of a resilience plan that includes local knowledge, skills, and other resources that define their strengths.

The interviews revealed that BOFN provided many cultural resources during the evacuation that allowed evacuees cope with the evacuation process. These included providing traditional food and spiritual guidance by Elders, oral tradition, and storytelling. During the evacuation Elders, ceremonies, traditions and reliance other cultural “resources” provided common ground between evacuees and BOFN organizers to better interact and exchange knowledge. Evacuees expressed satisfaction with the BOFN experience and stated that these were reasons why they preferred Rez Cross to other evacuation centres.

While the Red Cross excelled in some of the logistical aspects of the hosting process, the BOFN offered a more holistic experience by ensuring a culturally-friendly environment for evacuees. More specifically, Rez Cross was founded on these values and ideas: caring and compassion, “home away home,” gender equality, champions, and a sense of cohesion and interconnectedness. Caring and compassion is central to BOFN’s identity; this value was reflected the community’s commitment to support one another no matter the circumstances or the person. This commitment to help others was enacted as a community response rather than as an organizational duty.

The value of providing a “home away home” explained BOFN’s desire to provide a place just for the evacuees, so that they could feel private, comfortable, and welcomed. In this place, the conditions were likely similar to the homes from where the evacuees came. By providing a home away from home, BOFN provided a centre that was flexible and adaptable to the needs of the evacuees, providing both physical comfort and a friendly and welcoming environment for evacuees.

¹ Aboriginal Disaster Resilience Planning Guide Assessing risks and building resilience for disasters in Aboriginal communities. Retrieved from https://adrp.jibc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ADRP_Planning_Guidebook.pdf



Gender equality constituted an important part of BOFN's behavior. Although men and women executed different tasks during the operation of Rez Cross, they shared responsibility and did not judge others by their gender by, for example, determining who should clean, cook, sort provisions, and provide external security. Both men and women were seen as valuable and complementary parts of the process. Champions were important for demonstrating leadership and coordinating people and resources. Women were active leaders in the Emergency Management Committee and helped the BOFN response strategy move forward from Council to its actual implementation. During the emergency operation, they coordinated donations and ensured the provision of physical items, food, and accommodation, as well as assisting with other needs of the evacuees.

Likewise BOFN demonstrated a strong sense of community cohesion and extended this sense to the evacuees. Rather than remaining as mere recipients of supplies, evacuees participated in the day-to-day activities at the shelter. This collaboration among volunteers and evacuees not only reinforced the organizers' own cultural attachment to BOFN but also built new relationships between evacuees and BOFN organizers. Trusting relationships were strengthened and tokens of gratitude were given by evacuees to BOFN organizers, and from BOFN's Council to organizers.

Below are key lessons for future planning of emergency responses for Indigenous communities.

- 1. Know about your Community.** Hosting communities should be informed about evacuees' resources, geography, wildlife, connecting roads, land, and context, as much as possible. This knowledge is important for the members of the hosting community because it helps them to manage their resources: to know what to offer, how to provide it, and what to avoid when hosting evacuees.
- 2. Use Indigenous culture, values, and symbols as a background to inform the effectiveness criteria.** This research found that culture informed BOFN's decision making and influenced implementation of the emergency response. Therefore, it is recommended that when preparing for future events, ensure that the following are considered: context, values, ideas, approaches, and social principles (caring and compassion, "home away home," champions, and gender equality), as well as cultural symbols and traditions (e.g., story-telling, Elders, traditional food, language). This recommendation also involves using clear and culturally-based communication based on wording and concepts familiar to Indigenous communities.
- 3. Engage community members in the emergency response.** One of BOFN's main contributions was its inclusive and participatory approach to the functioning of Rez Cross, including its use of media and voice-to-voice technology to gather volunteers. Based on this finding, it is recommended that open participation be fostered among all members of BOFN through community engagement.
- 4. Create and/or facilitate existing training opportunities for the hosting community.** BOFN leaders became champions to coordinate resources and people in the management of Rez Cross. The work of champions can be



complemented by further training and/or accreditation on other operations across a broader range of people in the community. This additional training can include First Aid, creating an EMO, food safety, or accreditation by other agencies to improve operational capacity. The community can either create training opportunities, or it can make use of available provincial training programs.

5. Document the emergency response. This research found that BOFN needs to document the hosting experience of Rez Cross to inform a protocol for future emergencies. Written documentation is crucial for strengthening the capacity-building. Documenting ensures that everyone knows how the process was conducted. The document should reflect the language and wording commonly used by the community, so it is accessible to everyone. Documenting is also critical since it can guide the emergency response should local decision-makers be absent.

6. Debrief with the community. BOFN had few opportunities to debrief. Although some members debriefed, the volunteers and Band members did not analyze the evacuation experience altogether. Debriefing can take the form of formal discussions, open conversations, or any other option preferred by the community. These discussions open the door for implementing changes in the future.

7. Clarify the proper authority to certify the host community's evacuation. BOFN was unaware of steps to take to become certified as a host community. Although hosting competence is difficult to demonstrate, Indigenous communities need to know which non-Indigenous parties to contact, so they can work together to achieve certification. As of now, it remains unclear what the certification process is about and who deals with it.

8. Create guidelines for Indigenous communities establishing evacuation centres. A manual is recommended with guidelines for First Nation communities interested in becoming a host community. It should include procedures to follow before, during, and after setting up a shelter, and a list of resources with information on the different institutions that could support the initiative (e.g., government and non-profits).

9. Disseminate information on establishing a shelter to Indigenous communities. Once the communities interested in becoming a host community have mapped their community, trained community members, and developed a collaborative approach with diverse external actors, the word should be spread, so other communities become aware of opportunities.

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