

# INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE OF DEVELOPMENT: SELF-DETERMINATION AND SUCCESS

AN OCCASIONAL NEWSLETTER FROM THE IGD PROJECT

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This Newsletter gives a taste of the remarkable home-based solutions Australia's First Nation peoples and their organisations are using to rebuild their collective governance and futures. The stories in our first newsletter capture a rich sample of resilience and resurgence, describing examples where Indigenous self-determined governance is being strengthened, and where development with culture and identity is being achieved. We also understand that a challenge on the road ahead is not merely to take control over our own affairs, but to govern development well and fairly on behalf of all our own Nation members.

Australian Indigenous Governance Institute and the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research

## OUR RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

### Your Journey to the Self-Governance of Development



## About the Indigenous Governance of Development Project

The *Indigenous Governance of Development: Self-Determination and Success* Project (IGD Project) is a collaborative research project between the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (AIGI) and the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University (ANU), working in partnership with several First Nation Partners across Australia.

There are big gaps in our knowledge about the ways Indigenous peoples in Australia are building the kind of collective self-governance they want. And we know even less about how they are then adapting and sustaining it to suit their changing needs. So we are exploring the ways First Nations in Australia are building their self-governance, so they are in the driver's seat to set the direction for their development agenda. The project is looking at the practical Indigenous solutions and processes being implemented to do this.

### The objectives of this project include:

- Understand what 'self-governance', 'self-determination' and 'development' mean to Indigenous people, and how they assess their own effectiveness and success.
- Identify the diverse conditions under which self-determined governance arrangements are most effectively being initiated and sustained.
- Identify the strategies, processes, practices, expertise and capabilities that enable adaptive, agile governance.
- Compare the similarities and differences across diverse contexts, in order to draw out broadly relevant transferrable lessons.

In early 2021, the IGD Project team held a workshop to share our thinking and develop a research approach informed by conversations with our First Nations partners. One key outcome was a framework to guide our research efforts together, which is on the previous page. It shows self-governance of development as a journey, where big questions and issues need to be considered along the way.

While COVID-19 has created challenges for progressing the IGD Project, our research teams and partners are creating some innovative methods to share the unique understandings and experience of each First Nation partners. For example, the methods of **ArtVoice** and **Mapping Governance Histories and Futures** are providing valuable insights.

## Upcoming publications & tools

The IGD Project Team has been busy writing for our first special series of discussion papers to be released as joint publications from AIGI and CAEPR. Keep an eye out for the following titles over the coming months and if you would like to sign up for the CAEPR publications mailing list, please email: [caepradmin.cass@anu.edu.au](mailto:caepradmin.cass@anu.edu.au)

### The Journey to Indigenous Self-Governance and 'Nation' building: Conceptual, Design and Practice Considerations for a Strategic Self-Analysis Tool

Toni Bauman and Diane Smith

In this paper, Toni and Diane canvass the aims, issues and intercultural challenges involved in collaboratively designing and trialling a strategic self-analysis governance tool. The tool aims to support Indigenous peoples' own place-based journeys in building their self-governance. These journeys are often slowed down by the pressures of external demands, such as native title, resource agreements, treaty and settlement negotiations, as well as tough internal issues linked to the legacies of colonial violence and intergenerational trauma. Toni and Diane state:

***'Australian Indigenous governance is located in a high-pressured, complex jigsaw puzzle of powers, structures and legal decision-making mechanisms at local, regional and national levels. This can undermine the ways that Indigenous peoples wish to collectively govern themselves and co-opt their 'nation building' aspirations, leaving little time or energy to reflect on where they want to be in the future.'***

The authors review examples of governance tools from international and national contexts, as well as looking at the literature and wealth of experience to inform their discussion. The issues explored include:

- Producing a tool that has relevance for groups in different contexts and stages
- Securing relevant baseline data and subsequent data governance by each group
- Privileging Indigenous understandings of concepts such as 'governance' and 'development'
- The capabilities and resources needed by groups to assess their current arrangements
- The social and cultural issues that emerge when groups consider their membership and future goals
- The challenges involved in self-analyses.

**“Governance - Strong tree, Strong people,  
Strong culture”**



*“The sun, the leaves, the branches, the flowers, the seeds, the water and the bark are all parts of governance. The trunk of the big tall tree is an elder passing on knowledge and wisdom. The bark covers the trunk and holds it together. The branches are networks. The yellow leaves are the old people who need to be looked after. The seedlings in the waterhole are the young people listening to and learning from the elders, who are watching and supporting them. The sun is looking to see who’s going to be a strong leader in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. This system provides strong governance—everything’s inter-connected, allowing the tree to provide good fruit.”*

Source: Illustration and story by participants at the “Sharing Governance Success Workshops” of the vision for their

The tool will be collaboratively developed and trialled with the AIGI and with First Nations partners as part of the IGD project, a process that, by its very nature, will contribute to nation-building. Once developed, the tool will be uploaded onto the AIGI online Governance Toolkit, so that any group can customise it to their own needs. As Toni and Diane suggest:

***‘[w]ithout a collectively created picture of the future to guide decision-making, opportunities for desired benefit can be lost, and the imposed agenda of outsiders becomes dominant.’***

If you would like to know more about this research, please contact Toni on [toni.bauman@anu.edu.au](mailto:toni.bauman@anu.edu.au)

**Governing the pandemic: Adaptive self-determination as an Indigenous organisational tool for action and recovery in Australia** 🍷

Lara Drieberg, Dale Sutherland and Diane Smith

First Nations and their organisations in Australia are undergoing a time of profound challenges to their health and well-being, with many experiencing whole-of-community and regional Covid lockdowns (some self-initiated; others externally established). Nevertheless, over 2020 and this year, we have been talking to organisations who have been putting self-determination into practice, by governing the impacts of the pandemic on their communities and people. In 2021 we are seeing renewed COVID-19 hotspots emerging across Australia; this time involving the highly infectious ‘Delta strain’. Again governments have been too slow to act, thus enabling the virus to spread widely. By contrast we are seeing how Indigenous organisations have been quick to act. These are the stories of the innovative and effective ways Indigenous organisations have been taking charge to govern the pandemic.

This paper provides a rare insight into the ways Indigenous organisations are responding to safeguard their communities when confronted with a global pandemic. Indigenous people did not wait for governments to act – they made their own decisions and acted on those well before national initiatives commenced. Lara, Dale and Diane shine a light on these local stories of success.

The questions driving this research include: ‘What are the impacts of the pandemic on organisations - the community members and, staff, on their organisational governance and performance of functions? Exactly how have they been governing the pandemic in its rapidly changing local manifestations? What worked and what did not work so well? What kind of innovations were put into practice, in such agile ways? And are there any common learnings we can identify from their experience, to share with others?’

We conducted an online survey and subsequent zoom yarns with a small sample of Indigenous organisations in urban, rural and remote locations. In these yarns, organisations told absorbing stories of resilience, compassion, adept innovations in governance, and fast pivoting of their programs and work arrangements, as they reached out to protect community members (with food, PPE, new services, counselling, housing, aged and elder support, and so on). This paper presents a summary and analysis of the research findings with a blend of quantitative survey data and people’s own stories.



Lara, Dale and Diane describe the strategies of Indigenous organisations and how they drew strength from their cultural capital, local networks, specialist skills and partnerships to make innovative changes to how they governed and to their operational systems. For example by using remote outstations as safety Arks, and adapting digital communication applications using Indigenous languages and graphics to keep in contact with people.

One organisation noted an experience also mentioned by several other organisations when they moved quickly over to zoom meetings for their board. They said that:

***'We found more advantages in online meetings – the Board was able to participate more readily. [The] Board was more engaged and adopted improved decision making. 100% of the Directors participated in all meetings - which was not the case prior to COVID-19.'***

But another organisation also highlighted a downside that was also raised by other organisations:

***'... a number of people were sort of saying that they only had really erratic access to technology - so you know their infrastructure was poor - and that's a problem. Like if we want to talk to people in the regions that poor access to stable technology connections can sometimes be an issue if they're outside the major regions and cities.'***

As the authors state, during the pandemic Indigenous organisations 'have acted as service-deliverers Plus.'

One of the main conclusions from this paper advances is the concept of 'adaptive self-determination'. The authors explain:

***'[t]he concept of adaptive self-determination .... is the collective capability of Indigenous organisations to freely determine, autonomously exercise power, take control and responsibility for decision-making, which enables them to take agile action to modify their governing and operational arrangements in a united and strategic way, in the face of crises and high risk, and when available evidence is unclear and often contradictory.'***

The concept provides a long overdue counter to the common deficit narrative that circulates publicly about Indigenous organisations as lacking capacity, having debilitating cultural nepotism, and regularly requiring external administration; that is, as having poor governance. The paper argues that Indigenous organisations have always had to be inventive and adaptable and that, over many decades, they have embedded an organisational capability for adaptive renewal. The evidence in the paper shows this is a major tool for organisations enabling them to quickly take action to govern the pandemic.

If you'd like to know more about this research, contact Lara on [lara.driberg@aigi.com.au](mailto:lara.driberg@aigi.com.au)

## Feeding the Mob during the Pandemic

The pandemic has raised many issues for Aboriginal people - most importantly access to food - so a number of Midwest Aboriginal service providers in Western Australia banded together to deliver Emergency Relief Packages to those in need. Around 800 food and hygiene packages were delivered to regional and remote Aboriginal communities across the Midwest and Gascoyne recently, to help combat isolation and further disadvantage during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the early phase of the pandemic, Bundiyarra Aboriginal Corporation joined forces with the Midwest Employment and Economic Development Aboriginal Corporation (MEEDAC) and the Aboriginal Biodiversity Conservation Foundation (ABC Foundation), to contribute needed resources such as cleaning and sanitary products along with food donated through the ABC Foundation's 'Food for the Mob' program to organise, pack and distribute the Emergency Relief Packages.

Starting in August 2020, another vital service within the town of Geraldton was also started, with meals being provided to vulnerable Aboriginal people including the homeless, large families, disabled and elders during the pandemic to ensure their food security. Bundiyarra's Jennifer Gregory-Kniveton coordinated the project and MEEDAC, Geraldton Aboriginal Streetwork Corporation (Streeties) and Bundiyarra delivered the meals to eligible people across town. Each partner organisation identified their own target group and delivered the meals to their Aboriginal clients over a period of 18 weeks. Meals were delivered the day before pay day to ensure people had access to a hot meal during this lean period, when most households would run out of food.

Bundiyarra's Manager Operations, Wayne McDonald, said "The three organisations have had calls from Aboriginal people in critical need, people in lockdown where there are no shops, they are not allowed to leave their communities,



**L-R: Wayne McDonald Bundiyarra CEO, Brad Rowe ABCF Steven Kelley Bundiyarra, Derek Councillor Bundiyarra, Les Dann Bundiyarra, Jim Sandy Chairperson MEEDAC, Andrew Greaves MEEDAC and Terri Dalgety Bundiyarra.**

*and they are running low on cleaning products, hygiene needs and food. ... Everyone pulled together to get food and essentials out to all our mob in the region. Bundiyarra provided the logistics, assembling the packages, and delivering to some communities like Pia Wadjari, Kardaloo and Barrel Well, while ABC coordinated the 700 km round trip with their community partners Yulella Aboriginal Corporation near Meekatharra and Mungullah Community Aboriginal Corporation near Carnarvon."*

As well as their natural cleaning products, Bundiyarra's Environmental Health (EH) Unit supplied soap donated by Soap Aid, a not-for-profit organisation that cleans and processes hotel soap into fresh, hygienic soap bars that are distributed to communities to encourage frequent handwashing.

EH Team Leader, Derek Councillor Jnr, said the soap was initially to educate people in frequent handwashing to combat trachoma, an eye infection found in communities that can lead to blindness. But now, he said it *"is an essential time to keep the hand washing hygiene education going with the COVID-19 outbreak."*

This was an extraordinary example of collective impact that was the result of local Aboriginal organisations getting on the front foot very quickly, partnering together, coordinating logistics, and drawing in NGOs and local businesses, to provide the sustained and much-needed delivery of food and covid-safety products to Aboriginal families in their region.

## Aboriginal community governance in the Black Summer bushfires 🍷

Bhiamie Williamson

In this paper, Bhiamie Williamson brings us powerful stories of strength and resilience from Aboriginal people against the backdrop of the devastating Black Summer bushfires in 2019-2020. He shows Aboriginal people drawing on their own strengths to govern the impacts of the bushfires on their communities. The paper raises the critical question of disaster management in Australia. As Bhiamie states:

*'It was widely acknowledged that the bushfires disproportionately impacted Aboriginal people both in terms of the population of people affected, and the deep impact felt as people connected to the land. Yet at the height of the crisis, stories emerged of culturally unsafe and unwelcoming relief and recovery services, as well as the uneven responses of emergency services to safeguard and protect cultural heritage.'*

Bhiamie draws on a range of materials, including media, reports, and testimony, to bring out the experiences and responses of Aboriginal peoples, their communities and organisations. He points to the intrinsic strengths of Aboriginal communities and their essential role in emergency management and recovery. The paper also interrogates current disaster management frameworks. Bhiamie talks about the relationship between Aboriginal people and settler institutions, and suggests that:



*'The trust deficit between Aboriginal people and government, or mainstream agencies, now engendered as a result of the bushfires ... will not abate quickly. As such, it is imperative that Aboriginal community organisations be recognised for their role in responding to disasters. Indeed, this must be understood as a distinct form of community and organisational development.'*

This rich analysis centres the experiences of Indigenous people and encourages us to think deeply about what disaster justice should mean in Australia. The paper forms part of a much-needed dialogue as Australia will inevitably continue to face natural disasters.

If you'd like to know more about this research, contact: [Bhiamie.Williamson@anu.edu.au](mailto:Bhiamie.Williamson@anu.edu.au)

### What is coming up:

- In late September we undertook fieldwork with the Boonthamurra Native Title holders at Eromanga, along with our partners the Boonthamurra Native Title Aboriginal Corporation and Queensland South Native Title Services. Keep an eye out for our next newsletter for an update on this work and plans for an upcoming Youth Forum.

Join us for a **three part seminar series** showcasing IGD research. To sign-up email: [caepradmin.cass@anu.edu.au](mailto:caepradmin.cass@anu.edu.au)  
**Wednesday 3 November:** Felicity Thiessen (QSNTS) speaking on "People, place and partnerships: A model for governing native title"

**Wednesday 17 November:** Toni Bauman (CAEPR) speaking on "A governance strategic analysis tool: Concepts, design and practice Issues"

**Wednesday 1 December:** Bhiamie Williamson (CAEPR) speaking on "Aboriginal community governance in the Black Summer bushfires"



### Dandenong Fire Truck

Artist, Uncle Ian Harrison, said the piece was inspired by the recent summer bushfires:

*"The painting I did for the CFA was inspired by the latest bushfires that ravished through East Gippsland; my father's Country, the Gunai Kurnai people. .... The hands around the camp sites represents the healing and comfort for the community that was affected by the bushfires, the burnt trees depict the mark left by the fires and the symbols at the bottom reflect the strong Aboriginal culture throughout our Country."*

Read more about this story:  
<https://news.cfa.vic.gov.au/news/dandenong-fire-truck-sports-aboriginal-artwork>

- We are now working on producing a series of 'policy insights' arising out of the IGD project case studies
- Get ready to 'Put the kettle on!' Over the next few months the AIGI & CAEPR are working to curate a podcast featuring governance yarns with First Nations Peoples from across Australia.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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