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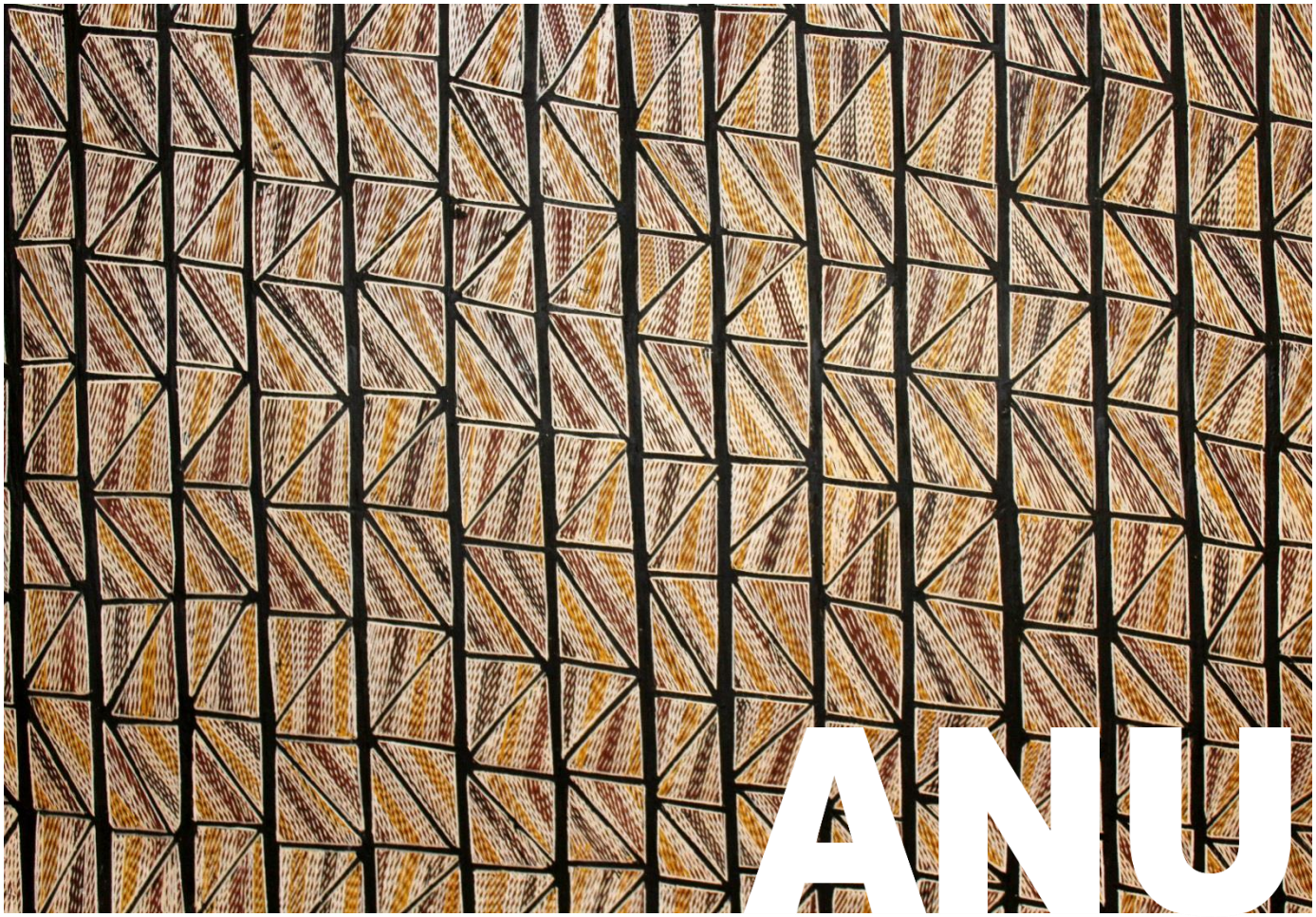

LOOKING BEYOND INDIGENOUS SERVICE DELIVERY: THE SOCIETAL PURPOSE OF URBAN FIRST NATIONS ORGANISATIONS

D. HOWARD-WAGNER, J. REIMER, J. LEHA, C. MASON, D. EVANS, K. SOLDATIC, J. HUNT AND J. GIBSON

Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
ANU College of Arts & Social Sciences

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Looking beyond Indigenous service delivery: The societal purpose of urban First Nations organisations

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Abstract

The paper analyses the quantitative findings of a three-year mixed-method research project developed in partnership with six urban First Nations organisations in the Australian state of New South Wales. The research is designed to engage with *Closing the Gap 2020*, and past policy, in relation to the positioning of First Nations organisations in relation to the delivery of government services to First Nations people. As part of this research, a survey was developed based on the observations, questions, and concerns of our partner First Nations organisations and wider First Nations Discussion Circles. This paper speaks back to a longstanding policy position about the role and function of First Nations organisations in the Indigenous service market, which discursively positions First Nations organisations as service providers, by using the findings of the survey that identify an alternative Indigenous perspective about the distinctive role of urban First Nations organisations in society.

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Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACCO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
ALS	Aboriginal Legal Service
ANAO	Australian National Audit Office
ANU	Australian National University
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CATSI Act	*Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006* (Cth)
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects (program)
CDP	Community Development Program
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CtG2020	National Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020)
FNDC	First Nations Discussion Circle
LDM	Local Decision Making
NIAA	National Indigenous Affairs Agency
NSW	New South Wales
OCHRE	NSW Government Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment Plan 2013
ORIC	Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations
PM&C	Prime Minister and Cabinet (Australian Government)
SUA	Significant Urban Areas

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Introduction

In July 2020, then Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap (*CtG2020*). The signatories to *CtG2020* included all Australian Governments and the National Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks). As a signatory to this Agreement, the New South Wales (NSW) Government committed to the new Agreement and agreed to a new way of doing business with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in NSW.

The revised National Agreement on Closing the Gap (PM&C, 2020) acknowledges that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples need to have a much greater say in how programs and services are delivered to their people, in their own places, and on their own country, and that community-controlled organisations deliver the best services and outcomes for Closing the Gap (PM&C, 2020, p. 4). It commits Australian governments to a set of 'priority reforms' (Australian Government Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet [PM&C], 2020; Morrison, 2020). One of the four 'priority reforms' is targeted at building formal partnerships and shared decision-making, supporting and building the community-controlled sector. In announcing the reforms, the Prime Minister conceded that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services usually achieve better results, employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and are often preferred over mainstream services' (Morrison, 2020; National Indigenous Affairs Agency [NIAA], 2020). *CtG2020* is recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community control is an act of self-determination, and that community control builds the strength and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people (National Agreement on Closing the Gap, 2020, Chapter Six). *CtG2020* sets out that partnerships should be with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples 'based on their own structures and where they are accountable to their own organisations and communities' (PM&C, 2020, p. 6). *CtG2020* does represent a critical turning point in Australian Indigenous policy by not only the Australian government, but also State and Territory governments, such as the New South Wales Government. The New Agreement forefronts the move to co-designing Indigenous service delivery. While the *CtG2020* report could, arguably, be said to be in line with a nation building conceptual framework that includes self-determination and leadership, it is directed at supporting and building the capacity of the community-controlled sector (structures of governance) around service delivery to Close the Gap. First Nations organisations remain discursively and materially situated in a service system approach driven by a service motivation in the era of New Public Management (NPM).

While an important shift in policy, and innovative and potentially empowering policy shift, *CtG2020* concerns service innovation or social innovation in government service delivery in the era of NPM. Community-controlled First Nations organisations remain situated within a service mentality and their deduced societal function endures as that of service providers around closing the gap in Australian policy. That is, while *CtG2020* takes us full circle back to a rights-based discourse and self-determination is a prominent term in this discourse, it is a policy approach limited to service delivery and Closing the Gap.

We date the service mentality back to the 'quiet revolution' in Indigenous affairs. We argue elsewhere that this is the moment that an Indigenous service market was established (Howard-Wagner et al., 2022). We also explain the strong influence of NPM on establishing an Indigenous service market and reforming the way governments do business with First Nations organisations (Howard-Wagner et al., 2022). It is the political moment that the state engaged in what Michel Foucault refers to as a 'problematisation' (Foucault, 1986) of First Nations organisations. From that moment onwards, First Nations organisations were solely seen in the eyes of the state as service providers funded to deliver government services. Vanstone's refrains about Indigenous capacity, which justified the need for policy intervention, never accounted for an alternative, Indigenous-specific, reality about the role of First Nations organisations in Australian society. Vanstone's refrains rendered invisible nearly 30 years of urban self-determination and cultural, social, and economic advancement achieved via First Nations organisations (Howard-Wagner, 2021).

Vanstone's' announcement of a 'quiet revolution' was followed shortly by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreeing to a National Framework of Principles for Government Service Delivery to Indigenous Australians in June 2004.[1] Through that Framework, the principles of NPM were applied to the delivery of government services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the state and federal levels. Because First Nations organisations were only valued for their ability to deliver government services, the reforms assumed that their roles could just as easily be filled by mainstream organisations, albeit with cultural competency training. Indigenous service delivery via First Nations organisations was undervalued and seen as replaceable within the service delivery system, where the public value offered by First Nations organisations could be easily transferred and implemented through mainstream quasi-market mechanisms via training mainstream organisations in cultural competency. Governments turned the effects of colonisation into an issue of social outcomes that could be solved by the free market, and recast the overcoming of Indigenous disadvantage as a socioeconomic problem through a market-driven approach (Howard-Wagner, 2017).

First Nations organisations were seen as playing a role in the market by delivering programs and services 'directed towards aged care, childcare, youth and family services, employment preparation, primary health care, legal aid, community development, family violence prevention, municipal services, sport and recreation, community safety, arts and cultural heritage services, and native title representations' (Australian National Audit Office (ANAO), 2012, p. 16). The *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976* (Cth), which was intended to engender self-government through the formation of Aboriginal Councils and Associations, was replaced with the *Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006* (CATSI Act) (Cth), which was designed to strengthen and improve governance to 'align corporate governance requirements with modern standards of corporate accountability', as well as allow 'for a range of assistance from training to a rolling program of "good governance audits"' (Entsch Second Reading Speech, 2005). The Australian Government's 'quiet revolution' focused on getting individual organisations to roll out pre-defined programs, and thus become service providers that would deliver cost effective government services with pre-defined outcomes. The holistic concept of 'community control' was reframed as a simple matter of transferring specific programs and services to community control, allowing community members to have access to services that are more culturally appropriate and, later, potentially having a say in how services are delivered in their communities and participating in the planning, development, management and delivery of services in their community (ANAO, 2012).

Differing state/Indigenous understandings of the function, aim, and purpose of First Nations organisations in society or the capacities of First Nations organisations are not new. In the 1970s, conflicting understandings around the role of First Nations organisations in relation to Indigenous self-determination existed. First Nations peoples' understandings of self-determination differed from that of the Whitlam Australian Government (Perheentupa, 2020, p. 189), particularly in terms of what urban First Nations organisations in the state of NSW were actually trying to achieve when they said they were enabling self-determination in places like Redfern, Western Sydney, and Newcastle and what the state was actually trying to achieve when they said they were enabling self-determination (Howard-Wagner, 2021; Rademaker & Rowse, 2020, p. 3). For First Nations people in urban areas, self-determination was about authority in relation to decisions and solutions to their own problems. Urban First Nations organisations became important expressions of Indigenous agency, empowerment, autonomy, and self-determination in governance, cultural resurgence and community development (Howard-Wagner, 2021). Howard-Wagner points out that, while in some ways their objectives were complementary to the business of the state, their intent has been, and still is, to do business their way and

[1] From 2002, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) promoted initiatives to improve outcomes in identified areas of Indigenous disadvantage through the co-operative efforts of governments at all levels. Between 1997 and 2007, practical reconciliation translated into overcoming Indigenous socioeconomic disadvantage under the Howard Australian Government and later Closing the Gap under the federal Rudd Labor Government (COAG, 2004).

in accordance with the real needs of First Nations people at a local level, rather than in accordance with how their needs were or are perceived by the state (Howard-Wagner, 2016, p. 89). Research to date suggests that urban First Nations organisations visions for enabling self-determination in NSW has not changed (Howard-Wagner, 2021).

Recognising the challenge of finding a systematic way to question service delivery assumptions about community-controlled First Nations organisations in Indigenous policy, we set out to establish whether there was any consensus among senior position-holders (i.e. Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), Deputy CEOs, General Managers, Chairs) in urban First Nations organisations in NSW on the distinctive societal function of their organisations. Our research aims to understand the organisation–society relationship. It examines the functional motivations for establishing community-controlled organisations in urban areas, including what drives First Nations people to establish First Nations organisations and what their intended role/purpose/function is. We also set out to examine the motivational role that self-determination plays in the creation and operation of First Nations organisations.

The research aimed to address this Indigenous policy challenge through a partnership between three academics and representatives from six community-controlled First Nations organisations, who engaged in a collaborative, iterative, co-determined, co-designed, and co-produced research process. We took as our starting point the perspectives and practices of nine community-controlled First Nations organisations operating in the Greater Sydney region (Redfern, Western Sydney and the Central Coast) and turn those perspectives into indicators to identify and measure whether a set of principles exist in relation to this question, measuring this perspective among a cohort of senior position-holders of community-controlled First Nations organisations across 30 significant urban areas (SUAs) in NSW. The results of the survey reveal that First Nations people come together to create organisations that are multifaceted societal, cultural and political actors whose function is to improve the cultural, social, political, and economic life outcomes of First Nations people. The intergenerational visions and agendas of those who create First Nations organisations are directed beyond service delivery to Indigenous recovery, cultural continuity, development, and self-government. This is the place of First Nations organisations in Indigenous society and, sociologically, this is what we mean by the organisation–society relationship, a concept we return to below. In fulfilling this objective, the discussion juxtaposes this framing of First Nations organisations alongside alternative, Indigenous views about why First Nations people establish community-controlled organisations and the place of those organisations in Indigenous society.

Methodology and research design

> *The reason why I am here … I like the title … it's reconfiguring, it's changing something. Things have gotten worse. It is the type of power relationships that exist and that are maintained … that we need to understand and hopefully, change that type of thing. (FNDC 1, Participant 3)*

Our research is principally interested in ontological questions of what types of organisational artifacts First Nations peoples living in urban contexts construct when they create urban First Nations organisations. The aim is to broadly characterise a First Nations standpoint about the distinctive societal function of First Nations organisation in SUAs in NSW.

The research, and this co-authored paper, is a collaboration between three academic researchers and nominated representatives from six partner First Nations organisations, who together constitute the research team for the project. The six partner organisations are Butucarbin, First Peoples Disability Network, Muru Mittigar, the National Centre of Indigenous Excellence, Tjillari Aboriginal Justice Corporation, and The Glen. The research is premised upon a model of co-determination, where the First Nations partner organisations and

researchers come together to identify shared processes, goals and outcomes, and work together with a shared goal of improving our knowledge and understanding of the distinct role urban First Nations organisations play in society. The central guiding principle of the research is that it is an equal partnership between the researchers and the partner First Nations organisations. We have worked together as partners to improve our knowledge and understanding. The iterative co-designed approach has entailed collective decision-making on all details of the research throughout the project with First Nations people in the driver's seat of data governance (i.e. collection, analysis, dissemination and ownership) over a three-year period. The same people from the partner organisations (June Riemer, John Leha, Chris Mason, Jack Gibson, Cheryl Goh, and Deb [Evans] Martin) remained dedicated and engaged in the research and part of the research team over the three-year life of the project. Ros Fogg from Muru Mittigar joined the research team in the last year, working alongside Cheryl Goh. The iterative research design entailed three face-to-face research gatherings at Western Sydney University in which the survey was designed.[2] On two occasions, the research team was joined by representatives from three additional First Nations organisations from the Greater Sydney region for a First Nations Discussion Circle (FNDC). The purpose of the first FNDC was to bring people together to design the survey.

Survey

Survey design

Survey design began at our first research gathering, which was divided into two sessions. The first session was to discuss the governance of the research and to formalise a research reference group – Riemer and Gibson were appointed by the research group as our reference group Chair and Deputy Chair. The second session involved a FNDC. Representatives from other First Nations organisations in the Greater Sydney region joined us for the FNDCs. The FNDC was in keeping with a yarning circle methodology and its protocols (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, p. 39); however, the focus was on describing organisational experiences, as well as understanding the complex social and bureaucratic worlds in which First Nations organisations operate. In keeping with this research method and its broader epistemological and ontological underpinnings, the FNDCs were designed to privilege First Nations peoples' voices in the research and its design (Donovan, 2015, p. 613). As set out in our research funding application, our first formal research aim for the survey was to confirm the distinctive societal function of urban First Nations organisations. The FNDCs began the conversation. We took the Indigenous service market in the era of NPM as our starting point for the discussion (see Howard-Wagner et al., 2022). The discussions were designed to allow First Nations people to yarn about their experiences of the Indigenous service market. They described how this government agenda interacted with the distinct societal function of their organisations in terms of the social and economic wellbeing of First Nations people living in urban localities, and their capacity to undertake those functions in the climate of the Indigenous service market. Participants were asked why First Nations organisations in urban localities exist. They spoke about their organisations and their objectives, which included First Nations peoples' self-determination, autonomy, and development. Participants articulated how their organisations are deeply embedded in Indigenous societal environments. They explained the reasons that First Nations people had come together to form community-controlled First Nations organisations. Participants described organisations as cultural and societal entities that have inextricable relationships with, and obligations to, their communities. They explained how those relationships with the First Nations communities they serve are central to how their organisations operate. Those connections are strong. They explained how Indigenous societal development, improvements in life

[2] Our partners also designed a Data Management Plan. It outlines the principles guiding the research, including the obligations of the researchers and the partner organisations, as well as how the data will be managed throughout the research and after it is completed. Muru Mittigar attended the first meeting at the start of the project, and again from late 2020.

outcomes and wellbeing, and self-determination are actualised through First Nations organisations. The FNDC also engaged in an interactive discussion and dialogue around these experiences. We broke off into smaller groups to identify key experiences and commonalities, and then came back to the wider Circle to share. One of the key themes emerging from the FDNC was conflicting perspectives; that is, the differences that exist in the way that governments and First Nations peoples see the role and responsibility of Indigenous institutions in urban contexts. Together, those who participated in the first FNDC generated a set of themes and draft survey questions.

The draft questions and knowledge gathered from the FNDC were then used to develop our survey questions. That is, the draft questions generated by Reimer, Leha, Gibson, Evans, and Mason, which were captured on butcher paper, were then developed into a survey by Howard-Wagner with feedback from Soldatic and Hunt. At a later date, representatives from five of our six partner organisations – Riemer, Leha, Gibson, Mason, and Evans – and all three Chief Investigators participated in a separate, four-hour workshop to design the survey instrument based on the first iteration of the questions captured on butcher paper. This process entailed a refining of the questions, and further development of the indicators generated by Riemer, Leha, Gibson, Evans, and Mason at the first workshop. The FNDC was the starting point for the workshop discussion. The survey had two aims. First, to identify the distinctive role of urban First Nations organisations in society, including their distinct social and community development functions, and how this distinctive role and their distinct social and community development functions contribute to the realisation of Indigenous rights for urban First Nations peoples. Its second aim was to establish empirically how the NPM era is affecting the capacity of urban First Nations organisations to fulfil their distinctive role in society.

Riemer, Leha, Gibson, Evans and Mason determined the focus of the survey and its questions. They directed the content of the survey and what data the survey would gather. Through the survey, research partners wished to test the prevalence of certain Indigenous values that are expressed through the way that First Nations organisations operate. These values were measured as indicators from a First Nations standpoint. In addition, optional questions were designed to capture qualitative data about each organisation's objectives, social purpose, definitions of success, as well as views about First Nations governance, culture, and values. We intended to use this qualitative data to further interpret the quantitative data and integrate the two to obtain insights for triangulation. This approach allowed us to gain more in-depth understanding of the distinctive role or value of urban First Nations organisations in society from a First Nations standpoint. Rather than verifying the findings of our FNDCs, collecting qualitative data alongside the quantitative data itself provided a qualitative richness to the survey data about the societal function of urban First Nations organisations not anticipated at the time of designing the survey. A key theme to emerge from the qualitative data is the core place of self-determination to the operation of urban First Nations organisations, the strong organisational-society relationship (i.e. the relationship between First Nations organisations and Indigenous society), the core function of culture and community to the way urban First Nations organisations operate, and the multi-functional purpose of urban First Nations organisations. The qualitative data speaks back strongly to the service delivery mentality within Indigenous policy, juxtaposing it with an Indigenous perspective about the place of urban First Nations organisations in society.

Distribution

Once finalised, an email containing a link to the survey, which was created using SurveyMonkey, was emailed to all identifiable First Nations organisations incorporated at the state or federal level, in 35 Significant Urban Areas (SUAs) in NSW, as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2016) instead of randomly

selecting a representative sample of urban First Nations organisations.[3,4] We also included Queanbeyan because, although it is part of the Australian Capital Territory SUA, it is in NSW. Of the 474 urban First Nations organisations from the 35 SUAs in NSW, 52 participated in the survey, which is an 11% response rate.

There were 51 surveys completed by senior position-holders in organisations across 30 SUAs in NSW. The organisations represented well a sample of urban FNOs, in that they were a small subset group that proportionally reflect the different characteristics exemplified in the target population. While the response rate was only 11%, the data is a representative sample across nearly all SUAs within NSW. The release of the survey coincided with a nation-wide COVID 19 lockdown. Even so, our partners anticipated a low response rate, because 'while the research itself is important, it adds pressure on the organisations' time' (Partner FNO Representative 1). Of the 35 SUAs, 30 SUAs are represented in the survey results (see Fig. 1). First Nations organisations participated in the survey from the Sydney region (n=9), Coffs Harbour (n=4), Central Coast (n=3), Newcastle/Maitland (n=2), Batemans Bay (n=2), Ulladulla (n=2) and Bowral/Mittagong (n=2). There was one from all other regions, except Camden Haven, Foster/Tuncurry, Goulburn, Morisset/Cooranbong, Mudgee, Nelson Bay, Parkes, and Taree. The organisations that participated were a mix of locally established community-controlled organisations, including five community-controlled health organisations (n=41), as well as local Aboriginal land councils (n=7), local native title bodies (n=3), and regional Aboriginal legal services (n=1).

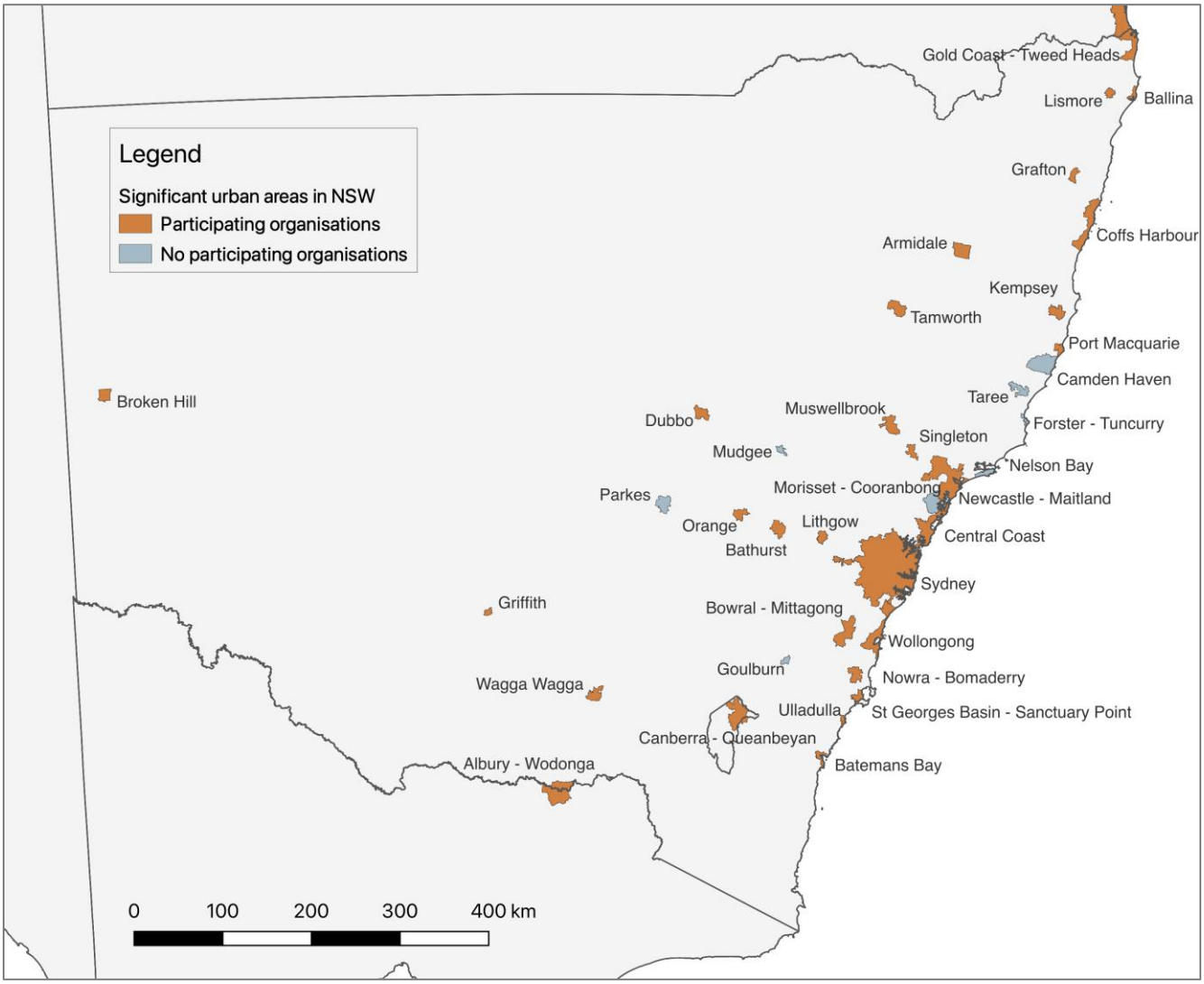
Fig. 1 shows the 2016 SUAs in NSW (https://dbr.abs.gov.au/absmaps/index.html). The orange SUAs are those in which First Nations organisations were represented in the survey data. SUAs in blue are those with no survey participant First Nations organisations. Those SUAs were Camden Haven, Foster/Tuncurry, Goulburn, Morisset/Cooranbong, Mudgee, Nelson Bay, Parkes, and Taree.

Over 40% of survey respondents are registered with the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC) under the CATSI Act. Nearly 25% are respectively registered under the *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth) and the *Associations Incorporation Act 2009* (NSW). Nearly 10% are registered under the *Co-operatives (Adoption of National Law) Act 2012* (NSW). This breakdown of organisational incorporation is consistent with our compiled database.

[3] Charities and Non-Profits in Australia can now choose between four different structures: unincorporated associations; companies limited by guarantee; non-trading co-operatives and Indigenous corporations (ACNC, 2020). We do not include unincorporated associations.

[4] According to the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS), SUAs are towns, cities or areas with more than 10 000 people. SUAs are defined by combining one or more adjacent Statistical Areas Level 2 (SA2s) (ABS, 2016). A single SUA can represent either a single Urban Centre or a cluster of related Urban Centres (ABS, 2016).

Fig. 1 Significant Urban Areas (SUAs) in NSW



Source: Map produced by Francis Markham from ABS (2016).

Survey response

Senior position-holders from 51 organisations completed all questions on the role of urban First Nations organisations, but only 33 survey respondents completed the whole survey. The lower completion rate compared to response rate did not fit the normal parameters of starting – but not completing – a survey. In the section on the distinctive role of urban First Nations organisations, some respondents chose to provide a qualitative response ('other'), rather than one of the pre-defined quantitative options. In the section examining the effects of the NPM era on urban First Nations organisations, which is not the subject of this paper, 33 respondents completed all 35 questions. However, questions 21, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28 and 29 on the effects of the NPM era on urban First Nations organisations contained several Likert scale questions within questions, and only 28 completed all the Likert scales (i.e. questions within the questions). Respondents skipped questions, but did not opt out of the survey altogether, answering later questions. Only one respondent started the survey by answering several questions, but did not complete the survey or opt back in to later questions. Consideration of individual responses suggests that some may have felt that certain questions did not apply to their organisation or some gave detailed qualitative answers that answered later questions, which could potentially account for why they skipped questions, but that cannot be verified.

Given the verification purpose of the survey, testing the experiences of our nine FNDC organisations more widely among urban First Nations organisations and the rich qualitative data that the survey generated, we believe it is accurate to assert that our findings are indicative of the experiences and views of urban First Nations organisations in the state of NSW.

Results

Our survey did not set out to establish the importance of service delivery, but set out to answer ontological questions about what types of organisational artifacts First Nations peoples living in urban contexts construct when they create urban First Nations organisations – that is, to find out what the distinctive societal role of First Nations organisations is from a First Nations perspective. This approach was driven by our First Nations partners and the FNDCs. The indicators used to measure societal function were driven by and generated from the first-hand experience of our partners.

In this section, we present the responses to closed-ended survey questions that asked respondents to indicate the aim/purpose/role of their organisation, what actions best defined why their organisation was established, and what best described the development agenda of those who established their organisation. We also present the response to two open-ended survey questions that asked respondents to: (a) identify the original/founding objective of their organisation; and, (b) describe what they think their organisation's social purpose is in relation to First Nations peoples. In addition, we present data from a closed-ended question that asked what self-determination means in the context of their organisations as First Nations organisations. Based on our FNDCs, we hypothesised that community development and self-determination would be key motivating factors in why First Nations people establish organisations in urban localities.

Societal function of urban First Nations organisations

The survey asked respondents to indicate the purpose/aim/role of their organisation by choosing from a pre-determined list of service delivery options (e.g. health services; housing; parenting programs; youth services; employment services; early intervention; out-of-home care) alongside community and cultural activities (e.g. language recovery: community representation; Elder support; First Nations recognition; First Nations activism; cultural education; gathering place; cultural activities; and community events). The reason for asking this question was to establish whether urban FNOs:

1. are predominately multifunctional;
2. do more than service delivery;
3. take on broader societal roles and responsibilities in the form of community and cultural functions; and,
4. provide community and cultural functions as part of their business – and, if so, to what degree.

The selected purposes/aims/roles are listed in Table 1.

All 51 respondents chose several options from the list, and this illustrates how they not only do more than service delivery, but are (a) multifunctional and (b) take on broader societal roles and responsibilities. All respondents indicated that their organisation engaged in community and cultural functions for the societal benefit of First Nations people and communities (e.g. Cultural activities [e.g. NAIDOC week] n=29; Cultural education [e.g. cultural capabilities training] n=28; community events n=28; gathering place n=28; community development n=22; and community representation n=21; First Nations recognition n=20; First Nations activism n=19; and Elder support n=18).

Table 1 Categorisation of the purpose/aim/role of First Nations organisations

Service delivery roles	n	Cultural/community aims	n
Housing	12	Cultural activities (e.g. NAIDOC)	29
Language recovery	12	Community events	28
Family support	12	Cultural education (i.e. cultural capabilities training)	28
Parenting programs	12	Gathering place	26
Community transport	11	Community development	22
Mum and bub groups	11	Men's group	21
Youth services	11	Elder support	21
Family and community healing	11	Community representation	21
Drug and alcohol services	10	Women's group	20
Employment services (e.g. Job Ready, Job Active, etc)	9	Cultural heritage protection/site work	20
Counselling services	9	First Nations recognition	20
Early Intervention	8	Advocating for individual people	19
Sport/community activities (enterprise)	8	First Nations activism (lobbying for First Nations peoples' rights to education, health, housing and employment)	19
Hospitality (Indigenous food)	7	Elders support (including transport and services and programs)	18
Disability services	7	Reconciliation	18
Justice services (State Debt, licenses, community justice centre)	6	Health and wellbeing (including mental health)	17
Language services	6	Land and natural resource management	16
Financial counselling	6	Proof of Aboriginality	16
Homelessness services	6	Systemic advocacy (policy influence)	16
Post-prison release services	5	Training	15
Employment services	4	Lobbying for community infrastructure	14
Business development support	4	First Nations activism (lobbying for treaty and recognition)	12
Women's/men's/youth shelter	4	Sectoral policy development (e.g. education policy, health policy, etc.)	10
Justice (therapeutic)	4	Sponsoring community and sporting activities (i.e. sponsoring All Blacks)	9
One-stop shop	3	Creating community infrastructure (i.e. medical service, preschool)	9
Out of home care	3	Sport/community activities (enterprise)	8
Media	3	Land Council	8
Justice (non-therapeutic)	2	Dance/Performance	8
First Nations Preschool	2	Link-up (Stolen Generation)	7
Legal services (ALS)[a]	2		
CDEP/CDP[b]	1		
First Nation child care service	1		
Youth hostel	1		

Notes: a. ALS = Aboriginal Legal Service.

b. CDEP = Community Development Employment Projects; CDP = Community Development Program.

Beyond service delivery: Urban FNOs as multifunctional, societal organisations

Our analysis of the data shows that urban First Nations organisations have a much wider societal function than delivering government services. The responses to this question show that a single urban First Nations organisation often seeks to undertake multiple functions including advocacy, community development and service delivery, language revitalisation, caring for country, and cultural resurgence, as well as several forms of service delivery. This could be as diverse as disability care, community housing, health services and even child care. For example, survey respondent #1 identifies the organisation as a Land Council. The respondent indicates that their organisation is engaged in providing community transport; cultural activities (e.g. NAIDOC); cultural education (i.e. cultural capabilities training); cultural heritage protection/site work; land and natural resource management Sport/community activities (enterprise); sponsoring community and sporting activities (i.e. sponsoring All Blacks); proof of Aboriginality; community representation; lobbying for community infrastructure; systemic advocacy (policy influence); advocating for individual people; sectoral policy development (e.g. education policy, health policy, etc.); First Nations recognition; reconciliation; community development; and First Nations activism (lobbying for First Nations peoples' rights to education; health, housing and employment).

Survey respondent #2 identifies as a not-for-profit registered with ORIC with the founding objective of providing culturally appropriate health care services to First Nations people. The respondent indicates that their organisation is engaged in providing community transport, gathering place, community events, men's group, women's group, Elder support, cultural activities (e.g. NAIDOC), mum and bub groups, health and wellbeing (including mental health), drug and alcohol services, proof of Aboriginality, systemic advocacy (policy influence), advocating for individual people, and Community development.

Survey respondent #3 identifies their organisation as a not-for-profit and social enterprise registered as a NSW incorporated association with the founding objective of 'creating an organisation based in healing community and land, a niche market and need in this area.' The respondent indicates that their organisation is a gathering place that is engaged in providing community events, men's group, women's group, cultural activities, cultural education, land and natural resource management, language recovery, training, family support, Elder support, health and wellbeing (including mental health), youth services, family and community healing, community representation, and creating community infrastructure (i.e. medical service, preschool).

Responses to other survey questions support the finding that these organisations are multifunctional. For example, the qualitative open-ended responses to a question asking survey respondents to describe 'the original/founding objective of your organisation' and illustrate how urban First Nations organisations inhabit multiple economic, legal, political, and social spaces (Howard-Wagner, 2021).

> *Our organisation was established to both retain and strengthen the community to achieve their individual and collective potential through providing service responses to address the disparity and disenfranchisement experienced across the health determinants impeding self-determination and potential (Survey Respondent #3).*
>
> *Our function in society is to service the community (Survey respondent #42).*
>
> *Through assisting First Nations people to resist the historical power imbalance perpetrated by statutory child protection agencies. We hope to foster self-determination that is written into the legislation but currently not enacted in practice (Survey respondent #4).*

Creating opportunities and driving the change across several facets of society through education employment, enterprise, health and wellbeing. These experiences and opportunities will ensure the next generation will inherit much more (Survey respondent #22).

Our organisation is improving employment opportunities, social, transport, legal, vocational outcomes and wellbeing of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons so that they can excel and achieve in every aspect of their lives. All our members are Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander, the community has a say in everything we do. We are reclaiming our cultural values of sharing, caring and respect to achieve a level of health and wellbeing equal to that of every other population in Australia (Survey Respondent #31).

We are providing a culturally safe service for our community to ensure the health and wellbeing; social and emotional cultural needs are being met. We are ensuring our children in out of home care are being cared for and managed by an Aboriginal service that can meet the cultural needs of our children. We providing fulltime employment to our community/staff members which have led to security in terms of homeownership and higher education opportunities (Survey respondent #5).

Creating opportunities and driving the change across several facets of society through education employment, enterprise, health and wellbeing. These experiences and opportunities will ensure the next generation will inherit much more (Survey Respondent #28).

These responses also give some insight into the broader societal and economic returns that urban First Nations organisations provide through employment generation, increased labour force participation, and the promotion of Indigenous equality and improved life outcomes for urban First Nations people through education, employment, and enterprise.

Community organising, creating organisations and community development

The survey also set out to capture the reasons why First Nations people establish First Nations organisations in urban localities to advance understandings about their societal function. Based on the reasons provided during the yarning circles, we chose to include a series of questions in the survey that would allow us to establish the degree to which community development and self-determination factored in the establishment of First Nations organisations in urban localities. First, the survey contained a question asking respondents to choose one of eight development models that best reflects the model of their organisation at the time of establishment (see Table 2). The development models reflected those of the partner FNOs and other three Western Sydney FNOs that participated in the first FNDC. The purpose of this question was again to establish whether organisations were established for the purpose of service delivery only, or whether they were established to fulfil a broader community development agenda (i.e. a process where community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems) as was the case among our six partner organisations. Rather than simply asking if organisations were established to (a) engage in service delivery or (b) community development, we identified a range of development agendas among the nine FNDC organisations and used these to identify if there are nuances in organisations' development models.

Table 2 Development model at time of organisation's establishment

Development model	%
Model 1: Our organisation was established as a result of First Nations people coming together as a form of Indigenous activism to address the needs of First Nations people and communities in a specific locality. Our relationship with the wider First Nations community in this locality has always been strong and we have engaged First Nations peoples in the development of our programs and initiatives, seeking information and opinions, as well as involving various leaders, Elders and First Nations people in the development of our initiatives and programs. We have created some great programs and initiatives along the way. These programs were very responsive to the needs of First Nations people and communities in this locality.	27%
Model 2: Our organisation was established as a result of First Nations people coming together as a form of Indigenous activism to engage in community economic development in a specific locality. It has created local social infrastructure aiming at both improving the economic outcomes and the social conditions of First Nations people (e.g. by creating services such as affordable housing, First Nations medical services, and First Nations child care services, etc.) while creating jobs and opportunities for First Nations people.	8%
Model 3: Our organisation was established by a small group of First Nations people who came together to address a pressing social problem(s) experienced by First Nations people and communities. It has involved a great deal of community engagement in terms of the development of our organisation and its programs.	16%
Model 4: Our organisation was established by First Nations people to engage in community-driven development in terms of shifting the reliance on governments in the delivery of services for First Nations people in a specific area (e.g. housing, childcare, justice, disability services).	3%
Model 5: Our organisation was established under national or state legislation, so it already had a clear mandate set at the state/national level.	8%
Model 6: Our organisation was created by one or more First Nations people as a First Nations social enterprise in that the initiatives and programs we create and provide have both a market focus and fulfil a social and/or cultural purpose.	14%
Model 7: Our organisation was established by a small group of First Nations people to create programs and services and to advocate for systemic change in relation to a particular social problem as it is experienced by First Nations people.	3%
Model 8: Our organisation was established by a small group of First Nations people to create a particular service(s). That is, it was created as a First Nations service delivery organisation only.	5%
Other (qualitative response provided)	11%

As Table 2 shows, 95% of respondents to this question indicate that their organisation was not established for 'service delivery only' (n=43 quantitative & n=6 qualitative). Nearly 90% were established to address local agendas and engaged with community to some degree. The other 8% indicated that their organisation had been

established under state or national legislation.[5] Of those, the results suggest that the two main reasons why First Nations people come together to establish organisations in urban localities is to address:

1. 'the needs of First Nations people and communities in a specific locality', or
2. 'a pressing social problem(s) experienced by First Nations people and communities'.

Community was involved in the organisations' establishment in the following way:

1. 'Our relationship with the wider First Nations community in this locality has always been strong and we have engaged First Nations peoples in the development of our programs and initiatives, seeking information and opinions, as well as involving various leaders, Elders and First Nations people in the development of our initiatives and programs. We have created some great programs and initiatives along the way. These programs were very responsive to the needs of First Nations people and communities in this locality.'
2. 'It has involved a great deal of community engagement in terms of the development of our organisation and its programs.'

Six organisations (11%) chose to give an open-ended response to this question, rather than check one of the boxes. Examples of their responses are as follows:

> *Our organisation was created by a small group of First Nations people to create access to Country for caring responsibilities and to share this knowledge with other people (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) (Survey respondent #33).*

> *It was a fairly small group of local Aboriginal people who wanted to get some employment happening around the Lismore area – not activists in the radical sense, but they were the people involved in getting community services going and improving the lot of youth and improving economic prospects of local people so they were involved in setting up other organisations and programs. While funding restrictive, we are building better connections – most of the work we do is once the person gets the job (Survey respondent #39).*

The qualitative responses also show that community-controlled First Nations organisations in SUAs not only involve community in the programs and governance of their organisations, but give a 'voice' to community; they occupy and operate in these spaces 'to be a voice for their needs' (Survey respondent #4) and 'to be a voice for the most vulnerable people in community' (Survey respondent #52).

Only two survey respondents indicated that their organisation was established to 'create a particular service' and to be 'a First Nations service delivery organisation only'. Importantly, their individual responses to other questions, including their qualitative responses to a number of quantitative questions, illustrates how their notion of Indigenous service delivery is also framed in a different way to that of governments and public officials in relation to an Indigenous service market mentality in which First Nations organisations and mainstream not-for-profit organisations compete to deliver services to First Nations people in urban localities. For example, survey respondent #52 identified that their organisation was established to deliver services to First Nations people but, in an open-ended response, described the organisation's role as: 'providing an alternative model to mainstream providers with a cultural framework, it supports the community perspective of how change can occur' (Survey respondent 52). That same organisation indicated in its quantitative responses that it considered the most important values of its organisation as the following: that we engage with First Nation peoples holistically (in terms of our history, culture, identity and healing as First Nation peoples); that we are an organisation that First

[5] Only 8% (n=5) of survey respondents indicated that their organisations had been established under national or state legislation.

Nation peoples and the wider community/ies can trust; that we provide a culturally safe space; that we are an inclusive organisation; that we respect the First Nation peoples and community we serve; that we are an honest, open and transparent organisation; that our organisation embodies a notion of First Nation power that is appropriate to First Nation 'cultures; that we have a heart (and compassion); that we make a difference in First Nations peoples' lives; and, that we create pathways and hope for future generations. Together, the qualitative responses to various questions reveal how its societal obligations, and certain principles, shape the way this organisation operates in a service context.

Again, while survey respondent #31 identified that their organisation was established for 'service provision only', the open-ended comments in response to this question illuminate how Indigenous societal obligations – ways of being and ways of doing – affect the way that organisation operates in a service context.

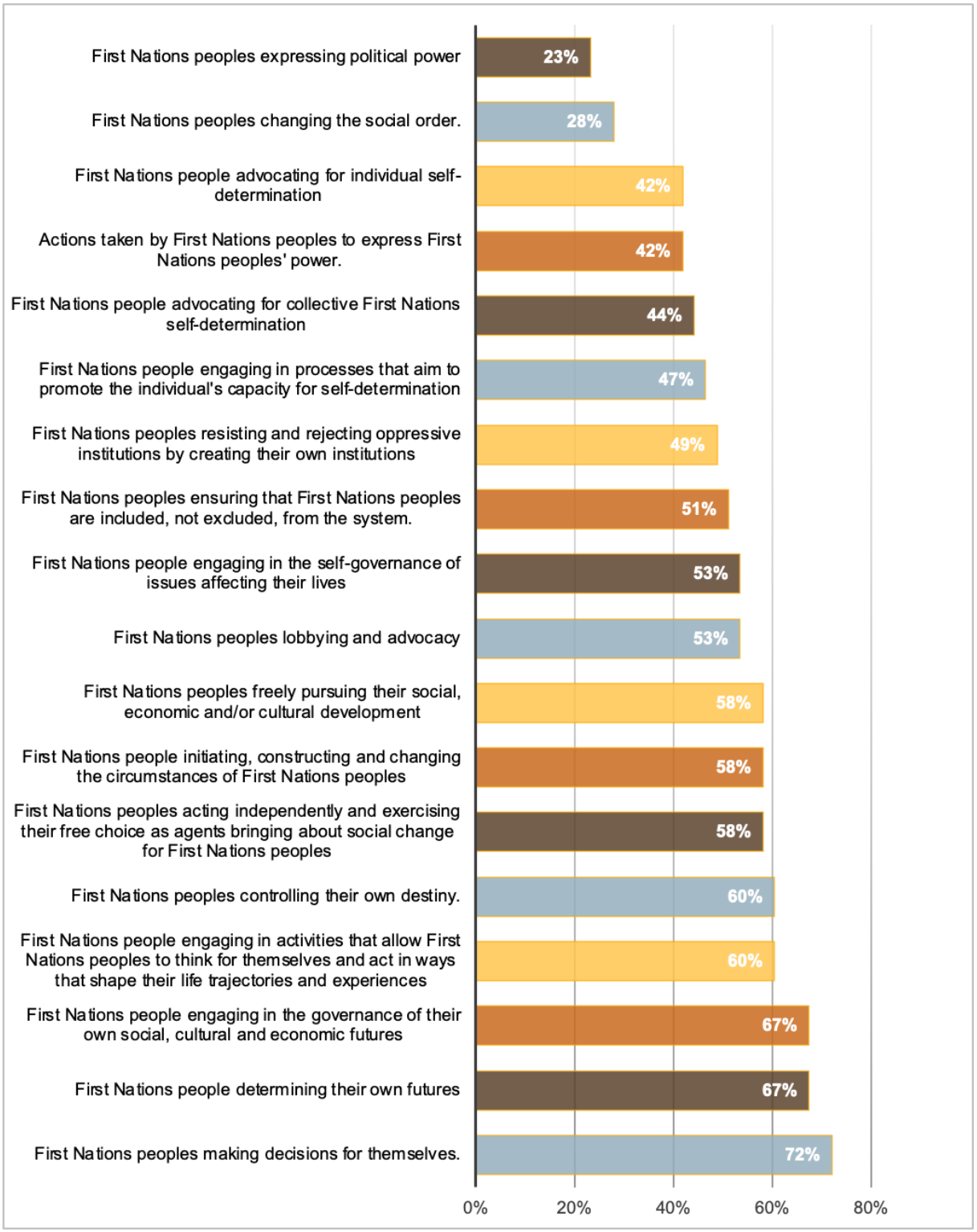
> *We are an employment service. However, how we do business very much reflects our cultural values and ways of doing business. We were approached by the local airport to employ an Administrative Trainee, and they wanted a Traditional Owner. It opened a can of worms. Our TOs [Traditional Owners] and Elders engaged through the Board direct us to go and speak to others. TOs were particularly concerned about contamination of wetland from foam firefighters' use at the airport getting into the wetland. I went to one of our Board Members who is a TO and that TO contacted an Elder before I contacted that person and then I spoke with that person and then she put me in contact with other people and then I had two TO applicants and two Aboriginal applicants that we then engaged with the corporation to take up a merit-based process from there. I then had to report back to the Elder and report back how I had done that process according to protocols and instructions and that is the complex way of being an Aboriginal organisation and the way you do business (Survey respondent #31).*

This example illustrates the complex space that First Nations organisations navigate in the process of providing Indigenous services. Indigenous ways of being and ways of doing (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003), including Indigenous protocols – such as understanding how to navigate the complexities of engaging traditional owners and Elders in decision-making about suitable Aboriginal applicants for a position at a local airport – are front and centre of organisational practices in providing an employment placement service.

We also asked survey respondents to indicate all actions from a pre-defined list that best describes the establishment of their organisation. The purpose of this question was to not only establish whether self-determination was a factor in the establishment of urban First Nations organisations, but to find out what self-determination means to these organisations (see Fig. 2).

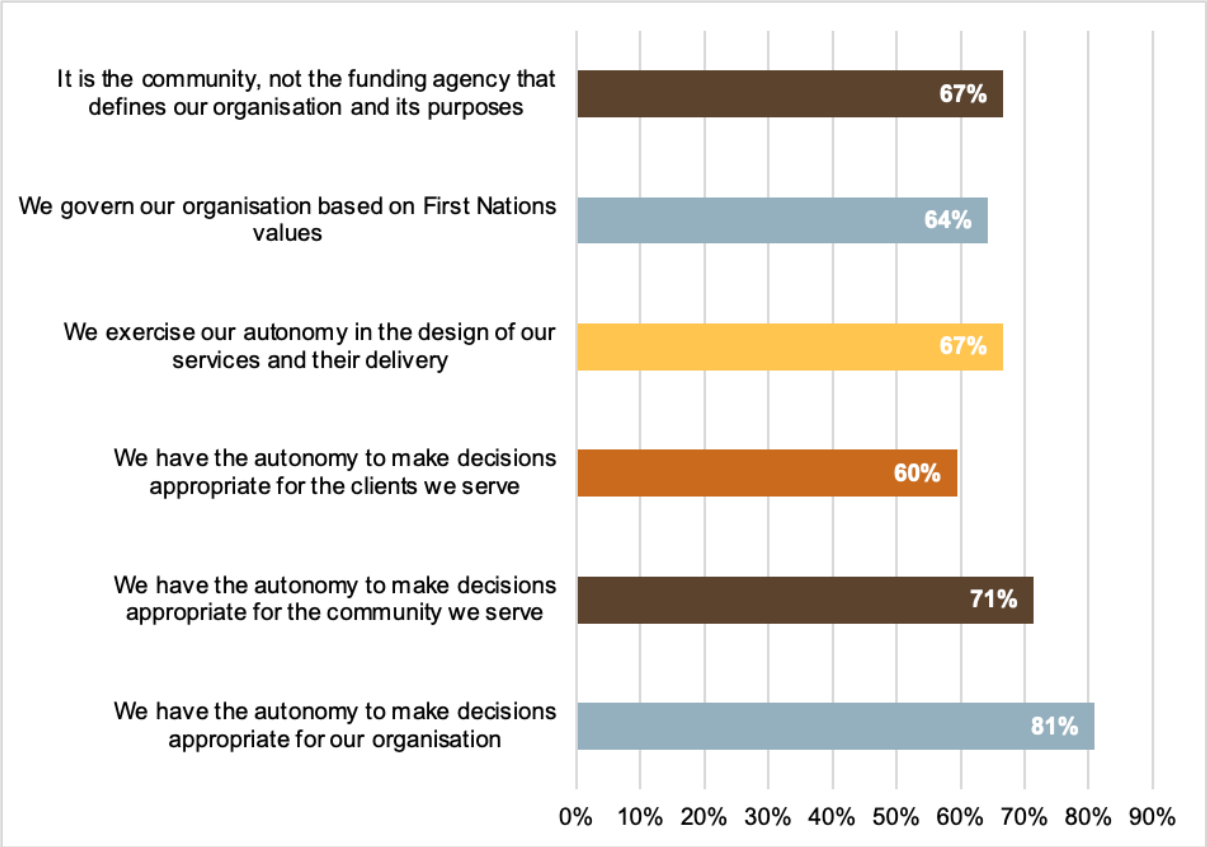
Over 80% of survey respondents answered this question (n=43). From the responses chosen, it is possible to assert that the main reason why urban First Nations people establish organisations is not about expressing First Nations power, or even political power, or changing the social order; the main reason is the ability to engage in self-determination. That is, it is predominately about First Nations people making decisions for themselves (72%); First Nations people engaging in the governance of their own social, cultural and economic futures (67%); First Nations people determining their own futures (67%); and controlling their own destinies (60%).

Fig. 2 Actions that best describe motivations for the establishment of First Nations organisations



Next, survey respondents were asked to indicate what self-determination means in the context of their organisation, based on a pre-determined list of indicators developed by the representative from five of our six partner organisations (Fig. 3). Respondents were able to choose all indicators that applied to their organisation.

Fig. 3 Self-determination in the context of a First Nations organisation



Again, over 80% of survey respondents answered the quantitative component of this question. While nearly 65% of those who responded to this question chose all six options, demonstrating the important value or aim of self-determination to the way that organisations intend to operate, the majority (81%) indicated that self-determination primarily relates to the capacity to make decisions appropriate for their organisation. Self-determination is also about having the autonomy to make decisions appropriate for the community they serve (71%). It is about community defining an organisation's purpose (not funding agencies) (67%). It is about autonomy to design services and their delivery (67%). It is about governing organisations based on First Nations values (64%).

Seven survey respondents (i.e. 17% of respondents) provided a qualitative response only. Examples of their responses are as follows.

> *Self-determination is the ability to make an informed decision without fear of reprisal. Something that we have to fight for constantly (Survey respondent #8).*

> *Self-determination and leadership are paramount to success in conjunction with funding opportunities to build capacity (Survey respondent #22).*

> *Self-determination is about getting land back. And then working with community to establish economic development that is ecologically and culturally friendly without the interference of local council and/government DA processes (Survey respondent #51).*

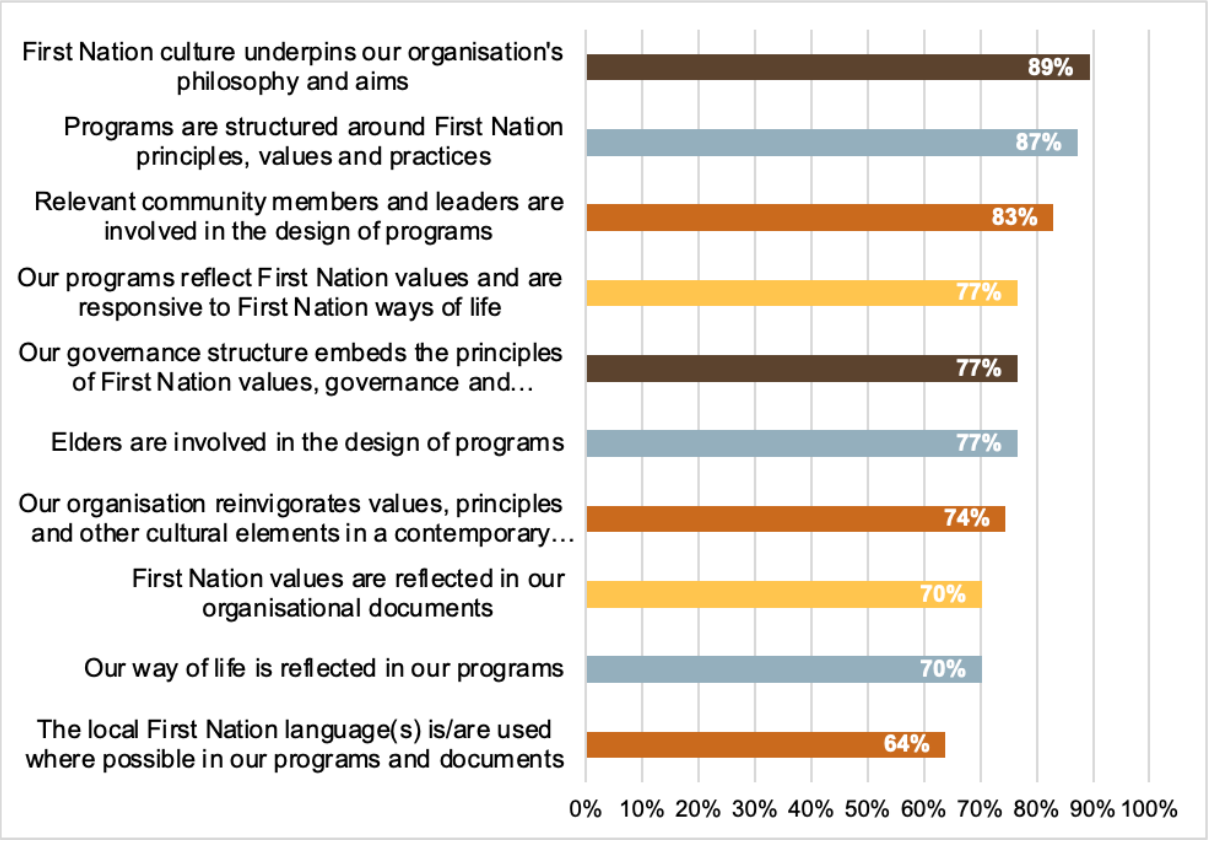
Community development and self-determination are clearly key reasons for establishing urban First Nations organisations.

Culture (values, principles, protocols and ways of being in the world) as integral to the way First Nations organisations do business

In addition to understanding the degree to which community development and self-determination factor in the establishment of urban First Nations organisations, the survey set out to establish if it was possible to identify an Indigenous organisational ontology among urban First Nations organisations, such as a common purpose (distinctive societal function) and organisational values (distinctive societal obligations). For example, this could include the ways that First Nations organisations embed Indigenous culture into the practices of their organisations and engage First Nations people and communities in the development of their organisational practices and day-to-day operations. Representatives from our partner First Nations organisations developed the indicators for each question in this section of the survey.

Survey respondents were asked to indicate how First Nations culture (values, principles, protocols and ways of being in the world) is incorporated into the way they do business (see Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 How First Nations culture (values, principles, protocols and ways of being in the world) is incorporated into the way organisations do business

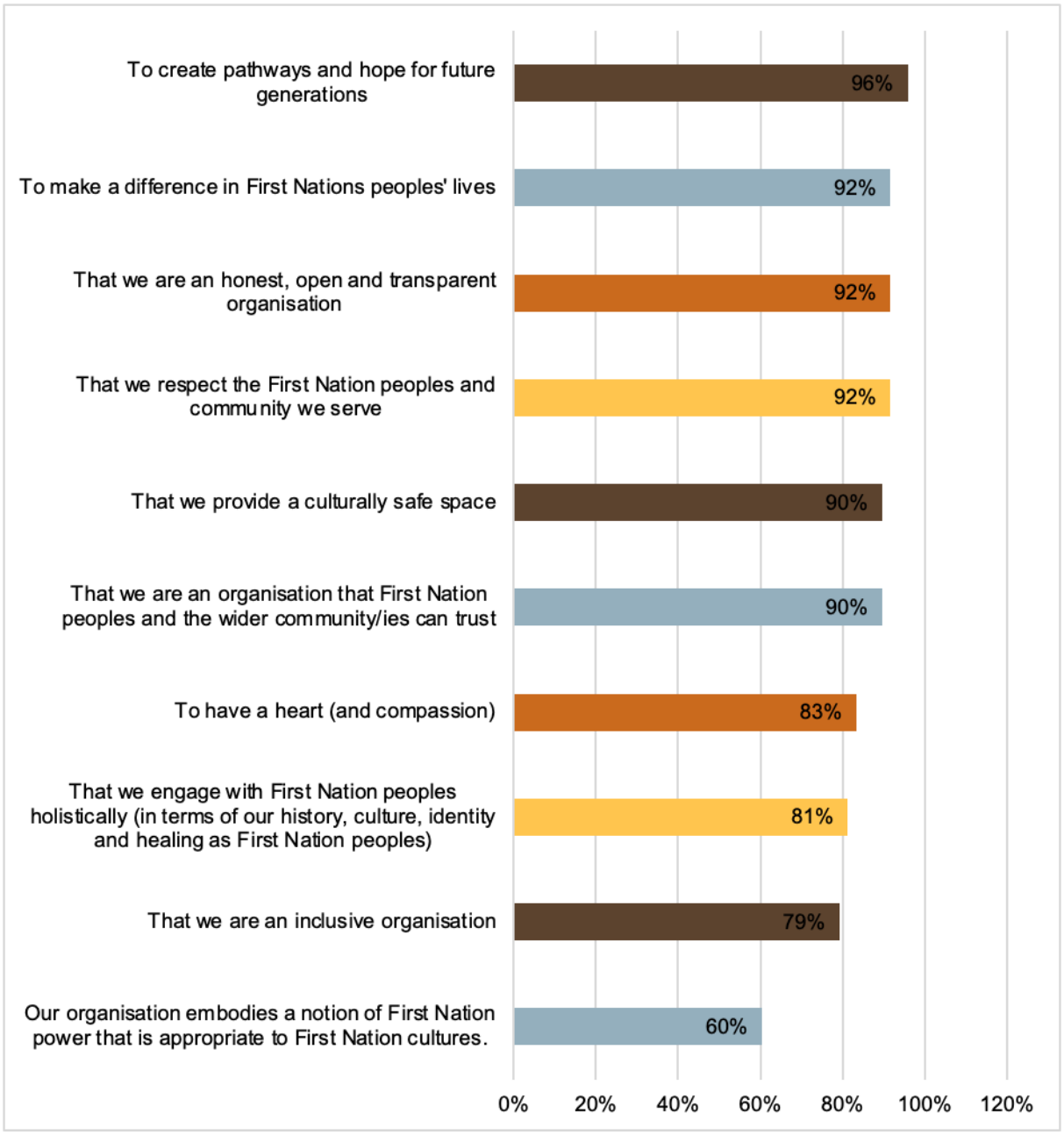


Of the survey respondents who completed this question, 47 provided a quantitative response and five provided a qualitative answer. Nearly 90% indicated that 'First Nations culture underpins our organisation's philosophy and aims' (89%, n=42) and 'programs are structured around First Nations principles, values and practices' (87%, n=41). Over 80% indicated that 'relevant community members and leaders are involved in the design of programs' (83%, n=36). Over 70% indicated that: 'our programs reflect First Nations values and are responsive to First Nations ways of life' (77%, n=36); 'our governance structure embeds the principles of First Nation values, governance and societal obligations (77%, n=36); 'Elders are involved in the design of programs' (77%, n=36); 'our organisation reinvigorates values, principles and other cultural elements in a contemporary political

and economic reality' (74%, n=35); and, 'First Nations values are reflected in our organisational documents' (70%, n=33). Nearly 65% indicate that 'the local First Nations language(s) is/are used where possible in our programs and documents' (64%, n=30).

Survey respondents were then asked to identify from a list of nine values those that they considered to be the most important values of their organisation (see Fig. 5). A total of 48 survey respondents answered this question.

Fig. 5 What organisations consider to be the most important values of their organisation



As Fig. 5 indicates, 60% of respondents to this question chose all nine values. Over 90% of respondents identify that the most important values of their organisation are: creating pathways and hope for future generations (96%, n=46); making a difference in First Nations peoples' lives (92%, n=44); being an honest, open and transparent organisation (92%, n=44); respecting the First Nations people they serve (92%, n=44); providing a

culturally safe place (90%, n=43); and being an organisation that First Nations peoples and the wider community/ties can trust (90%, n=43) (see Fig. 5).

The survey also included an open-ended question asking respondents to describe what they think their organisation's social purpose is in relation to First Nations peoples. The following are examples of the qualitative responses to this question.

> *We place culture, healing, true lived experience, deep community connections and self-determination at the centre of all we do. We embody and embed holistic, community-based, decolonising approaches to connecting First Nations people to their cultural, inner and community strength. We advocate and collaborate to improve justice and child protection systems (Survey respondent #25).*

> *To build community, return knowledge, remember, support and continue cultural practices that strengthen the individual and community; heal the people and heal the land; work alongside non-cultural organisations to support all to build tolerance, understanding and harmony to achieve these outcomes (Survey respondent #45).*

> *By continuing to be a place of knowledge, education and social inclusion of all First Nations Peoples. By involving community in the programs and governance of the organisation. Through preparing the younger generations to move into roles and structures with their cultural power (Survey respondent #30).*

These responses illustrate how First Nation culture (values, principles, protocols and ways of being in the world) are reflected in the way that organisations operate.

Survey respondents were then asked: 'In which of the following ways is culture embedded in the governance of your organisation (please select all relevant options)?' They were given a list of 28 indicators of the potential ways that culture is embedded in the governance of their organisation and asked to identify those which applied to the governance of their organisation (see Table 3). The indicators predominately concerned the organisations' engagement with community, alongside other cultural obligations, as being core to First Nations practices of governance. A total of 44 respondents answered this question.

Of those who answered this question, nearly 90% of organisations considered that they had a good knowledge of the different cultural First Nations groups in community (86%, n=38) (see Table 3). A high value was placed on local community connections and support from community (84%, n=37). This extends to open, honest and fairness in dealings with leaders, Elders, traditional owners and the wider community (82%, n=36), and celebrating NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Commemoration) week and other important cultural events (80%, n=35).

Survey respondents were then asked 'In what ways does your organisation engage with First Nations peoples and communities in the development of its mission, aims and programs (please select all relevant options)?' A total of 13 options were provided (see Figure 6). Of the 52 survey respondents, 44 answered this question.

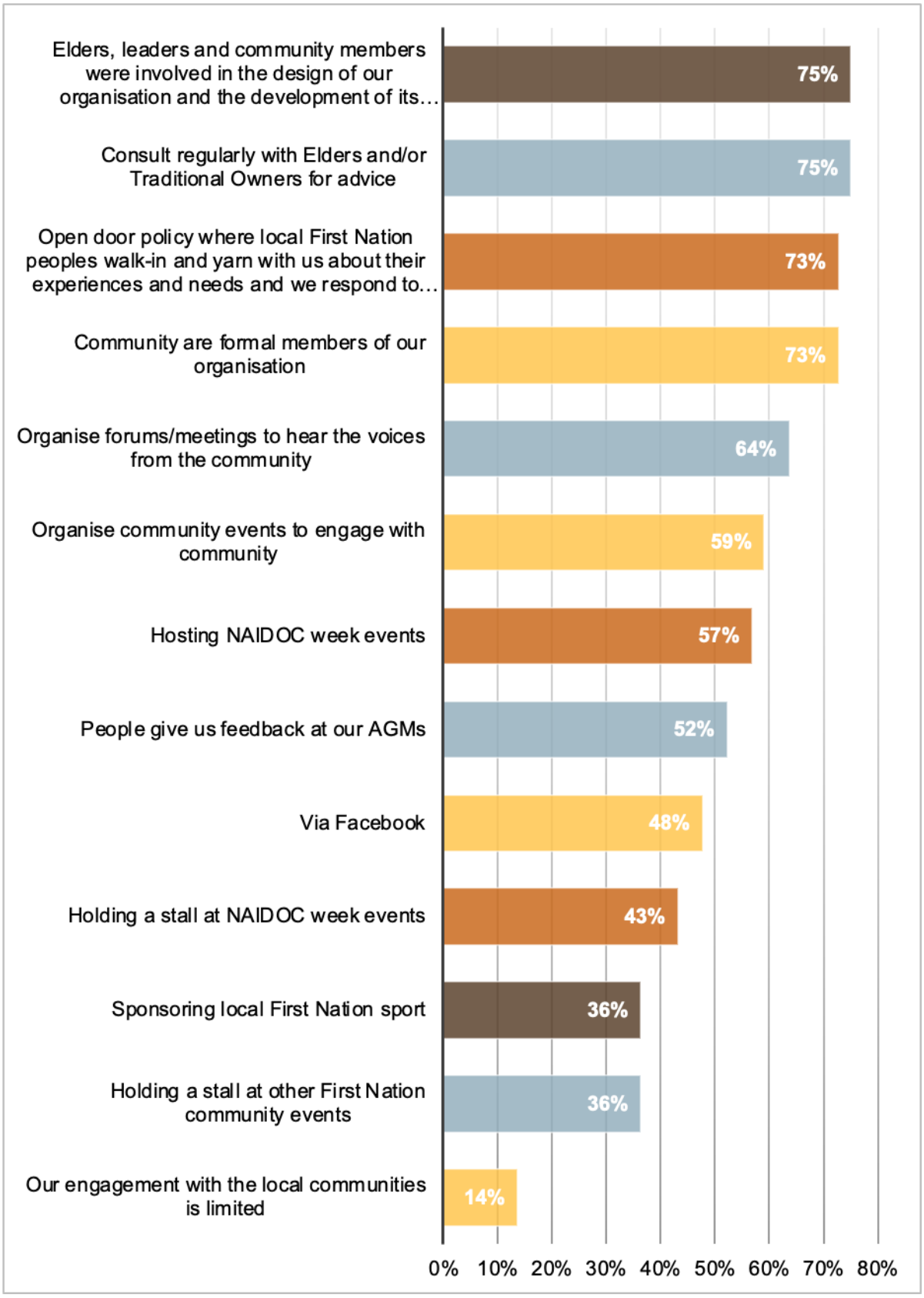
Three-quarters of those who answered this question indicated that 'Elders, leaders and community members had been involved in (a) 'the design of their organisation and the development of its vision/aims from the beginning and (b) their organisation 'consults regularly with Elders and/or Traditional Owners for advice' (75%, n=33) (see Fig. 6). Nearly 75% indicated that they have an open door policy where local First Nations people walk-in and yarn with them about their experiences and needs and that they respond to those walk-ins (73%, n=32) and 'community are formal members of their organisations' (73%, n=32).

Table 3 How culture is embedded in the governance of organisation

Indicator	%
Our organisation's mandate is not community-driven but issue-driven from a First Nations perspective	32%
We have community forums that inform the directions and decisions of our board	41%
We keep leaders, Elders and the community informed about funding and our capacity to deliver in terms of meeting community-identified needs	50%
Our organisation reflects the governance history of this locality	55%
Our board and leaders are chosen in a way that reflects the governance history of this locality	55%
Attachment to Country and there is a role for traditional owners in making decisions about how our organisation operates on Country	57%
We have strong internal relationships and a clear idea of group and kinship memberships of First Nations peoples accessing our organisation and its programs and services	57%
We don't impose change on the community, but engage the community in decision-making about our organisation	57%
Our governance arrangements have cultural legitimacy	57%
Our corporation's rule book embeds First Nations culture and governance practices into our corporation	59%
Mutual responsibility between our organisation and First Nations peoples	59%
We report back to leaders, Elders and the community on our progress and any problems we experience	59%
Our board and management are constantly out in the community speaking with First Nations peoples	59%
We keep leaders, Elders and the community informed about the direction our organisation is heading and our strategic vision and plan	64%
The community are voting members of our organisation	64%
A collective community focus in which our organisation thinks of itself in terms of its affiliation with local First Nation communities	66%
We are accountable to the different groups and families in the local community (not just one or two)	66%
High value is placed on local Elders and leaders and support from Elders, including respecting the authority of local Elders	68%
We deliver services and outcomes that we promised to the community	73%
We provide a flexible work space to allow staff to fulfil cultural responsibilities (e.g. sorry business)	73%

Our organisation operates in accordance with First Nations cultural values, practices and protocols and ways of doing business	75%
We are respected in the local community	75%
Our organisation employs First Nations staff	75%
We have strong networks within and with the community	80%
We celebrate NAIDOC week and other important cultural events	80%
Open, honest and fair in our dealing with leaders, Elders, Traditional Owners and the wider community	82%
High value placed on local community connections and support from community	84%
Good knowledge of the different cultural First Nations groups in our community	86%

Fig. 6 Ways organisations engage with First Nations peoples and communities in the development of its mission, aims and programs



Survey respondents were then given the opportunity to briefly describe First Nations governance as it applies to how their organisation does business via an open-ended qualitative question. Examples of the qualitative responses provided are as follows.

> *The concept of Aboriginal governance is important because the principles and practices of corporate governance cannot be separated from their political, institutional, ideological and cultural contexts. There is a growing recognition that Aboriginal corporate governance correlates to real self-determination and targeted responses to population health and psychosocial needs. Although Aboriginal peoples values include obligations based on kinship relationships, it would be naïve to believe that Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation [ACCO] board directors are not required to balance cultural and community expectations with their legal, ethical and fiscal obligations as any other board. ACCO board directors manage the potential conflicts between the two 'belief systems' of cementing the cultural integrity of the organisation, whilst ensuring the compliance of regulatory and funding requirements are ensured. Effective governance in ACCOs acknowledges the differences in 'legislated' governance standards and the traditional or historical values that have underpinned the establishment of the services, and works through these differences. Getting this right means that the boards can 'govern' and have their say in the community-focused operations and decision making that impacts upon their communities (ensuring their communities have services, setting the strategic directions, developing the shared vision and so on) while the 'business' side of the services and day to day operations can be managed and run by the CEOs and staff who have the necessary training and skills to meet the corporate governance requirements of the mainstream funders and regulatory bodies (Survey respondent #11).*

> *Aboriginal governance for our organisation is utilising Aboriginal ways of being, knowing, and doing and formalising this within our structure. It encompasses how we care for country, arrange ceremony, manage and share resources, and pass on cultural knowledge (Survey respondent #19).*

> *We listen to our community and our decision making is based on those views while ensuring the rights of all individuals are respected. To act in the best interests of the individual in regard to their rights to equality, fairness and justice is to act in the best interests of the community (Survey respondent #33).*

> *Within the organisation both law and lore are considered from all perspectives. First Nations law and lore is foremost but non-cultural law is respected and applied to meet legislative requirements and ensure the business is both financially and socially viable (Survey respondent #38).*

A key theme emerging from the qualitative responses to this question concern the embedding of First Nations culture in the way organisations are governed, including that organisations are fundamentally community focused.

Discussion

In his Foreword to *CtG2020*, the former Prime Minister Scott Morrison outlines that the primary change across all levels of Australian policy is a '…focus on how we deliver services, as well as what is being delivered, and on solutions, not problems' (COAG, 2020, p. 1). As the then Prime Minister explained, the way forward for governments 'to chang[e] the way we work … expanding the opportunities for shared decision-making…. It means making sure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have better access to high-quality services, including building community-controlled sectors … without this, we can have no meaningful action and no real progress' (COAG 2020, p. 1).

While an important shift in policy, *CtG2020* is actually about service innovation or social innovation in government service delivery in the era of NPM (Howard-Wagner, forthcoming). While innovative and potentially

empowering, there is no shift in policy understandings about the societal role of urban First Nations organisations, this policy framing situates community-controlled First Nations organisations as organisations initiated and operated by local communities to deliver holistic, comprehensive, and culturally appropriates services to people in community. In part, there is some alignment between the perspective of senior position-holders of community-controlled organisations in SUAs in NSW and mainstream policy perspectives (see Table 4). At the same time, however, the fundamental distinction is that while *CtG2020* situates community-controlled First Nations organisations within a service delivery mentality at the federal and state level, their societal role is limited to service provision.

Table 4 Alignment between state/Indigenous perspectives on societal function of First Nations organisations

First Nations perspective	***CtG2020* perspective**
Building community infrastructure, community and cultural function, and service provision	Service provision
Services designed through engagement with community and designed and delivered in accordance with Indigenous values, principles, protocols and ways of being in the world	Services designed through engagement with community & culturally appropriate services
Community-control (autonomy)	Community-control (partnerships)
Self-determination (making decisions about social, cultural and economic needs)	Self-determination (over service delivery)
Voice (for community about their needs)	Voice (in service delivery)
Indigenous recovery, cultural resurgence and continuity, intergenerational visions, improving life outcomes and wellbeing	17 national target initiatives

CtG2020, at the federal and state level, aims to close the gap, increasing the involvement of First Nations people in the design and delivery of government services, and returning control of First Nations governance around closing the gap to First Nations peoples. If its aims are realised, this policy will significantly change how governments do business with First Nations organisations in a way that should increase community control and self-determination. These pledges to community control come with commitments to increase the amount of funding provided to First Nations organisations. However, the data here shows that *CtG2020* misses the fact that urban First Nations organisations play an important societal and cultural function, which goes well beyond service delivery; that a far more expansive definition of self-determination is manifest in the data; and, even Indigenous service delivery is framed differently for an Indigenous perspective. The societal role of First Nations organisations in SUAs in NSW include building community, community development, Indigenous recovery, returning knowledge, continuing cultural practices, healing people and land, formulating approaches to decolonisation, connecting First Nations people to their cultural, inner and community strengths, and self-governance. The data demonstrates that self-determination, community, recovery, culture, and governance are key social purposes of urban community-controlled First Nations organisations.

Speaking back to a service delivery mentality, the survey results from a representative cohort of senior position-holders from community-controlled First Nations organisations in SUAs in NSW provide three important insights. First, the societal functions of community-controlled First Nations organisations in SUAs in NSW goes well beyond government service delivery. Those functions include building and developing community, such as the creation of community infrastructure (including gathering places and initiatives and activities that create and foster community), cultural education, systemic advocacy, cultural resurgence, healing community, and community development. These are the ways organisations seek to improve life outcomes for First Nations people living in urban areas. As one survey respondent indicates, First Nations organisations 'place culture, healing, true lived experience, deep community connections, and self-determination at the centre of all we do' (Survey respondent 25).

Second, while there is some overlap between how *CtG2020* defines self-determination with the survey findings for what self-determination means in the context of their organisations, there are important differences. Organisational self-determination goes beyond asserting control over service delivery to self-determination over First Nations cultural, social and economic development with First Nations peoples making decisions about their own cultural, social, and economic needs – which is consistent with international agreements such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Self-determination over cultural, social and economic development concerns the right to build and develop community, such as creating community infrastructure (including gathering places and initiatives and activities that create and foster community), engaging in cultural education, engaging in systemic advocacy, continuing cultural resurgence, healing community, and improving life outcomes and wellbeing among local First Nations people. So, at a very practical level, the results demonstrate that urban First Nations organisations do a lot of additional work in community around self-determination that does not fall within the current bounds of service delivery as contained within the policy of *CtG2020*.

Third, the results show that the way organisations deliver services goes well beyond that of delivering culturally appropriate services. Organisations place a high value on adhering to First Nation values, principles, protocols and ways of being in the world in operating their organisations and doing business with and on behalf of communities. Adhering to these values, principles, protocols and ways of being in the world add to the work that community-controlled First Nations organisations do. This work remains unfunded (Howard-Wagner et al., 2022). That is, a service delivery mentality does not accommodate these broader societal functions of urban First Nations organisations nor does it provide the financial support to develop and implement such aspirations for community-control over cultural, social and economic development.

So, coming back to the organisation–society relationship, particular attention was devoted to the organisational model and functional purpose that characterised why First Nations people establish First Nations organisations in urban localities. What the responses from a cohort of senior position-holders from community-controlled First Nations organisations in SUAs in NSW tells us is that the functional motivations for establishing community-controlled organisations in SUAs, reveal that First Nations people come together to create organisations that are multifaceted societal, cultural and political actors whose function is to improve the cultural, social, political, and economic life outcomes of First Nations people. They have multiple societal purposes. The way they operate and do business upholds and promotes cultural protocols, values and ways of being in the world. They offer more than services to First Nations people and what First Nations organisations do expresses their distinct cultural values, using the organisation as a model and catalyst for social change, self-determination and Indigenous recovery. The intergenerational visions and agendas of those who create First Nations organisations are directed beyond service delivery to Indigenous recovery, cultural continuity, development, and self-government. This is the place of First Nations organisations in Indigenous society and, sociologically, this is what we mean by the organisation–society relationship. Understanding the organisation–society relationship allows us to conceptually and organisationally distinguish community-controlled First Nations organisations from

the service-delivering organisations of the broader not-for-profit and for-profit sector that deliver government services to First Nations people in urban localities.

Conclusion

It is limiting to think of urban First Nations organisations as service providers only. Our research confirmed the existence of an identifiable cohort perspective among senior position-holders of First Nations organisations in SUAs in NSW, which rests on the fact that First Nations organisations are Indigenous relational and societal entities and agents of Indigenous society. The cohort perspective confirms the reasons why First Nations people living in urban areas establish First Nations organisations and what First Nations people identify as the function of these organisations. It reveals that they provide self-determination, community development, autonomy and agency for urban First Nations people, as well as improving life outcomes for First Nations people (Howard-Wagner, 2021). The intergenerational visions and agendas of urban First Nations organisations are directed beyond service delivery to Indigenous recovery, cultural continuity, development, and self-government. Self-determination, community, recovery, culture, and governance are the key social purposes of urban First Nations organisations.

The insights provided in this paper are only possible because it is based on research produced in close collaboration with First Nations people who have established and/or manage First Nations organisations. Our methodology of co-designed research and co-written paper ensures that the results presented here are an accurate reflection of the real-world realities of the societal function of community-controlled First Nations organisations in SUAs of NSW. By capturing the perspectives of senior position-holders as to the societal function of organisations, we were able to illuminate the way in which *CtG2020* falls short of Indigenous aspirations for their organisations, particularly around the societal function of their organisations.

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