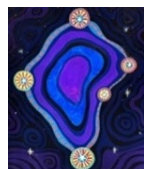


# INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE OF DEVELOPMENT: SELF-DETERMINATION AND SUCCESS

AN OCCASIONAL NEWSLETTER FROM THE IGD PROJECT

Vol. 1, No. 2, February 2022



CAEPR



Australian  
National  
University

## Acknowledgement

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*We acknowledge and celebrate the First Australians*

*on whose traditional lands we meet and work,*

*who have never ceded self-governance over their countries,*

*and whose cultures are among the oldest continuing cultures in human history.*

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

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*Photo 1: on Country at Eromanga (source: QSNTS Eromanga Trip)*

## Upcoming publications & tools

The IGD Project Team has been busy writing for our special series of discussion papers to be released as joint publications from AIGI and CAEPR. Keep an eye out for them 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)

### Podcasts of Governance Seminar series

In the last few months of 2021, IGD researchers and partners featured in a series of seminars showcasing their research case studies and emerging insights.

These seminars were part of CAEPR's ongoing seminar series. You can check out the podcast recordings using the links below.

#### Wednesday July 2021

**Lara Driberg (AIGI) and Diane Smith (CAEPR)** speaking on "*Governing the Pandemic*"

<https://caepr.cass.anu.edu.au/events/governing-pandemic-role-indigenous-organisations>

#### Wednesday 3 November

**Felicity Thiessen (QSNTS)** speaking on "*People, place and partnerships: A model for governing native title*"

<https://caepr.cass.anu.edu.au/events/people-place-and-partnership-model-leveraging-and-governing-native-title>

#### Wednesday 17 November

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

<https://caepr.cass.anu.edu.au/events/indigenous-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*"

<https://caepr.cass.anu.edu.au/events/aboriginal-community-governance-black-summer-bushfires>

## Research Insight:

### Getting Back on Country Together: Place-Based Governance Re-Learning

Late last year, members of the Boonthamurra Nation travelled back to their lands out in far south-western Queensland. After fighting long and hard for a successful native title determination, they wanted to hold their PBC annual general meeting on country, and spend time together talking about their hopes for the future and their own collective governance. Their trip to Eromanga out in far west Queensland demonstrated a way for the dispersed members of a First Nation to kickstart a conversation about their self-governance. It 'simply' involved getting back out onto their country together. Of course it was anything but simple, because it involved considerable planning, logistics, funding, and hard work so that Boonthamurra people living throughout Queensland could come together at Eromanga. But as many said afterwards, getting back to their country, as a group, was a powerfully healing way to start talking about their own ways of governing and hopes for the future. The insights in this story draw on Boonthamurra and QSNTS staff discussions about the trip.

Indigenous ways of governing in today's world has become an important issue for many First Nations like Boonthamurra who are trying to use the leverage they've gained from winning land and native title rights, to deliver a better life for their families. But there are major gaps in our understanding of how people go about getting started on the road to rebuilding their relationships, their trust in each other, and their confidence in making decisions and exercising authority together. All these things are critical parts of Indigenous governing, but are especially challenging to achieve in the context of alien governance structures and rules imposed by settler colonialism over the generations.



*Photo 2. Eromanga (source: QSNTS Eromanga Trip)*

In the IGD Project, we are seeing Indigenous groups working to reclaim their collective governing authority, in ways they feel have cultural validity and strength. Many are trying to do this at the same time as being under enormous pressures from negotiating with external parties, and getting quick development happening for their members. These conditions makes it hard for groups to find time, energy and a safe space to work on their own governance rebuilding priorities. As a result, self-governance rebuilding often ends up last on the job list. This becomes a self-defeating problem - because having really effective collective governance is a major source of Indigenous strength for actually carrying out negotiations and setting a self-determined development agenda.

While some groups are highly motivated to think about ways they want to rebuild and strengthen their self-governance as a group, the reality for many is that their members are often widely dispersed across large regions and so disconnected from each other, are poorly resourced, and experiencing ill-health and poverty. Many suffer (individually and collectively) from what one Boonthamurra member called the 'sorry business of the past', which now generates community dysfunctions, internal struggles for power, and the marginalisation of women and younger generations from governing authority.

In these contexts, sometimes the most radical governance action is for the members of a group to get back together

again. With the specific intention of talking together about their self-governance.

In other words, before people can start an internal conversation about what kinds of development they want for the future and how they are going to govern to get that happening, they have to be able to spend time together. Time and a space to yarn with each other, renew relationships and do some 'future thinking'. Such things were an everyday part of life in small-scale traditional society, but are now exceedingly hard to do when people are scattered across large distances.

So people and their relationships with each other, and with their lands and waters, are the real starting point for rebuilding self-governance as a group.

If place-based relationships are the bedrock of governance-building, then it follows that what is needed is a different kind of governance conversation – one that is about the kind of collective identity and values people want to build for themselves as a nation and for their future generations.

For Boonthamurra, their 'getting started' conversation became possible because their 'country' is an anchoring place, a creative source for revitalising internal relationships and authority to make decisions. When Boonthamurra members went back to their country for a governance conversation, they began to talk with greater confidence about their ideas and goals, they started to talk about the future. These conversations were invigorated by having the



cultural legitimacy or validity that comes from being and doing it on country. Being back on 'country' offered a transformative space for people, supporting them to talk about the possibilities of working together. Which lies at the heart of self-governance.

The comments by Boonthamurra people (including many younger generations who had never been on their own country, and others who had not been back for a long time) were strikingly emphatic about the positive benefits for them:

- ✓ I enjoyed seeing the younger generation being out on country;
- ✓ Enjoyed seeing the elders out on country;
- ✓ Healing; We always feel that our ancestors are walking with us while on country;
- ✓ Good to see the little cousins walking around on country;
- ✓ Sharing of knowledge from elders;
- ✓ First time seeing Kyabra Creek, it was amazing to see for the first time, I was so grateful to learn traditions from our elders and the sand dune was so beautiful;
- ✓ Exciting to see all our elders on country, and being on country for the first time with my kids, showing them the artefacts that I've had experience seeing myself;
- ✓ The feeling coming back is beautiful. Feeling the sand can't get much better. The heat not so much. Learning everything from my elders is amazing and I can pass things onto everyone in front of me. Hopefully, I can be better next generation moving forward;

- ✓ It's the first time on country and seeing the sites for many of the people here. Seeing how proud our elders were seeing the kids see the sites, one thing I'll never forget is seeing the young fellas following Uncle around looking at all the different campsites;
- ✓ Spiritual side if it – had a drink of the water at Kyabra – it was unreal;
- ✓ Refreshing experience ...and will always cherish it;
- ✓ When you come on country you can feel their presence. This is the second time I've been here and it's good to be back;
- ✓ Coming out of the smoking ceremony was very special for me;
- ✓ It's good to be reunited with the extended family and see all the elders again. I'm really happy to be here and see everyone; [I] could tell in the body language of everyone how proud they all were. ... everyone carried their head higher;
- ✓ The best experience coming back out for first time in so many years – it would've been good if dad was here;
- ✓ Very special to my children on country here... they can't wait to create more memories on country with my siblings and mob.'



Photo 3. Being together at Eromanga (source: QSNTS Eromanga Trip)



Photo 3: Talking governance on Country (source: QSNTS Eromanga Trip)

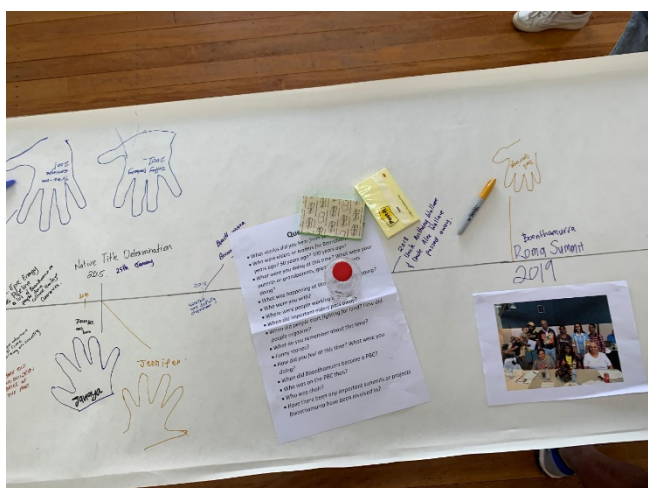


Photo 4: Governance mapping (source: QSNTS Eromanga Trip)



Photo 5: Governance workshop (source: QSNTS Eromanga Trip)

So being on country together with a shared intention to talk about self-governance is a space for reconsidering, relearning and reasserting one's own way of governing. The Eromanga trip suggests this seemingly simple action can be potentially transformative for governance-rebuilding. This happens by:

- (1) Reconnecting, healing and reviving group relationships with each other (that is, starting to think through who is the collective "self" in their future self-governance);
- (2) Physically reconnecting with and knowing the cultural geography of their group governance (that is, being on the lands where their jurisdictional authority is literally 'grounded' and grows from);
- (3) Firing up a stronger experience of their combined potential to act as a place-based polity for governance rebuilding (that is, not simply acting as a corporate organisation or structure, but as a 'nation'); and
- (4) Recognising the link between building collective self-governance, and using that governance to get self-determined development happening (rather than responding to an external development agenda set by outsiders).

Of course starting a conversation together about where to head in the future is only a start. The work of governance rebuilding has to be put into practice over time. The Boonthamurra experience at Eromanga suggests that being 'on country' for place-based conversations will also contribute to the sustainability of governance rebuilding.

### Governance Policy Insights Corner

With the international trend moving towards greater use of E-Governance, the issue of digital access, use and literacy is of critical significance for many Indigenous communities and organisations.

Given the accelerated reliance on digital access by Indigenous organisations and communities during the pandemic, this warrants the fast track formulation of a 'National Indigenous Digital Strategy' with linked funding, and based on 'digital governance' principles and practices determined by First Nations themselves.



## Research Focus:

### 🍷 Electronic Governance: Challenges and Opportunities

Last issue we introduced you to research that Lara Driberg, Dale Sutherland and Diane Smith are undertaking with Indigenous organisations to explore how they have governed during the pandemic. They are documenting the innovative ways Indigenous organisations across Australia made decisions and took action to safeguard their communities. In this issue, we take a closer look at the role of e-Governance.

Rapid changes across the globe in digital technology, infrastructure and the creation of big data platforms have major implications for First Nations in Australia and internationally. The digital transformation of our world is already causing a major shift in the way governance is conducted – from boards and leaders making decisions, through to voting and communication with members, keeping admin, client and financial records, membership lists, and monitoring important business deals and agreements.

Governments and their departments, big industries, small businesses and community organisations are all adopting digital and online Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). These new digital approaches are being referred to as Electronic-Governance or E-Governance.

E-Governance can include using any of the wide range of digital tools, communication devices and applications such as radio, television, mobile/smart phones, computer and network hardware, software applications, satellite systems, and so on. It can also involve the various services associated with them, such as videoconferencing, zooming, emails, websites, SMS texting, social media platforms, interactive games and distance learning.

E-Governance has many potential uses for First Nations and their organisations; for example, for how leaders make their decisions, represent and communicate with their members; how the rights and interests of different groups are protected and exercised; and how members have a say in their own group's self-governance. And it has growing importance for being able to keep track of negotiations, agreements and outcomes with external parties.

We have already seen during the Covid-19 Pandemic that quick reliable access to (and confidence in using) digital technologies has played an important part in Indigenous community organisations being able to stay connected with their board, members and clients, and take decisive actions to keep them well informed and supported.

Digital ways of governing come with big promises and big challenges – it's supposed to create greater efficiency, transparency, more accountability, easier participation of citizens. But sometimes it can make those things harder to achieve because it can be overwhelming in the range of complicated options available, the workload involved, and the expertise and experience required. And many people are rightly sceptical about electronic records and data because of the history of surveillance by governments. Potentially adverse impacts are further complicated by the so-called 'digital divide', where many Indigenous communities are poorly serviced with digital infrastructure, unreliable connectivity and lack of relevant training.

The big question in this digital revolution is how can new ICT tools and information best *be governed by Indigenous people* - so that it meets their needs and priorities, not those of others?

How can groups and organisations make sure they get access to the technologies that are going to be of most practical value to them? How can they make informed decisions about the extent to which they want to 'go digital' in their governance and administration? And perhaps even more importantly, Indigenous culturally-based governance values and ways of doing things can easily be marginalised or undermined by new digital technologies. So how can new digital ways of doing things be put to positive service to support Indigenous ways of governing? How can E-Governance be carried out so that it maximises self-determination by Indigenous groups and organisations?

There is little research to date about how groups and organisations in Australia are going about engaging in digital transformation to bolster their self-governance of development. Our project is looking at some of these issues, and it's clear that many are already selectively adopting and customising aspects of E-Governance to suit their own purposes. Sometimes this is the result of deliberate innovation, sometimes it is in response to dire circumstances and urgent community needs.

Five years ago, AIGI's (2016) report *Voices of Our Success: Sharing the Stories and Analysis from the 2014 Indigenous Governance Awards*, found that 73% of incorporated and 63% of non-incorporated applicants are using electronic technologies, and that IGA applicant organisations:

*... are putting considerable creative thought into how new media and technology can support their governance and operations. These include website content (blog, events calendar, annual and financial reports, policies, photos, interviews, videos), email, electronic newsletters, media*

*releases and social media such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. For many organisations, the electronic age helps to enhance their governance strategies.*

Here are some recent examples that we've come across so far and we will be exploring more:

#### **Board meetings and decision making:**

In response to crisis Covid-19 conditions where organisations have had to quickly adapt their communication strategies to engage with residentially dispersed members and directors, support staff operating across varied service areas, and assist board access to urgent information in order to make timely and informed decisions, etc. Indeed during the pandemic, digital transformation has almost overnight become an issue of organisational survival for some, with ongoing implications for boards and communities alike.

#### **Online support and projects for artists:**

"The health and wellbeing of our artists out in the city - that was a big, big issue that we faced. So we did some repurposing of some funds with our partners and set up some online supports for everyone - a lot of online meetings with artists and we got some new support projects up and running online. We created a Play Club, which is a Wednesday night, where people can get together via zoom and read out their own plays they were writing."

#### **Supporting Food security**

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, 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."

#### **Yirra Yaakin, Perth**

"Zoom ... The advantage for Board and committee members is it avoids the time that they have to take out of their office or home, and travelling time .... And we can achieve what we need to achieve - the papers can come up online, they can share the data and all that sort of thing. So, the chair of that meeting can run things more effectively, they actually run a bit quicker."

".... the AGM was probably the best attended that we've had. We had something like 20 members rock up."

#### **Challenges**

*"...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."*

Access to technology, suitable IT infrastructure and digital literacy offers new opportunities, ways of working and

communication channels. As such, it is critical that governments work to ensure access for all Australians. Several government and Indigenous reviews have recommended the need for a national Indigenous Digital Policy. Our research is confirming the urgent need for such a policy, but stresses the need for Indigenous nations to have governing control over the choice and implementation of ICT within their communities and organisations.

The digital transformation for groups and organisations involved in strengthening their E-Governance is not necessarily an easy journey, but the lockdowns under COVID-19 have demonstrated that without a sound digital governance capability, organisations can close and go out of business forever. Communities and groups in turn can be left in highly vulnerable situations. For example, the National Indigenous Digital Excellence Strategy (2014) produced by the National Centre for Indigenous Excellence (NCIE) strongly argued that with the continuing shift towards a knowledge economy, **Indigenous digital excellence is:**

*crucial in enabling participation in the social and economic activities that are essential to achieving wellbeing—be it physical health, economic prosperity, social and emotional health, the resilience of a community, or the health of an environment (NCIE 2014: 14).*

In other words, **E-Governance is becoming an imperative for many organisations, communities and groups.**

On a more positive note, a growing number of organisations are using ICT to present their cultural vision and governance charters on their websites, as a way of telling the culture story for their governance and purpose. Also, many representative organisations are developing ICT systems to govern development initiatives that are arising from land rights, native title, ICIP, cultural heritage, and natural endowments etc. Here the paper describes a more detailed example of E-Governance of data being used to monitor the implementation and outcomes of land and development agreements amongst native title holders (such as the Traks application and database designed by QSNTS).

In other words, while boards and communities may not quite be ready for digital transformation, several things can be done to increase their skills and confidence in governing ICTs in self-determined and productive ways, so they are in driver's seat of governing development. The paper concludes by considering the ways Indigenous nations and organisations are beginning to use E-Governance as a tool to strengthen Indigenous participation, self-governance practice, and development outcomes, within a framework of self-determination, whilst also being realistic about challenges involved.





## Indigenous Governance News:

### 🍷 Upgrading the AIGI's online Indigenous Governance Toolkit

CAEPR and AIGI continue their longstanding partnership over the years, with the upgrade of AIGI's Indigenous Governance Toolkit.

Launched in 2010, the Indigenous Governance Toolkit is a web-based initiative which was developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and several AIGI partners. The Toolkit is a free online resource developed to support Indigenous nations, communities, individuals and organisations to strengthen their governance in ways that are meaningful to them.

The Indigenous Governance Toolkit contains a collection of information, tools, templates, and audio-visual resources about the ways to customise governance to suit locally and culturally diverse needs. The Toolkit covers all the basics—rules, values, culture, leadership, decision making—and has many examples of success stories, tools to help start the process, and useful guidance to sustain governance journeys over time.





The Toolkit was originally written by ANU researcher Diane Smith and drew upon international and local research and practice from two key projects: CAEPR, ANU's Indigenous Community Governance Project and the Indigenous Governance Awards, hosted by Reconciliation Australia and AIGI.

AIGI are currently working on a wholesale upgrade of the Indigenous Governance Toolkit which will include:

- Updated content, including coverage of new emerging governance themes – continuing to promote a strengths-based, developmental approach to governance building which places culture at the heart of understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander modes of governance
- Restructure of the Toolkit based on a new organising principle to create a more dynamic, intuitive, and inclusive user experience
- A website refresh – making the Toolkit more user-friendly and with increased search functionality

Additionally, as part of AIGI and CAEPR's partnership, the IGD project research will also provide input into other AIGI key deliverables, including governance capacity-building workshops, case studies, resources, and other products.

The new Indigenous Governance Toolkit will be launched this year. For more information contact: [aigi@aigi.com.au](mailto:aigi@aigi.com.au)

### What's coming up for the Indigenous Governance of Development project:

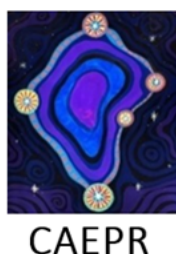
- Get ready to '**Put the kettle on!**' This year the IGD project team will begin creating a podcast series that features yarns between researchers and First Nations peoples about governing development in self-determined ways
- IGD team members Jason Field and Kate Bellchambers are designing a research case study exploring the self-determined governance of Country enacted through Indigenous Ranger Programs.
- We are now working on producing a series of short 'policy insights' arising out of the IGD case studies.
- AIGI will be running a Youth and Governance Capacity-Building Forum

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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