SPEAKER SERIES

WEBINAR: INTERNATIONAL INDIGENOUS RESILIENCE THROUGH COVID-19

10 JUNE 2020

"Everyone wants to get back to "normal". What we had before was not that great … normal was not good for everyone and certainly not good for all Indigenous Peoples"

(Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith)

INTERNATIONAL INDIGENOUS RESILIENCE THROUGH COVID-19

SUMMARY

Date:	Wednesday, 10 June 2020
Time:	09:30 am – 10:30 am (AEST, Brisbane)
Facilitator:	Michelle Deshong, CEO, Australian Indigenous Governance Institute
Panellists:	Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith
	Ms Megan Hill

Our Speakers

Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith

Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith PhD is a Māori scholar, writer, teacher, grandmother, and mother. She is known for her book *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Professor Smith has won many awards for research, is a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit and a fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand and the American Education Research Association. She has served on many public sector governance and advisory boards as well as community organisations. She is currently a Professor of Māori and Indigenous Studies at the University of Waikato and a member of the Waitangi Tribunal.

Megan Hill

Megan is the Program Director of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and the Director of the Honoring Nations program at the Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University. Through applied research and service, the Harvard Project aims to understand and foster the conditions under which sustained, self-determined social and economic development is achieved and sustained. Megan currently serves on the Native American Graves Protection Repatriation Act Committee at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, on the Board of the Sustainable Native Communities Collaborative, and as Board Secretary for the Dr Rosa Minoka Hill Fund board. Previously, she worked as the Director of Development for the University of New Mexico College of Arts and Sciences, Senior Program Officer at the Institute of American Indian Arts, and Director of Individual Giving at the American Indian College Fund. In her spare time, she volunteers for the Somerville Backpack Program, the Urban Agriculture Program, and the Dana Farber Cancer Institute.

Key Themes

This webinar presented views of approaches undertaken in in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and in the United States of America. Professor Linda Smith and Megan Hill provided overviews of what was occurring in each of their jurisdictions and then questions

Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith

- As a point of reflection, the "normal" pre-COVID-19 world was not that great; certainly not good for everyone and certainly not good for all Indigenous Peoples. There were significant ground-breaking realities that identified the demonstration of leadership and deficiencies in leadership that could have impacted greatly on Indigenous Peoples. Accordingly, it highlighted that the collaboration and communication from mainstream governments on their inclusion and response to addressing Indigenous priorities and concerns were at differing levels of engagement, commitment, and responsibility.

- In view of these realities, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the necessity for Indigenous Peoples to be pro-active in undertaking their governance and leadership aspirations, and objectives for maintaining their human rights struggles. This is necessary moving forward.

- Experiences for Indigenous Peoples during the pandemic around the world have identified concerns that many of the existing governing frameworks, systems and operations may have placed the most vulnerable members of our society at further disadvantage and risk.

- Leadership in Indigenous governance has seen Indigenous Peoples take control of some of those governing structures, adapted those structures for themselves and where necessary, embraced their self-determination rights in the face of existing government control to keep themselves safe.

- Negative educational, social, and economic outcomes during the pandemic revealed that the disadvantage experienced by Indigenous families only serves to highlight the historical and continuing cycles of institutionalised colonialism ideology and implementation.

- The importance of data sovereignty provides the mechanism that empowers Indigenous Peoples to provide governments and social agencies with accurate information to advocate for necessary financial and practical resources and responses.

- Open communication between Indigenous Peoples is critical for strengthening cultural, political, economic, social, technological, and environmental alliances and objectives.

- Indigenous Peoples must occupy the place at the conversation tables to ensure that their perspectives, knowledge, experiences, and needs are being included.

- The impact of the Black Lives Matter Movement happening globally has exposed that inherent and institutional racial inequality frameworks, policies and practice remain as powerful as it has ever been. The disconnection from Indigenous struggles, colonialism, and the multilayered struggles for sovereignty only serves to highlight that our global community has immense work to do to transition into a higher evolutionary state of being.

Megan Hill

- In the USA, there are 574 Federally recognised Tribal nations, that are diverse in size, population, and geography. Since the 1970's and the era of self-determination, Tribal governments have been operating with the same powers and responsibilities as States and local governments; such as the responsibility for roads, health, schools, curriculum, and services such as trash collection, etc. Without the traditional tax basis from its citizens to fund these things, economically it has been a challenge for many Tribes – especially those who rely on tribal businesses such as gaming and non-gaming enterprises. When the pandemic hit, there was a shutdown of the casinos and many of the tribal enterprises across Indian country.

- Immediately before the pandemic, Tribes were aggregately contributing $157 billion dollars to the GDP of America, which is 1.1 million jobs, where 915,000 were for non-natives and only 211,000 were held by native peoples. This had a huge spill-over effect in regions outside of Reserves and contributed to the collapse of Tribal economies as a result.

- Significant to Indian country, there are hotspots with super-spreader events. Tribal nations have a different starting place to other peoples in the USA, because there are pre-existing economic, health, and food security issues—adding stress to an already stressed system.

- Disparity in the approaches taken by State governments working with tribal nations has placed those already vulnerable to further risks.

- Leadership in Indigenous governance, underpinned by traditional values and practices for caring for community and peoples, came to the forefront as a result of the pandemic.

- The development of information and messaging that is linguistically and culturally accessible was instrumental in the Tribal nations implementing the necessary measures to keep their communities safe and informed. The challenges of distribution and where there is an underlying systemic failure, shaped by colonialism and institutional racism, could have further negatively influenced Tribal nation disadvantage and devastation, if not for Indigenous leadership and governance undertaking self-determination decisions and actions.

- What the pandemic is fundamentally revealing in Tribal nations, is that many of the foundational matters such as sovereignty and building institutions, are needed now and the need to build those infrastructures has never been more essential for moving forward.

Summary of Discussion

Question: Were there critical points of tension between governments and State bodies, and what are the lessons around the partnerships that stand out?

Linda: When the New Zealand government was getting praise, the Maori peoples were left out. It was Maori health practitioners advising government to include Maori data and considerations. There were inequities in the delivery of the government's COVID-19 response. If Maori peoples had not pushed, it would be a different story. We have amazing Maori capacity in the health area; our health practitioners were able to organise a different flow of information – through website/s, developed specialised health measures for Maori, challenged the Government daily, to deliver the right response. In regard to the question of who was vulnerable, the message from the Government was anyone over the age of 70; however, for Maori, we are all vulnerable. Health status and outcomes are worse off for Maori people than non-Indigenous citizens of New Zealand. If our people did not get up and act, knowing what is at stake, we would be exposed.

Megan: The tensions between State and Tribes where there is aggression, and the resources feeding into that aggression, is unnecessary. I was on a call a few weeks ago with the Governor of New Mexico, who was concerned about shutting down enterprise for the impact on the rest of the community and State. Making decisions together; sharing information. There is not enough information and data sharing - at the local level, at the Tribal level - some Tribal nations that have not been as proficient as getting resources to their people. What we are seeing in the data, provided by the University of California, Los Angeles, is that about five of our Indian tribes on a per capita basis have higher rates than any State in the USA for the spread of COVID-19.

Question: Are there important lessons coming out of this, are there strategies for First Nations people, so that there are First Nations-led regional approaches, or will we lose sight of that when things open back up? Is there a real ownership and collective force now because of this?

Linda: Depends on the regions; when we were locked down, the local agencies and charity sector, who were scrambling before the lock down, they came together, and all agreed to collaborate and create a one response group with pooled resources. The charity sector collapsed, because many the volunteers were retired people over the age of 70, they had to re-jig and get younger people in to fill in that gap. Collaboration really worked in the regional area.

Going back to a "normal", what I hope we have taken out of this as communities, when the chips are down we can look after ourselves, we have always known that and we cannot rely on Government to help us, because, they're 2-5 beats behind; too slow. Our own organisations can support community. There is no single strategy to hold governments to account.

We have public health specialists and scientists. The Government could have had Indigenous specialists alongside them, but they chose not to. When white people occupy the space, they decide whether we get in the room or not. It is a problem in the old normal but will have to fight that post COVID-19 lockdown.

Megan: Too slow and too invested in the Status Quo as the system works for them (non-Indigenous actors). I hope that the renewed momentum will continue; recognition of self-sufficiency or regional independence – food systems, justice, or infrastructure. It will be different regionally, for example, in the Pacific North-West, where there are smaller tribes, they have come together to develop a regional justice system as one Tribe does not have the resources to fully support a court and justice system on their own.

We will see what happens with the health impacts, but the economic impacts will linger for a while. We need to continue the momentum of forward-thinking in 25, 50, 100 years. How we are going to plan for that and invest in infrastructures and invest in emergency planning; and part of it is keeping pressure on and keeping Tribal leadership to that; grounded in core values. Who we are as Indigenous peoples and how we continue to get through that?

Question: Looking at collaborative research around lessons for this – areas of innovation, information sharing, and data, what are some of the lessons appearing as a result of the pandemic in relation to data and information sharing?

Megan: One of the key takeaways – Governor Lewis in Arizona with respect to the Hela River Tribal Nation opened the discussion on "how are you thinking about opening?" He said the biggest lesson, is making sure we are keeping avenues of communications open between Tribes to share with each other. With the Tohono O'odham, they are getting the food in and trying to keep their kids educated, they are creating Tohono O'odham "happy meals", education packets and food and have negotiated to get free Wi-Fi.

Linda: Huge room for ongoing collaborations, we learn from each other, asking the critical questions of whether we could we feed our people as a Tribe; could we feed all our Elders? Our tribal governance entities must be able to do these things. We have strengths and we must build our economy from. People should not starve. The ability to grow food is a strength; people started growing food again when the ease and accessibility of places was removed. Unfortunately, we have stopped growing our own food. We have a lot of work to do ourselves in getting back to the basics and letting our young people get involved. Out of the lockdown a lot of creativity blossomed. That is where our young people were especially resilient; our young people used music, art, out there using social media. They developed a lot of strategies to keep themselves well.

Question: Has there been observations, of cultural indicators on country, of the resilience on country, in general?

Linda: More native birds sounding; people were commenting on hearing bird song more. The moment the cars stopped, people stopped moving, the birds started to sing. On the negative side, the pests had a wonderful time killing off plants and animals. Some of the estates are in negative situation because of native things killed off. In relation to water, our creeks and rivers started to look cleaner, eels and fishes came out more visible. Distinctive cases in the environment. International measures including air quality improvements.

Megan: On the reservation, they are saying a lot more deer, bears, more things are coming out. What is interesting, hand in hand with technology, for some of the tribal groups such as the Oneida, the last time we had kids home like this was before boarding schools. This time has shown how community can come together online, as a community. Reclaiming that educational space and self-determination.

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