

# Governing the Pandemic: Adaptive Self-Determination as an Indigenous Capability in Australian Organisations

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## Abstract

In 2020, the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) and the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (AIGI), in partnership with First Nation partners, commenced a two-year applied research project – *The Indigenous Governance of Development: Self-Determination and Success Project* – to explore the ways First Nations in Australia are exercising their collective self-governance to pursue their own development agendas.

In the context of the IGD project, we asked ourselves: What impacts was the pandemic having on Indigenous nations and their members? How have Indigenous organisations adapted to more effectively govern the impacts of the pandemic on their community members? Are there any common strategic practices and learnings from their combined experiences that could support the disaster resilience of other Indigenous organisations, communities and nations? A survey and follow-up online interviews were carried out with incorporated Indigenous organisations nation-wide. This paper reports on findings from the small responding sample.

In adopting a capability lens for the research, our analysis of evidence leads us to propose a framework for how we might better understand the particular mode of crisis resilience and governance innovation that Indigenous organisations were able to mobilise. We have labelled this capability ‘adaptive self-determination’, and identify several constituent functionings, which can be grouped as meta-functionings: institutional, normative and cognitive.

While much of the literature on Indigenous self-determination focuses on it being a ‘right’ of individuals in their diverse communities, nations and groups, our analysis indicates it also operates as a daily operational *practice* in the work of incorporated Indigenous organisations. Implications for putting disaster policy and funding support practice are considered in conclusion.