

Indigenous ‘Elder’ Organisations: Resilient adaptive governance and management as a capability for longevity and renewal

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Abstract

Incorporated Indigenous organisations in Australia operate in a complex intercultural environment, which produces specialised qualities to their governance, management and staffing operations and capabilities. This paper examines the Indigenous organisations who have survived the longest, which we refer to as the ‘Elder organisations’ – meaning they were established after 1976 when the first incorporation legislation was passed, up until the 31st December 1999, and are still operating in 2022. The paper pays attention to identifying the diverse crises and opportunities that generate survival ‘tipping points’ for these well-established organisations. We deliberately adopt a capability-based, problem-solving lens to identify the positive factors at play in their longevity, focusing on the practical ways they build and mobilise capabilities and solutions for governance and management at times of tumultuous change, in order to remain viable over the longer term.

While a great deal has been written about Indigenous organisations, there is a noticeable gap in the research on this cohort of long-established organisations. Our aim is to contribute to that gap. Through mixed methods including a literature review, conceptual analysis, an online survey with a sample of Elder organisations, a contextual quantitative analysis of incorporated organisations from ORIC data, and qualitative information from interviews, the paper investigates how Elder Indigenous organisations have successfully navigated change. Specifically, we examine the governance and other capabilities that seem to have best supported their longevity, and whether these are different for times of opportunity as opposed to crises. Finally, we analyse the combined evidence to identify common factors at play in longevity, which might usefully inform other organisations facing major changes. These are collated and described.

The paper constructs a new conceptual framework by which to better understand the longevity of some Indigenous organisations. The paper concludes that Elder Indigenous organisations demonstrate a specialised capability function for what we refer to as ‘Resilient Adaptive Governance’ that significantly contributes to their renewal and longevity. With these matters in mind, the conclusion of the paper draws out implications and recommendations for government policy and organisational practice.