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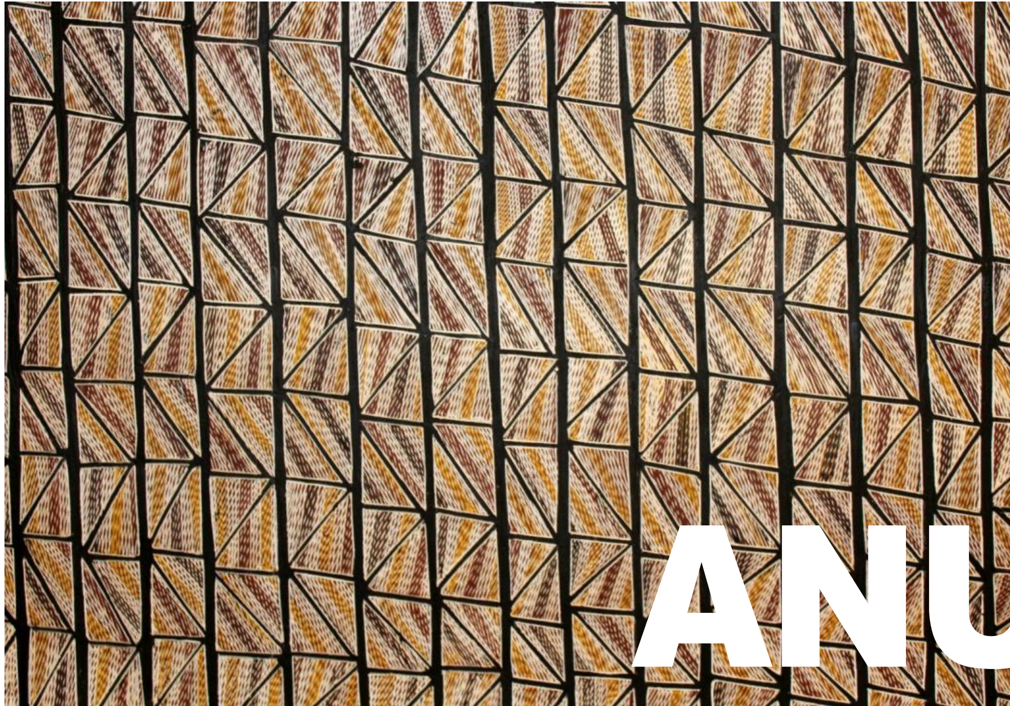

GOVERNING THE PANDEMIC: ADAPTIVE SELF-DETERMINATION AS AN INDIGENOUS CAPABILITY IN AUSTRALIAN ORGANISATIONS

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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 and the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, 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 COVID-19 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.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the leadership and staff of the Indigenous organisations who participated in the survey and engaged in follow-up conversations with us. Given the enormous pressures they were operating under, people were extraordinarily generous in making time available to share their pandemic experiences with us. We acknowledge the considerable expertise and insights contributed by all the participants to this project.

We received valuable comments from CAEPR and AIGI staff throughout the research, and when delivering a public CAEPR seminar on the initial findings. An anonymous peer reviewer made a compelling suggestion about the structuring of the draft paper which we took on board, and both the reviewer and Francis Markham raised several points of emphasis and argument, which greatly improved our revision of the paper into this final form. Hilary Bek and Kate Bellchambers provided invaluable work on publication format and proofreading.

Acronyms

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
AIGI	Australian Indigenous Governance Institute
AMSANT	Aboriginal Medical Services of the Northern Territory
APM Lab	American Public Media Research Lab
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CATSI Act	Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006 (Cth)
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
IGA	Indigenous Governance Awards
IGD	The Indigenous Governance of Development: Self-Determination and Success (Project)
IWGIA	International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs
MEEDAC	Midwest Employment and Economic Development Aboriginal Corporation
NACCHO	National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NGO	non-government organisation
OHCHR	Office of the High Commission Human Rights (United Nations)
ORIC	Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations
PPE	Personal Protection Equipment
USA	United States of America
WHO	World Health Organisation
YERG	Yamatji Regional Emergency Response Group (COVID-19)

Foreword

In late 2020, the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) and the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute (AIGI) commenced an exciting partnership with several First Nation partners, in a two-year applied research project –*The Indigenous Governance of Development*: *Self-Determination and Success Project* (IGD Project) – to explore the ways First Nations in Australia are strengthening and exercising their collective self-governance so they are in the driver's seat for their development agenda.

The first year in 2021 was an extremely productive one for the Project. A high-calibre multi-disciplinary research team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers was assembled, and the Project established a foundation of partnerships with First Nations and their representative organisations. Our research teams have worked alongside local communities, native title holders, leaders and their representative organisations. With the ongoing pandemic conditions, we have been sensitive to the major COVID-19 pandemic stresses that continue to be faced by our First Nation partners. That has led to many conversations and collaborative innovations in how we do our research work together; we have become adept at Zoom yarns, but have also been meeting locally 'on country' when we can, to share experiences and insights.

At a time of great uncertainty and policy change in the national political environment, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups face major challenges in rebuilding their own governance in practically effective, culturally strong ways. This Discussion Paper is part of an IGD Project series, which presents evidence and analyses from the IGD Project's collaborative case studies. Our aim is to make this research count for First Nations, their leaders and community organisations across Australia, so they can use it for their own local purposes. The important matters raised in the papers also have direct relevance for industry and governments, who need to rebuild their own internal capacity and policy frameworks to better support Indigenous self-determined efforts to govern development.

This series of IGD Project Discussion Papers is a taste of the remarkable home-based solutions First Nations and their organisations are designing for their collective self-governance and futures. The papers capture a rich sample of changes, resilience and resurgence, describing examples where Indigenous practices of self-determined governance are being strengthened, and where development *with culture and identity* is a priority. We understand that the challenge on the road ahead is not merely to take control and put self-determination into practice, but to govern well and fairly on behalf of all the members of a First Nation. That way, chosen development has a better chance of delivering sustained outcomes.

We would like to thank the AIGI Board and staff, the CAEPR project team and staff, and the participating Indigenous nations and organisations who are working in partnership with us to carry out this applied research project. We believe our collective efforts will make a difference in informing constructive First Nations solutions for self-determined governance of development in Australia, and contribute to the formulation of more enabling government policy and industry engagement.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic (hereafter 'the pandemic') is unique in recent history as a catastrophic global crisis. Its severity and duration has continued to test individuals, organisations, communities and nations in unexpected ways. Internationally and in Australia, Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by such disasters, which exacerbate pre-existing structural inequalities and discrimination (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), 2021; Jewett et al., 2021; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020; Walsh & Rademaker, 2020; World Health Organisation (WHO), 2020). The story of how Indigenous peoples have dealt with the multiple simultaneous threats created by the pandemic received scant public attention during its onset in 2020 (Akee et al., 2020; McLeod, 2020; Markham et al., 2020; Meneses-Navarro, 2020) with details only slowly emerging. It is telling that the authors of a rapid scoping review undertaken in early 2021 to inform the *United Nations Research Roadmap for the COVID-19 Recovery,* reported their inability to assess Indigenous impacts globally because 'there is a dearth of evidence on the role of racial inequity' during the pandemic (Jewett et al., 2021, p. 7).

At the onset of the pandemic in Australia in late 2019, grave fears were held for Indigenous communities, especially those in remote and regional regions. Yet by the end of 2020, a major health disaster for Indigenous peoples seemed to have been avoided – and it appeared that Indigenous community organisations in different parts of the country played a vital role in helping to deliver that early outcome. Specifically, the most adept and timely actions on the ground in the initial phase of the pandemic came from Indigenous organisations, working at local and regional levels, supported often by national Indigenous peak and medical bodies. And yet we knew little at the time about how local organisations went about governing the rapidly unfolding risks of the pandemic to their clients and community members.

Around the same time, 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* (IGD). Its aim was to explore the ways Indigenous land-owning collectivities ('nations')[1] in Australia are strengthening and exercising their self-governance in order to pursue their own development agenda. In the context of the IGD project, we asked ourselves: What impacts was the pandemic having on Indigenous nations and their members? Exactly how were local organisations governing the pandemic, with its rapidly changing local manifestations? To what extent and how did local Indigenous organisations adapt (or not), so as to more effectively govern the impacts of the pandemic on their community members? What worked and what did not work so well for them? And could any common strategic practices and learnings be identified from their combined experience?

So it was that during 2020 and early 2021 we conducted what was then the first online survey (with selected follow-up interviews) of incorporated Indigenous organisations about their role in governing the early impacts of the pandemic in Australia. Our analysis phase was carried out during the remainder of 2021 and revised accordingly as the pandemic continued to spread quickly and in unexpected ways. For example, when we commenced the online survey there were no vaccines in existence internationally or in Australia. At the date this paper appears in published form, there are

[1] In Australia, Indigenous collective land-owning groups or polities include traditional owners, native title holders, extended networked family groups, dispersed communities of identity, clans and tribes. While the term 'nation' is only recently finding its way into the political language of Indigenous groups in this country, for the purposes of this paper we refer to these diverse polities as 'nations'. Today, many First Nations have their own representative and local service-delivery organisations.

multiple vaccines, multiple challenges in their delivery, multiple variants of the COVID-19 virus, and heated debate around equitable, timely access to vaccines and vaccination hesitancy. This rapidly evolving environment is likely to continue to be the defining characteristic of the pandemic. What this paper captures then, is an extended turning point in Australia – namely, the volatile first phase of the pandemic when fear and vulnerability were high, and solutions were uncertain.

Here we present the evidence and analysis of the survey and interviews with a small sample of Indigenous organisations working on the frontline to address the multiple threats and risks generated by the pandemic to members of their community and region. To help us understand their role in delivering critical outcomes for people in Australia during the pandemic, we chose to focus on identifying the particular capabilities and deliberate adaptations being deployed by organisations on the ground. So, while we did pay attention to identifying the diverse challenges being faced, we purposely focused on uncovering the strategies, strengths and solutions they were bringing to bear on those challenges.

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 mode 'adaptive self-determination'. While much of the literature on Indigenous self-determination, nationally and internationally, 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. We coined the concept of 'adaptive self-determination' to capture an insight having important practical, theoretical, political and policy implications. Namely, that there is a *pre-existing* and distinctive strength-based capability amassed within Australian Indigenous organisations, which they have been able to harness as a strategic 'resource' to help them govern the impacts of the pandemic.

Accordingly, before presenting the methods and results of the online survey and interviews, in the first section of the paper we address the literature on human capability, extending it from the more usual focus on the individual, to organisations as a whole. Here we also seek to build on the insightful connection noted by Michael Murphy (2014), that self-determination itself is a capability not simply of an individual Indigenous person, but also of a collective group. We extend Murphy's logic further to suggest that organisations themselves also have a collective capability for self-determination, which in the specific case of Indigenous incorporated organisations includes the critical capability for '*adaptive* self-determination'. Part of the paper's significance lies in its evidence-based demonstration of the very great value that Indigenous organisations in Australia can bring to bear during crises and disasters, as a result of harnessing their capability for self-determination in very practical, adaptive ways.[2]

Next, the paper describes the early phase of the pandemic in Australia, and presents an overview of the legal frameworks under which incorporated Indigenous organisations operate, and the wide range of roles and responsibilities they undertake. Then follows a discussion of the methods used for the survey and interviews, which themselves occurred under the constraints of the pandemic.

Then follows a broader analysis based on synthesising the survey data into thematic issues. To these we incorporate qualitative examples drawn from the follow-up interviews carried out with a small

[2] We suggest this conceptual and practical insight may be valid for First Nation representative organisations in other countries, but given the newness of the concept and the relatively small sample in our survey, it remains to be confirmed by further evidence.

subset of organisations. Here the paper brings the voices of organisational leaders to the fore, presenting experiences and initiatives in their own words. This enabled us to then identify a range of experimental adaptations being initiated in governing and other organisational practices, linked to the pandemic. From this basis, we identify commonalities in the form and content of organisational capabilities.

To contextualise these innovations, in the penultimate section of the paper, we briefly examine broader concepts of adaptive and experimental governance in regards to their relevance to Indigenous networked modes of governance. The paper argues there is a distinctive set of capability practices that constitute and underwrite the exercise of adaptive self-determination by organisations, when they are problem-solving the impact and uncertainties of the pandemic. We then propose a higher-order categorisation of these into three capability 'meta-functions' of adaptive self-determination within organisations. Finally, the paper draws out the implications of this for future policy, disaster and recovery funding, and Indigenous governance practice, in the hope they may assist in better supporting the vital but largely unrecognised role that continues to be played by many Indigenous organisations in unfolding disasters in Australia.

Organisational capabilities

Following Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's pioneering work on the capabilities, there is now a large body of research into how capabilities are developed, with the focus primarily being on individuals. According to the capability approach, what matters for wellbeing and chosen personal development, are what individuals are *able to do and be* (i.e. peoples' capability to function) in order to live the kinds of lives they value (Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1980, 1999, 2009). Capabilities are thus linked to effective opportunities. This paper proposes that the COVID-19 pandemic presented a perverse 'opportunity' where a distinctive set of pre-existing capabilities could be mobilised within Indigenous organisations.

More recently, there has been research movement to recognise 'collective' capabilities, although Nussbaum herself explicitly denied (wrongly, we suggest) the application of capabilities to groups (see Ibrahim, 2013; Nussbaum, 2000, p. 74; Rosignoli, 2018; Stewart, 2005). Yet the research of authors such as Murphy (2014), Schlosberg and Carruthers (2010), Thomas et al. (2015), Yap and Yu (2016) and Cronin and Murphy (2019) has valuably extended the capabilities framework into Indigenous settler–colonial contexts, to consider the capability functioning not just of individuals, but of groups and communities of people. Murphy's seminal work (2014) argued that self-determination is one such collective Indigenous capability. Our research builds on that trajectory, to propose that the collective capability for self-determined decision-making and adaptive agency – in this case, to secure the wellbeing and safety of entire groups and communities – is also to be found in legally incorporated Indigenous organisations.

The combination of capabilities needed to govern any organisation well are likely to change over time as it responds to changing priorities, opportunities or crises. Problems addressed at one point in time may re-emerge and have to be reconsidered. An established governance arrangement may need to be fine-tuned or replaced under changed circumstances. New arrangements may produce unintended consequences and so have to be readjusted. In other words, what worked well to govern an organisation at one point in time may not work so effectively down the track. It follows that the set of capabilities needed to govern may change accordingly. This is not necessarily a problem. But it can become one if an organisation's governing board, managers and staff do not recognise their operating environment has changed dramatically and their way of governing is no longer fit for new purposes, or they have become stuck in a collective 'comfort zone' and are unwilling or unable to adapt. Such an

organisation could be said to have low renewal or adaptive capability. It was just such a dramatically changing environment that Indigenous organisations encountered in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Much of the international literature on organisations emphasises their operation as institutional systems (political, social, economic and so on) having their own internal 'life cycle' progression, commonly described using biological metaphors of birth, growth, maturity and decline. Each phase encompasses transformation, for the better or worse, with changing capability requirements and issues (for examples of the research debate over time see, Greiner, 1972; Ford, 2016; Jirasek and Bilek, 2018). While much has been written about Indigenous organisations in Australia, very little is known about their life cycles or the extent to which those might vary relative to their Western counterparts (see Bourne, 2017; Smith, 2011, 2014). Our own professional experience working with Indigenous organisations over many years suggests to us that their life cycles are not characterised by neat sequential progressions, but rather are dynamic, involving periods of sometimes tumultuous recycling through establishment and re-establishment, decline and re-emergence. This dynamism can promote vulnerability – for example, when it is linked to a debilitating flow of staff or board members, unilateral changes in external government programs or withdrawal of funding – but also has been identified as a source of strength (see Dodson & Smith, 2003; Holcombe & Sullivan, 2013; Martin & Finlayson, 1996). Leah Armstrong, an experienced Indigenous Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and board member of Indigenous organisations refers to this positive quality as 'restless renewal' (cited in Smith, 2008). Arguably, Indigenous organisations can more accurately be described as complex self-organising networked systems with dynamic, non-sequential life cycles (Smith, 2011, p. 205–212). Both aspects of dynamism may positively contribute to their capability for adaptive behaviour.

There is a substantial literature on adaptive practices in organisations, including what is referred to as adaptive governance. The idea of adaptive governance grew out of the search for different modes of governing uncertainty and crises in social-ecological systems where there are multi-stakeholder layers of governance (Chaffin et al., 2014; Djalante, 2012). Adaptive practice has also been pursued in the international development arena, where a recent focus has been on building the capability of so-called 'developing' nation states, through the use of engineered methods such as 'problem driven iterative adaptation'.[3] While acknowledging that Indigenous organisations face substantial challenges and obstacles, in this paper we deliberately adopt a realistic strength-based lens that could be called a 'capability-based problem-solving' frame, in which the 'problem' is the pandemic.

In its common-sense usage, 'adapt' simply means to make fit for a new use, often by modification; to adjust, learn, rework, transform or modify something to be fit for different conditions and environments (Cambridge and Merriman-Webster Dictionaries). There is a well-documented survival need (be that in organisations, governments, businesses, social groups or amongst the citizenry) for adaptive capability in order to cope with the high-pressure uncertainty and impacts of disasters and crises (Dayton-Johnson, 2004; Kuntz, 2021; Robertson et al., 2021; Zukowski, 2014). In an organisation, 'adaptive capability' refers to its overall systemic and institutional ability to recognise and adjust to potential risk or harm, to take advantage of opportunities, or to cope with change and consequences. It is more than simply the sum of individual capabilities or the structural parts of an organisation. Extending Rosignoli's argument (2018, p. 8; see also Ibrahim, 2006, p. 398) about 'collective capabilities', we propose that 'adaptive self-determination' is a whole-of-organisation capability set that

[3] Problem-driven iterative adaptation focuses on solving locally nominated and defined problems in nation-state governmental performance, as opposed to imposing externally-preferred solutions. In doing that, it aims to generate an authorising environment for decision-making that encourages governance and development experimentation. The development method seeks to then embed this experimentation in tight feedback loops that is supposed to facilitate rapid experiential learning. It actively engages a wide range of stakeholders to ensure that adaptations are viable (see Pritchett et al., 2017).

the individuals and parts of an organisation would otherwise not be able to achieve by themselves. Indeed, our research suggests that self-determination lies at the very heart of the set of adaptive capabilities that Indigenous organisations have been able to call upon during the pandemic.

Adaptive self-determination: An organisational capability

Following Megan Davis (2011), we take self-determination to refer to Indigenous peoples' right to freely determine, take control and responsibility for the kinds of lives they want through the exercise of genuine decision-making powers, capable participation and control over their affairs and wellbeing (social, economic, political and cultural). At its core, self-determination is not simply about having power, but just as critically is about having the *ability* to effectively exercise power as a people, or a delegated entity. Without ability and account-ability, self-determination remains an empty promise, or too easily reduced to *selfish*-determination. The Australian Human Rights Commission further notes that self-determination is an 'ongoing process of choice' (https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/right-self-determination). We additionally suggest it is a capability set that can be put into *practice* to give ongoing effect to choices and aspirations. This takes the concept beyond rights, to encompass the responsibilities, relationships and abilities of both individuals, groups and organisations to implement and operationalise (Corntassel, 2008; Smith et al., 2021).

Murphy (2014) has argued that the collective capability of Canadian First Nations for self-determination is precisely the kind of freedom Amartya Sen described as being both the primary objective and means of development. Our survey and interview evidence analysed below indicates that many Indigenous organisations in Australia have been able to draw on and mobilise this capability, on a daily basis and in locally diverse ways, to govern the impacts of the pandemic on their community members and personnel. Importantly, the research suggests that adaptive self-determination is not a new or emerging thing in organisations. It is not a capability that had to be created for the first time, in response to the pandemic.

This contrasts with much of the general literature, which focuses on how to establish or encourage new modes of adaptability, and practices for resilience during crises. We argue that Indigenous organisations have always had to be inventive and adaptable; that over many decades they have embedded an organisational capability for adaptive renewal. Without being simplistic, the pandemic is the most recent of the multiple historical disasters that Indigenous people and their representative organisations have had to cope with; including previous epidemics, the experience of settler colonialism itself, forced removal of entire groups from their lands, denial of human rights, removal of children from families, entrenched poverty, unilateral government interventions, erratic government program funding and hyper-changing policy frameworks. What the current pandemic has done is to spotlight this existing adaptive capability and the role it plays in the agility of organisational responses at times such as the pandemic.

For organisations, adaptive self-determination does not refer simply to their ability to deal with changing circumstances imposed by outside authorities or external events. Rather it highlights a capability for proactively steering direction and taking autonomous action. Today it is also a capability that is intercultural, where Indigenous people and organisations bring their cultural identities into interactions with the wider Australian society. It is not surprising then that organisations were able to quickly mobilise their relationships with non-Indigenous partners and stakeholders, well beyond their immediate Indigenous networks.

The pandemic hits

The pandemic in Australia bought issues of capability and self-determination to the fore; albeit initially in the form of health alerts. At the start of the pandemic in early January 2020, Indigenous leaders and peak bodies across Australia quickly raised their concerns about its potential impact on their communities across Australia. They feared that the prevalence of co-morbidities and other health risk factors,[4] lack of access to healthcare and sanitation, housing overcrowding, and cultural roles and responsibilities would put Indigenous people at higher risk of serious illness and death – creating a crisis within a crisis. Pat Turner, the CEO of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) bluntly stated in an early 2020 interview with the ABC radio, that 'if this virus gets into Aboriginal communities, it will be absolute devastation, absolute devastation without a doubt' (ABC, 2020a). Turner reinforced her concerns in a national webinar about the pandemic, convened by AIGI in May 2020: 'I can't be any blunter… if COVID-19 gets into our communities, we are gone'.[5]

The fears of Indigenous leaders, community-controlled medical centres and community-based organisations were well justified. During epidemics and pandemics, evidence shows higher infection rates, more severe symptoms, and higher death rates amongst Indigenous populations than in the general population (Power et al. 2020).[6] John Paterson, CEO of Aboriginal Medical Services of the Northern Territory (AMSANT) put the matter frankly: 'The stakes could not be higher', and warned of a 'narrow window of opportunity to prevent the spread of the virus into our communities'. He challenged governments to urgently provide 'a clear, consistent and appropriate response that will best support individuals and communities and contribute to the efforts of government and community organisations to deal with this crisis' (AMSANT, 2020).

Yet in the early months of the pandemic, governments in Australia floundered. They were unable to provide Indigenous communities and organisations with 'a clear, consistent and appropriate response', let alone deliver bipartisan coordination for urgently needed funding and equipment (Markham et al., 2020). Over the subsequent course of the pandemic, the underlying weaknesses in Australian governments' own governance capacity continued to be evident at local, state and national levels. State governments took increasingly unilateral actions, at short notice, issuing an array of state-specific executive directives, which included closing their borders to citizens from other states (Downey & Myers, 2020). Any hope of coordinated program implementation seemed lost as government departments defaulted to their territorial arrangements of siloed funding and service delivery (Markham et al., 2020).

The horizontal and vertical collaborative underpinnings of Australian federalism have been weakened as a consequence, and the Australian Government's historical dominance of the federal–state relationship visibly diminished, as confusion reigned over whether national or state rules applied in rapidly changing pandemic conditions. One public commentator was prompted in mid-2020 to astutely refer to Australian federalism as 'One Nation, Six Governments' (Seneviratne, 2020), while the Prime

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[4] For example, compared with non-Indigenous Australians, Indigenous Australians have shorter than average life expectancy (around 10 years shorter for males and 9 years for females). They are 1.7 times as likely to have a disability or restrictive long-term health condition, 2.7 times as likely to smoke, 2.1 times as likely to die before their 5th birthday, and 2.7 times as likely to experience high or very high levels of psychological distress. In addition, in 2018–19, 46% of Indigenous Australians had at least one chronic condition that posed a significant health problem (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2020; Biggs & Cook, 2018).

[5] Available at: https://www.aigi.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Summary-Speaker-Series-Leading-Through-Crisis-Webinar-2020.05.15.pdf

[6] The risk factors for COVID-19 were considered by some Indigenous leaders to be greater than the H1N1 virus in 2009, which resulted in death rates among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population six times higher than the non-Indigenous community, and the need for ICU [intensive care unit] admissions 8.5 times higher (Paterson, 2020).

Minister Scott Morrison at a ‘Bush (Regional) Summit’ on August 28, 2020 bemoaned that ‘Australia was not built to have internal borders, in fact the very point of federalism was not to have them’.

Slowly over the course of 2020, a set of poorly coordinated, sometimes contradictory government measures were initiated to address risks to Indigenous communities, including government-supported restrictions on travel to and from remote communities, along with a financial support package for Indigenous businesses. In March 2020, the Australian Government Department of Health produced a ‘Management Plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Populations’, which aimed to coordinate the response among federal, state and territory governments, via primary health networks. In the same month, an ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19’ was established by the Australian Government, co-chaired by the Department of Health and NACCHO. But well before these national initiatives, many Indigenous communities and their organisations simply stopped waiting for governments to act, and began to make and implement their own decisions on the ground. They started the practical work of governing the pandemic, to protect their people and communities.

One of the earliest actions came from Mapoon Aboriginal Shire Council in remote western Cape York, which implemented its own, much publicised ban on travel into the community to all but health and critical infrastructure workers (ABC, 2020b). On national and international news, Naseem Chetty, the Aboriginal CEO of the Shire Council, explained their decision:

> *We needed to be proactive, we shouldn’t be waiting for COVID-19 to be in our community. We need to shut it at our doorstep…. We don’t want to regret that we could have done this. When you think about life, I think it’s more important to be proactive rather than reactive (ABC 2020b; Coletta & Traiano 2020).*

Mapoon’s decision to impose a lockdown was praised at the time by the Cape York Health Council as ‘decisive’ and ‘well ahead of the rest of the country, being based on strong evidence and local capacity to restrict travel, and effectively cutting through all the bureaucracy’ (Mark Wenitong, quoted in ABC, 2020).

Other Indigenous communities quickly followed suit. Indigenous leaders began calling on state governments to declare entire remote regions as ‘special controlled areas’ and to take ‘extreme social isolation measures’ to require nonessential visitors to stay away (AMSANT, 2020). Several Indigenous peak and representative organisations took direct action in early 2020: The Northern and Central Land Councils in the Northern Territory, the Anangu Pitjantjara Yankunytjatjara Lands in the Western Desert, and the Torres Strait Islands and Papua New Guinea border cross-regions[7], stopped issuing new permits for visitors. At the direction of the Tiwi Land Council, its CEO declared the closure of all remaining land and seas within the Tiwi Aboriginal Land Trust in response to the virus threat. Across the country, many regional peak organisations began implementing a ‘Return to Country’ program, covering the travel costs of people who were stranded in towns, to return to their home communities.

A year later, and probably for the first time in Australian settler colonial history, Indigenous health outcomes from the COVID-19 pandemic seemed noticeably better than for the rest of Australia. At the end of 2020, of the 907 total Australian deaths and 27 698 COVID-19 related cases (including 685 deaths in aged care), there were only 149 positive cases recorded among Indigenous Australians.

[7] In addition to stopping visitors domestically within Australia, the Torres Strait Islander Regional Council and individual Island councillors worked closely with Australian border authorities to stop traditional inhabitants of Papua New Guinea treaty villages from crossing the international border, under the Torres Strait Treaty.

Perhaps the most pertinent statistic here is that Indigenous Australian comprised 0.5% of confirmed cases and 0% of deaths, although they comprise 3.3% of the population (Australian Government Department of Health, 2021).

At the beginning of 2021, there had been no cases in remote communities, not one COVID-related death of an Indigenous person, and only 13 Indigenous people hospitalised. In the early phase of the pandemic, the Indigenous rates of COVID-19 remained proportionately lower than the rest of the population.[8] The Australian Government Department of Health (2021) delivered a mid-September 2020 COVID-19 epidemiology report which showed that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are 3.3% of the population, they constituted only 0.5% of all COVID-19 cases. Interestingly, analysing the impact of the pandemic in New Zealand, Sacha McMeeking et al. (2020: 396) reported a similar outcome where 'Māori have a disproportionately lower infection rate than non-Māori'. However, this was not the case amongst First Nations in Canada, the United States (USA), South America or Africa (American Public Media Research Lab (APM), 2021; Congressional Research Service, 2021; IWGIA, 2021).

Indigenous organisations in Australia

This paper focuses on the governance of Indigenous organisations legally incorporated under government legislation in Australia. Over the last 40 years, the growth of these incorporated organisations has been the result of federal, state and territory government departments tying their provision of program funding to a requirement that recipient communities and groups become incorporated. There is now also a mandatory legal requirement for all native title groups to form a corporation as soon as they secure a positive determination of native title under law.[9] But equally, organisational growth has also been the product of Indigenous agency and choice, whereby small, localised groups have sought to autonomously control their own community or regional affairs.

Today, incorporated Indigenous organisations operate in a complex and competitive operating environment, working in virtually every area of life and industry sector, and are a significant employer of Indigenous people (see overviews in AIGI, 2016; Bauman et el., 2014; Ganter, 2011; Holcombe & Sullivan, 2013; Smith, 2011; Walter & Andersen, 2013). These organisations are the workhorses in communities, undertaking a vast array of functions, including the political representation of group rights in land and sea ownership, and delivering essential services, education, employment and training, health and wellbeing, aged-care and youth services, family welfare and child-care, art and cultural heritage, stores, community development, business enterprise, economic development and many others. At regional levels, they undertake land conservation, environmental and management services, outstation support, medical and legal services. Some community-controlled organisations operating in the same industry sector are linked into informal regional alliances or to state and national Indigenous advocacy peak bodies. The result is a vast network of interconnected organisations across the country.

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[8] This data has been produced by the Australian Government since at least September 2021, if not earlier. Two years into the pandemic, it is concerning that the vaccination rates in August 2021 are lower for Indigenous peoples than those for other Australians. NACCHO has recently called on Australian government departments to provide detailed data on Indigenous vaccination rates similar to that produced by Canada, the USA and New Zealand.

[9] In some instances, incorporation under government legislative regimes is mandatory; e.g. Prescribed Bodies Corporate must be established via incorporation after the determination of native title and so automatically come under government regulatory oversight. Government policy also encourages incorporation. From July 1, 2014 all Indigenous organisations receiving grants of AUD$500 000 (GST exclusive) or more in any single financial year through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy have been required to incorporate under the CATSI Act. Indigenous organisations that were already incorporated under the Corporations Act were exempted from this requirement (PMC, 2015).

In this context, we take 'organisational governance' to mean the system of decision-making authority, direction, control and accountability implemented to accomplish the vision of the organisation. Governance gives effectiveness to an organisation by establishing the framework of rules, plans and policies that shape its action. Management then operationalises that framework. However, the governance of incorporated Indigenous organisations is constrained by various statutory requirements set out under the incorporation legislation of state, territory and national governments; the most influential being the national *Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006* (Cth) (CATSI Act).

Once an organisation is incorporated its community members have certain rights under law, and its governing directors or boards operate under legally binding obligations and conditions, with substantial government oversight of the organisation by the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC), and by a myriad government departments in respect to vital program funding. At the same time, organisations also seek to integrate culturally-based ways of operating into their governance, management and service functions, becoming intercultural brokers and balancing sometimes contested expectations and accountabilities (Brigg & Curth-Bibb, 2017; Morley, 2015). When formalised through legislative means, governance structures and processes can resist change. In this research, we were interested in the extent to which, and how, incorporated Indigenous organisations operating in intercultural environments were able (or not) to adapt and innovate in order to govern the impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic in their communities.

Publicly accessible data we collated from ORIC's website[10] indicate that, at the beginning of 2021, there were a total 3364 Indigenous organisations in Australia incorporated under the CATSI Act.[11] The Indigenous population is conservatively[12] projected to increase to be 877 000[13] people in 2021, at an average growth rate of 2.2% per year. Of that total, approx. 346 300 will be adults over the age of 25 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2021). In effect, this means there is one incorporated organisation for every 103 adult Indigenous Australians. ORIC regulations allows for a maximum of 12 governing directors on the board of an organisation, with numbers varying in reality. Our data collated from the public ORIC website indicate the average was 5.6 directors per organisation in 2021.

On that basis, there are an estimated 27 585 Indigenous people (or 8% of the adult population) undertaking the governing responsibilities of directors on the boards of organisations.[14] This is an intensive rate of governing workload. If anything, it may be an underestimate given that alongside organisations incorporated under the CATSI Act, there are an unknown number incorporated under state and territory legislation or the Australian Securities and Investment Commission, as well as a plethora of informal, local 'consultative' structures that have been set up in communities – such as Elders Boards, committees, working groups, task forces, advisory and reference groups. The great majority of these informal structures have been created by government departments, private-sector

[10] The majority of this data collation work was undertaken by Francis Markham from CAEPR and a project research intern from the Aurora Program, Ms Olivia Freund.
[11] In fact, the total on ORIC database is 6572 organisations. However, 3208 of those are deregistered; that is, no longer active.
12 Conservatively, because Indigenous population estimates over the last few decades have consistently grown faster than even the 'high growth' ABS projections.
[13] See https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-and-projections-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release
[14] This estimate is subject to the caveat that some individuals are directors on more than one organisation, hence potentially lowering the estimate. On the other hand, the *workload* involved in one person taking on multiple governing positions is still a real-world role. The workload of governing appears to be spread evenly amongst men and women in Indigenous organisations; and more evenly compared to the wider Australian population. The overall representation of Indigenous women on boards of directors was 51.6% in 2017 (the last year ORIC published data on this; 80% of boards had more than 30% female representation, Available at: https://www.oric.gov.au/top-500/2015-16/key-findings). As a broad comparator, non-Indigenous women are reported as comprising 34% of 2021 appointments as directors to ASX 200 boards as of November 2021 (see https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-15/women-on-australian-company-boards-see-steady-increase-in-2021).

agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs) to act as the mechanisms through which they can engage and consult with local community members (Smith *in press*).[15]

Given their number and crucial representative and service roles, it is not surprising that organisations and their leaders have become the contemporary public face of Indigenous community governance, and a concrete expression of collective polities. Indigenous organisations are not islands. They are embedded within and across networks, from the local and regional, to the national and in some cases international levels. This led Sutton (1998) to characterise organisations as the new 'corporate tribes', and Smith in 2011 (p. 207; following Perrow, 1991, p. 725–762) to suggest that their deep integration into the daily life of communities means we can validly talk about Indigenous Australia as a 'society of organisations.'

In the years immediately preceding the pandemic, these very same organisations have borne the brunt of repeated cycles of government funding cuts, and been subjected to a government rollercoaster of short-term programs, and hyper-changing policy frameworks (AIGI, 2016; Anderson, 2015, p. 58, Holcombe & Sullivan, 2013; Lea, 2012, p. 116, 2020; Page, 2015; Smith, 2011; Sullivan, 2010). Over the past two decades, unilateral policy interventions by the Australian Government have left organisations and communities feeling under direct daily threat.[16] For example, the forced closure by governments of some small outstation communities in 2015 led the board of The Kimberley Aboriginal Land and Cultural Centre (KALACC, 2015) to strongly rebut the government strategy, arguing:

> *there is a raft of evidence that shows that connection to country and to culture is the single most important and effective means of improving wellbeing outcomes for Indigenous people. Culture and land are not liabilities. They are the single biggest asset and strength that we as Aboriginal people have. People in communities are generally stronger and happier than people living in town.*

The cumulative effect of repeated policy and funding 'upheaval' (Gooda, 2014, p. 14) has been to undermine the stability (indeed viability) of many organisations, and the ability of Indigenous peoples to govern their own lives (Davis, 2015; Hudson, 2016; Hunt & Smith, 2008; Moran et al., 2016). Given this vexatious context, it is all the more laudable that from the beginning of the pandemic, locally-based organisations became resourceful drivers of local crisis coordination and practical innovation.

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[15] Smith (forthcoming) describes evaluations commissioned by the Central Land Council of its own community development program (Roche & Ensor, 2014) which identified at least 20 'informal' local and 11 regional consultative structures operating in a small Central Australian remote community. Amongst the adult Aboriginal population of 236 (aged 24 years and over) at least 106 men and women – that is, 45% – were involved in governing duties on at least one of these structures. Many were on several. The majority of their governing work was unpaid.

[16] These include interventions in the form of the Northern Territory Intervention in 2007; the 'Indigenous Advancement Strategy policy in 2014 which linked funding to mandatory incorporation under the CATSI Act; and the end of Commonwealth funding of housing and infrastructure in small communities and outstations, leading to a largely unimplemented program of forcible closure in Western Australia beginning in 2015. The Northern Territory Intervention was framed by the Australian Government as being a national emergency, with army troops deployed to Indigenous communities. The 'Intervention' was a $587 million package of legislation that imposed a number of changes in specified Indigenous communities, including restrictions on alcohol, changes to welfare payments, acquisition of parcels of land, education, employment and health initiatives, restrictions on pornography and other measures. It was stridently criticised nationally and internationally (Altman & Hinkson, 2010; Smith, 2008). In June 2015, the Australian Government claimed that it could no longer support outstation and small remote communities and that no federal funding would be available for those. State governments were offered one-off funding deals from the federal government, to fund communities for one to two years. The then Prime Minister, the Hon, Tony Abbott, inflamed tensions surrounding the forced closures when he claimed that Aboriginal peoples living in rural communities were making a 'lifestyle choice' and that taxpayers had no obligation to support their 'choice'. A useful chronology of government interventions and initiatives is provided by Haughton and Kohen (2022).

Methodology

At the beginning of 2020, we were poised to undertake a research project to examine how long-established Indigenous organisations navigated crises, challenges, opportunities and change over their lifecycles. It was one of several case studies being undertaken as part of the broader *Indigenous Governance of Development* Project. As COVID-19 spread throughout Australia, a veritable storm of crisis and challenges landed on the doorsteps of organisations, and so we decided, opportunistically, to begin by focusing on how Indigenous organisations were adapting their governance and operations to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. Our aim was to identify the ways organisations were being adaptive and inventive, the factors involved, and any commonalities in strategies across organisations. We were particularly interested in practical approaches that could be shared with other organisations to support their future governance of crises.

The survey sample

The survey sampling approach evolved over time. Initially, we planned to select from the large number of incorporated organisations, a small subset of long-established Indigenous organisations (incorporated prior to the year 2000). We also wanted that subset sample to cover different industry sectors, sizes and locations (state/territory; urban, rural and remote; Torres Strait, Tasmania and mainland). We searched for organisations who met these criteria from the previous finalists of the Indigenous Governance Awards (IGA) program. Reconciliation Australia and the BHP International Foundation initially established the Awards to celebrate examples of successful governance amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations around the country, and the AIGI is now a co-host of the program. In the eight rounds since the inaugural Awards in 2005, there have been close to 500 applications, including 76 finalists and 16 winners. The IGA base group constituted a readily accessible cross-section of incorporated organisations from all industry sectors and states.[17] The research team were familiar with a number of them, which made approaching them easier. It also meant that the organisations surveyed had a demonstrated interest in governance matters, and a confident perception of their own capabilities and governance strengths. This constituted a deliberate 'bias' on our part, in the selection of the baseline sample to be surveyed – we were looking for strength-based, problem-solving and adaptations.

Through regular discussions amongst our research team, we realised we were unnecessarily limiting the scope by focusing solely on 'long-established' organisations selected as 'finalists' of the IGA. *All* organisations were facing a time of crisis and having to be innovative, creative, and adaptive to survive. Therefore, we expanded the sample to include all incorporated organisations who had applied to the IGA program, regardless of age or awards' success. Once the unincorporated, closed-down, unidentifiable, and repeat applicants were removed from the data set, an initial sample set of 294 incorporated organisations remained; that is, approximately 9% of the total number of incorporated organisations registered with ORIC.

Survey questions

Survey topics and questions were informed by literature review and the extensive research previously carried out by the authors with Indigenous organisations over several decades (see Hunt et al., 2008; Smith, 2008, 2011; and AIGI's periodic analyses of the IGA 2014, 2016, 2018). The overall focus of the survey is on governance, based on our expanded view of governance as a practice running right

[17] A caveat regarding this survey sample base is that it does not equate to a pro-rata representation of the total national number of organisations in each industry listed in the ORIC database.

through an organisation, rather than simply sitting at the 'top'. Furthermore, in line with our previous survey experience, Indigenous responses are recognised as likely being based on a more relational model, not the methodological individualism that typically underpins the administration of social science questionnaire (Hunter & Smith, 2008; Smith, 2000). Accordingly, our invitation to participate noted that we would welcome multiple responses from one organisation if several board members and/or executives were interested in completing it; individually or collaboratively as a team.

A combination of multiple choice, rated score questions, open-ended questions and comments boxes were utilised to obtain both quantitative and qualitative information and to enhance participant responsiveness. We piloted the draft questionnaire twice with AIGI staff (who themselves have been employed as staff in various Indigenous organisations, and as board members) and then revised the questions to improve their relevance and clarity based on feedback. The final questionnaire comprised 34 questions under 6 topics: about the organisation; about the board; adapting to challenges; building on strengths; resources; looking to the future (the questions are provided in Appendix A to this paper).

Survey methods in a time of Covid

Our method was COVID-sensitive and informed by the constraints and realities of stress, time pressures and workload experienced by the organisations. Given it was not feasible for us to travel or meet with people face-to-face, we administered an online survey through SurveyMonkey and then held follow-up yarns (semi-structured conversations) by Zoom with consenting participants, where we discussed their survey responses in more depth.

This approach was approved under a robust university ethics process. Accordingly, all participants were provided with a 'Participant Consent Form' and 'Information Statement' outlining the survey intent and process, confidentiality, information use, voluntary participation, research team and contact details. The first online survey question asked people's consent to participate and was designed so that, if a person selected 'No', the survey automatically closed. Those who elected to participate were also offered the opportunity to have a follow-up yarn over Zoom. Those who agreed were later provided an additional Participant Information Statement and a second written consent form prior to the interview. This constituted a double-consent procedure for each organisation who participated in both the survey and Zooms. In terms of confidentiality, it was agreed that individual survey responses would not be identified, but that quotes or stories drawn from the Zoom yarns would be attributed to the individual, the organisation or anonymous, according to the participant's wishes.

The survey went live in October 2020. We sent direct emails to the initial sample and further promoted the survey at an AIGI governance conference, and through AIGI networks. We intended to keep the survey open for 3 months and circulated monthly reminder emails. During this 3-month period, we received feedback that people in some hard-pressed organisations did not have the time to engage, but still wanted to, and so we extended the survey for an additional 2 months. The survey was accessed and attempted 43 times. Of these attempts, 30 were fully complete with no multiple responses. The 13 incomplete surveys were excluded from analysis.

Sixteen organisations agreed to have follow-up conversations and we were able to coordinate with eight of them. Those discussions were informed by the organisation's survey response and our review of information publicly available on their websites. The yarns followed a semi-structured format, with a focus on exploring how each organisation went about making their governance and operational arrangements more fit for crisis purposes, and then seeking practical examples and specific issues encountered. Each conversation went for 1–2 hours. Eight were conducted with executives and one with a Board Chairperson. The Zoom recordings were developed into written transcripts using

Otter.ai software, and a clean Word document was returned to organisations for their confirmation of accuracy and as an opportunity to provide additional information if they so wished.

Data collation and analysis

Data analysis was multi-staged. Firstly, survey responses were collated for each question. The SurveyMonkey function automatically provided statistical summaries for quantitative questions. For qualitative questions, the research team reviewed responses and grouped them into emerging themes. Results were then reviewed to identify which experiences and strategies had the most impact or effect. These were identifiable by high rating scores, or frequent discussion within and across questions. Thirdly, we drafted commentary around findings and insights. Fourthly, Zoom transcripts were reviewed and edited under emerging themes. Content from the transcripts was also developed into illustrative stories about solutions and strategies. These have been inserted into the analysis below at relevant points. In the few instances where different narratives emerged between survey and interview results, we have provided additional commentary to highlight the interesting nuances involved.

For such a small survey, and given the oft-cited limitations of phone interviews as opposed to face-to-face (Hunter & Smith, 2002), the strategy of combining online survey and Zoom discussions proved to be a remarkably effective method. Indeed, all the organisations we spoke with were keen and very proud to share their experiences and strategies. Many hoped that their strategies might assist other organisations and communities. Given the enormous pressures organisations were operating under, they were extraordinarily generous in making the time available to participate. We acknowledge the considerable expertise and insights contributed by all the participants, to better understanding the continuing impacts the COVID-19 pandemic is having on Indigenous communities in Australia.

In the following section we present an integrated analysis of the results from responding organisations to both the online survey and follow-up Zoom conversations. In the analysis below, we include the voices of the organisations themselves in quotes and comments, as they vividly portray the sense of urgency and pride that was so often evident in their responses and Zoom yarns. Where organisations are named, it is with their consent.

Analysis of survey results and Zoom yarns

As noted above, the final number of respondents included in the case study is 30. The number for calculation of all percentages presented in analysis is 30.

Organisational characteristics of the survey respondents

The organisations who responded to the survey are spread evenly across metropolitan, rural, and remote locations, with 10 located in metropolitan areas, 11 in rural and 9 in remote. Most Australian states and territories are also represented, with 8 organisations from New South Wales, 6 from both Queensland and Western Australia, 4 from the Northern Territory, 3 from both South Australia and Victoria, and none from the Australian Capital Territory or Tasmania. The cohort included 1 organisation from the Torres Strait and 29 from the mainland.

Industry sector is diverse. Health is the most common sector of operation amongst responding organisations (9); followed by Culture, Heritage and Arts (3); Child, Youth and Families (3); Community Development (2); then Native Title Bodies, Education, Employment and Economic Development (1 each). An additional 10 organisations selected ‘Other’ as their sector of operation. One operates in aged care, while the other 9 operate across multiple sectors, and so selecting only

one of the sector choices was not appropriate for them. For example, one organisation is a homelands resource agency offering housing maintenance, primary health, a Rangers program, aged care, National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) services and youth programs/services. Another runs language restoration and environmental management projects. This multi-functionality is a very common characteristic of Indigenous organisations who deliver not only core services funded under program grants, but provide a wide range of additional (unfunded) support to communities (see Howard-Wagner, 2021).

In respect to size, four organisations are classified as small, 15 as medium and 11 as large. Our classification is based on the criteria used by the ORIC.[18] The sample was not sufficiently large to be able make compelling conclusions about the effect size might have on organisations' ability to govern the pandemic. Twenty-seven of the surveys were completed by executive team members and three by board members. One organisation submitted two surveys, both completed by persons at the executive level.

The number of board members range between 3 and 20. The most common being 7 and 8. All organisations have a majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander board, and just over one-half (53%) are 100% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led. Six boards have a 50/50 gender split, 11 have a majority of female board members, and 13 a male majority. Significantly, less than one-quarter (23%) of organisations remunerate their board members.

The organisations select their board members in a variety of ways, including election at the Annual General Meeting, skill-based appointments, assessment interviews conducted by the board, and using cultural processes (e.g. choosing one man and one woman from a cultural block). Potential candidates are sought by expression of interest, recommendations, and formal nomination. Appointment criteria included Indigeneity, gender diversity, personal values, specific expertise and skills. Prior to the pandemic, 11 boards met quarterly, 8 met monthly, 6 bi-monthly and 5 met every 6 weeks.

Governance and operational challenges arising from COVID-19

The pandemic has continued to be characterised by considerable variation in locational occurrence and severity, exacerbated by the fact that state, territory and national governments have continued to take decidedly different approaches. Pandemic impacts varied depending not only on an organisations' particular cultural context, location, scale and industry sector, but also on the type of lockdown restrictions enacted. It is not surprising then, that self-assessments made by organisations of actual impacts range from 'just another challenge', to 'more a business than a governance challenge', to 'scary'.

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[18] Under ORIC classification, the size of an organisation is determined by looking at its income, assets and number of employees in a single financial year:
A small corporation will have at least TWO of the following in a financial year:
- consolidated gross operating income of less than $100 000
- consolidated gross assets valued at less than $100 000
- fewer than five employees.

A medium corporation will have at least TWO of the following in a financial year:
- consolidated gross operating income between $100 000 and $5 million
- consolidated gross assets between $100 000 and $2.5 million
- between five and 24 employees.

A large corporation will have at least TWO of the following in a financial year:
- consolidated gross operating income of $5 million or more
- consolidated gross assets valued at $2.5 million or more
- more than 24 employees.

In the survey, organisations were presented with an extensive list of challenges that they might be encountering as a result of the pandemic, and asked to rate them as either a 'big', 'medium', 'small impact' or 'not applicable'. The three challenges rated as having the biggest impact are the same for both governance and operational management; namely, being unable to meet face-to-face due to lockdown and related restrictions; high workloads; and difficulties with planning (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). A fourth key challenge was stress, fear and anxiety. Interestingly, this was not highly rated in the survey question (only 13% of organisations reported low staff morale had a big impact and only 10% rated ill or stressed board members as a big challenge). However, this *was* discussed by respondents in the survey's open comment questions, and also frequently reported in our follow-up Zoom yarns as having significant effects amongst staff, board members, clients and communities.

[INSERT FIG 1 & 2 HERE]

Figure 1: Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on organisations overall

Source: Adapting to Challenges Q.1 a) Appendix A

Figure 2: Governance challenges that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: Adapting to Challenges Q.2 a) Appendix A

Some organisations provided examples of how these impacts were experienced in their contexts, which are summarised below.

1. <u>Being unable to meet face-to-face due to lockdown or other restrictions</u>

   Of the responding organisations, 27% rated not being able to meet face-to-face due to lock downs or other restrictions as a big challenge for their board, while 47% found being cut off from visiting their communities had a big organisational impact. For the respondents, pandemic-generated lockdowns of towns and states meant a lack of travel, restricted the access of organisations to their dispersed clients and communities, and the limited delivery of face-to-face services. The significant impact of this was captured by one organisation, which stated that: 'you can meet the minimal requirements of operating, but beyond that it is very hard to deliver cultural programs'.

2. <u>High workloads</u>

   Of the survey respondents, 43% rated high workloads as having a big impact on their organisations and 13% rated high workloads as a big challenge for their boards. An increase in client and community needs created a substantial increase in workload, which in turn had flow-on impacts on staff. One explained that their staff were still adapting to new work routines and duties, another was struggling with a lack of staff and funding to cope with the increased demand from clients, and a third was trying to attract more staff to meet the high workload. In these instances, the high workloads often fed into the fourth challenge – increased stress amongst staff and board members.

3. <u>Difficulties with planning</u>

   The pandemic had major impacts on the ability of organisations to plan, because of constant changes to pandemic requirements. Of the responding organisations, 33% reported that it was harder to plan and action decisions, which had a big impact on operations. Of the responding

organisations, 20% rated strategic planning as a big challenge for their boards. One captured this as follows:

> *It was difficult to plan for changes during COVID and we had to manage on the fly. We are fortunate to have excellent staff who just did all they could to keep the operations opened and continued to deliver services. We had very little planning occurring, happening across the COVID affected period as we were reacting to the crisis of COVID and what the restrictions meant for the downturn of our business and increase in restrictions for our operations.*

4. Stress, fear and anxiety

In respect to mental health and welfare, organisations noted several areas of concern. One explained that their staff morale was low 'because of the lack of knowledge about COVID-19 and the fear of contamination'. Others highlighted fears about the spread of the virus among their clients and community, and discussed the amount of time they needed to spend communicating with staff and clients in order to overcome their concerns and anxiety.

While these four challenges were reported as having the biggest impact, it should be noted that some organisations rated them as having only a small impact, or not applicable at all. Comparative ratings are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Importantly though, in the midst of ongoing uncertainties and fears, the very great majority of organisations reported being able to navigate specific challenges with considerable effectiveness. Our analysis of the particularly adept contributions they were able to make, identified four major foci of organisational agency discussed below:

1. Supporting and servicing the community
2. Collaborating with external Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners
3. Adapting their governance
4. Pivoting the way they do business.

Supporting and servicing the community

Cultural values and priorities

> *Responsibility to serve community acted as strong foundation to help [our] organisation stay afloat. [A] strong sense of purpose and responsibility ensured staff stayed committed and focused on the job at hand and on getting through.*

Cultural values and norms guided organisational priorities during the pandemic. The values of 'kinship, communication, community and connection' as summarised by one organisation, were commonly mentioned across the respondent cohort. Priorities centred around protecting the health of Elders and vulnerable members and clients, ensuring family and community safety and social cohesion, creating solutions tailored to client and members' needs, and providing them with culturally-informed and safe services.

Of the responding organisations, 37% took on significant additional roles and workload in order to deliver on these priorities. This included activities well outside the regular scope of their functions, and which they were not necessarily resourced to deliver. The three main areas of outward-facing community/client support provided by organisations were: locally meaningful, informed

communication; essential livelihood needs (for health, food, housing and income); and mental and cultural wellbeing.

Zoom yarning with the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre, Western Australia: Remoteness and outstation-'arks' have survival value

At the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, Aboriginal community organisations and leaders across Australia were voicing their concerns about the potentially catastrophic effects the COVID-19 virus could have on Indigenous Elders. They called on governments to enact entire lockdowns of regions, and support the creation of Elder Protected Areas.

The remote community of Balgo in north Western Australia, with a usual population of 350 residents, found themselves inundated by incoming people who were being 'repatriated' from Perth and regional centres around the Kimberley, including Broome and Kununurra, without being tested prior to entering the community. Warlpiri people doing business in the desert headed to Balgo as well.

The influx of people immediately contributed to major overcrowding in housing, as well as posing high-risks for community transmission. Prior to the pandemic, Balgo was usually over-represented in admissions to the Halls Creek hospital. Speaking with NITV News, Warren Betag, a co-CEO of the Wirrimanu Aboriginal Corporation which represents Balgo residents and operates the local store, said the community clinic was 'under-equipped for an imminent outbreak, let alone monitoring, and that there was a 10-day turnaround for swab tests to be transported between the community and Halls Creek'. He described the level of resources in terms of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) at the clinic as 'appalling'.

The Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre (KALACC) described the consequences 'of 350 suddenly becoming 600' as 'a complete disaster in terms of the social outcomes'. Leaders in Balgo put the call out for support to regional organisations. One initiative was to use outstations as arks; that is, an isolated place that afforded protection and safety. KALACC responded quickly:

> *These arks were refuges; basically, these were outstations around Balgo that we were looking at, as a place where the Elders who we described as being the living libraries, could live safely. They are the custodians of the culture. So, we were concerned that if a single case got into Balgo, with the degree of overcrowding that was occurring in that place, we'd lose them all…. And so we were looking at alternatives to that, and we were looking at these arks which as I said were outstations and we managed to secure some reasonable support; not from government…. It was Bunnings that sent us several truckloads of generators and all kinds of things that you would need to set up these little arks. So the intent of the arks was to actually secure the future for the living libraries, for our elderly. So we managed to set up three of them with the support of Bunnings and a small number of Elders were able to avail themselves of that. So it was successful as far as it went.*

Additional sources of information: NACCHO Aboriginal Health and #CoronaVirus News Alert No 27 April 2 #KeepOurMobSafe: Part 1: Fears for Indigenous as 5 Kimberley health workers infected. Part 2: Race to build coronavirus 'ark' for at-risk elders | NACCHO Aboriginal Health News Alerts (nacchocommunique.com).

Remote Aboriginal communities call for governments to support 'Arks' for most vulnerable | NITV (sbs.com.au).

Meaningful and informed communication efforts

Organisations acted immediately to address the need for locally meaningful, timely and accurate information about COVID-19.[19] This issue has continued to be a crucial one as the pandemic unfolded beyond the timeframe covered by this paper. It was important everyone had equal access to information throughout every stage of the pandemic, in languages they understand. Indigenous organisations quickly began working with others to translate crucial health messaging not only into Indigenous languages, but also into Kriol and plain English; as posters, written, video, social media and animated formats.

The organisations we surveyed and talked with invested heavily in communicating information in ways that ensured its cultural relevance, ease of understanding and applicability to local communities and their members. They activated a range of inventive strategies and Indigenous networked pathways (selecting the most appropriate and effective for their context) to share information about symptoms, preventing spread of the virus, and testing. They are continuing to undertake this critical communication role in respect to vaccination against the Delta Variant. Close to one-half of the organisations translated information into local Indigenous languages or multimedia formats to increase its relevance to their audience (see Figure 3). Many used Indigenous graphics and visuals to great effect. In our follow-up Zoom yarns, organisations described rearranging their communication processes to identify critical pandemic messages, assess the cultural, social and health implications of those for their members, and then bring to bear their own expertise in Indigenous communication styles, in order to translate what was often complex technical information into locally meaningful content.

[INSERT FIG 3 HERE]

Figure 3: Technology and communication strategies that supported organisations through the COVID-19 Pandemic

Source: Resources Q.3 a) Appendix A

Many communication activities aimed to overcome fear about the pandemic, and its fast spread. A key role of leadership thus became to provide reassurance, address concerns raised by community residents, provide accurate information and correct misinformation. Trust was an important aspect of this achievement. Two-thirds of responding organisations rated their board members' strong relationships in communities as an extremely helpful strength (see Figure 4). Long-standing local organisations benefited from the community relationships and trust they already had established.

> *The board were very instrumental in communication that had to go out to community… Whenever we had the opportunity to speak outwardly to our community, the board were also there with me or one of the doctors. They didn't want to get involved in operations, they tell us all the time 'that's what they pay us for', but they absolutely wanted to complement what we were doing and get the word out there from themselves as community members. They've been instrumental in the vaccine rollout.*

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[19] This was especially the case after the introduction of vaccines, about which there was some wariness in particular in Indigenous communities. Indigenous organisations continued building on their existing communication expertise and networks of relations into communities, to design Indigenous-relevant messages, often in local languages. From the pandemic's beginning, organisations brought in Indigenous leaders and professionals to tell the story, used digital and visual messaging, trusted people to run focus groups, and Elders in videos to act as influencers. Examples of such innovative media initiatives were described by the organisations in their survey and interview responses.

> *The chairperson and I got our vaccinations the other day and posted it all over our social media. That's the sort of thing where our board is really helpful for us.*

The style of communication was also important. Half the organisations rated their communication networks and existing links into community as a very helpful strength. Effective communication was characterised as being open, regular, locally meaningful and clear. Having an engaged board and executive leadership who actively communicated with stakeholders and partners were also valued for fostering confidence in the organisation's decisions during the pandemic, and often led to important resources and support being secured.

[INSERT FIG 4 HERE]

Figure 4: Existing governance strengths that helped organisations through the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: Building on Strengths Q.2 a) Appendix A

The pandemic required board members and executive to stay up to date with the latest government directives and health advice. Organisations accessed information and resources from state and territory governments, health department and agency websites. Several mentioned that having access to the customised resources that were being created by other Indigenous organisation was extremely useful, providing them with a trusted source of reliable and culturally relevant information. Organisations also shared their own solutions and information across their organisational networks to ensure that others in the region kept up to date with useful initiatives and translated information.

<u>Providing for essential livelihood needs and wellbeing</u>

Quite apart from the threat of the virus itself, during 2020, the pandemic-driven lockdowns, travel restrictions and associated interruptions to supply distribution, raised concerns about food and income security, housing overcrowding, social conflict and domestic violence (Markham, 2020; Markham et al., 2020; O'Kane, 2020; Tamara et al., 2020).[20] A 2020 inquiry by the Australian Government's Indigenous Affairs Committee (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020) into food pricing and security highlighted an already well-established fact: namely, the lack of healthy, affordable, reliably available food in remote communities across the country. Frontline specialists in Indigenous domestic and family violence began reporting an increase in client numbers since the beginning of the pandemic (see e.g. Johnstone et al., 2020). High levels of welfare reliance and low levels of full-time employment presaged pandemic impacts of exacerbating income poverty not only in remote, but also in rural and urban communities. As Tamara et al. (2020) warned, there was an imperative for fast action.

[20] The issue of food security was not experienced equally across the country. For many, the problem was greatly improved in the first year of the pandemic due to the Coronavirus Supplement provided by the Australian Government to social security recipients. Supply-chain issues have waxed and waned during the entire pandemic to date, and been exacerbated by other international events. Food insecurity was not only experienced by some people in lock-down or quarantining who weren't able to get out to purchase food, but – as noted by some of our organisational respondents – was especially heightened for residents of remote and rural communities (see Fredericks & Bradfield, 2021; Markham & Kerins, 2020).

Zoom yarning with Yirra Yaaking Theatre Company, WA: Supporting community artists through informed responses

In the early days of the pandemic during lockdown isolation, Yirra Yaakin in Perth began several special initiatives to support their community artists and performers, including their families and youth. Many organisations put considerable effort into ensuring they had accurate information about how their community members and clients were faring in order to better tailor their work to those needs. Yirra Yaakin was one such organisation.

Between 3 June and 17 June 2020, a survey was sent out through a network alliance of Indigenous organisations – Ilbijerri, Yirra Yaakin, BlakDance, and Moogahlin – in south-western WA, to understand the impacts of the pandemic on the First Nations performing arts sector. Eighty-five artists and arts workers responded to the survey overall, and the organisations produced a report on their findings.

Over one-half of First Nations artists surveyed worked in theatre (53%) followed by multidisciplinary (47%) and dance (39%). Within the arts sector, respondents occupied the role/s of actor (37%), dancer (35%), choreographer (33%), storyteller (33%), and educator (33%). For one-third of the artists, their main source of income was performance/presentation (i.e. tour as part of festival or programmed work (33%); followed by schools or workshops (28%). The pandemic severely curtailed this. Because of cancellation or closure due to COVID-19 restrictions between March-December 2020, two-in-five First Nations artists surveyed lost an estimated or confirmed income of between $10 000 and $29 999 (39%). In addition, 26% lost between $5000 and $9999, 20% lost between $1000 and $4999 and 7% lost $1000 or less. Just 35% of First Nations respondents felt they had enough income/savings to support themselves during COVID-19 and up until December 2020.

Their data indicated that First Nations artists were profoundly concerned about the social and cultural impacts of the pandemic on their lives, especially on gathering to practice culture (78%) and caring for Elders (72%). They were also concerned about their wellbeing and mental health, with many experiencing depression, anxiety, isolation, and stress.

First Nations artists mentioned needing their own organisations to continue sharing resources, offering mental health support and services, and lobbying local, state and federal governments on behalf of the sector.

They concluded that while many First Nations' artists and organisations are exploring online opportunities, digital adaptation poses unique challenges for First Nations arts, including the need to uphold Indigenous rights and sovereignty in the digital environment and to protect against unethical dealing and digital disadvantage.

Additional sources of information: First-Nations-COVID-19-Performing-Arts-Impact-Survey-Summary-Report_Feb21.pdf (yirrayaakin.com.au)

Organisation website: https://yirrayaakin.com.au/results-first-nations-covid-19-performing-arts-wellbeing-survey/

It was local and regional organisations that made a significant early contribution with respect to their clients and community members. Several reported that they immediately began coordinating the provision of food, shelter and essential health and personal items for those in need. That included providing referrals to connect people to other organisations providing specialist care. One organisation described the difficulty they faced trying to deliver essential services and support to community because, despite being well placed in terms of relationships and logistics, they were not recognised as a preferred provider for Emergency Relief Funding by the Australian Government. For organisations who were working extremely effectively at the frontline of the pandemic, this lack of recognition hindered the extent of their valuable work.

Wellbeing during the pandemic went beyond caring for people's physical health and safety. Of the organisations which responded to the survey, 30% developed their own forms of support for mental health, and linked people to mental health services such as Beyond Blue or Lifeline. Many put together a combination of innovative initiatives to encourage different types of social interaction, mutual support and solidarity (e.g. via phone calls, creating socially distanced meeting spaces, and online get togethers) to help ameliorate the effects of isolation.

Collaborating with external Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners

Indigenous organisations are not social or cultural isolates. They are thickly integrated into the wider networked web of their own communities, groups, families and kin relationships. Accordingly, they are often able to call on the same social supports and are subject to the same obligations attached to the mutual relationships that characterise Indigenous society. Furthermore, their networks extend outwards to the public and private sectors (see Howard-Wagner, 2018; Smith, 2011; Sullivan, 2010, 2018). Often this very embeddedness is portrayed negatively by governments and public media, and indeed can present governance and operational challenges for organisations. However, in the case of the pandemic, the substantial practical benefits of embedded relationality came to the fore.

Having good relationships with local government, industry, NGOs, philanthropic, other Indigenous organisations and community leaders was reported by the responding organisations as being a significant strength during the pandemic. Of these organisations, 60% rated their strong relationships with external agencies as important (see Figure 4). In interviews, organisations reinforced that the key factor in this was their personal one-to-one relationships with individual staff in external industries, agencies and NGOs who then supported local initiatives. Of the responding organisations, 50% rated their strong community networks of support, and one-third rated their networks with other Indigenous organisations as critical sources of support and strength. In combination it suggests that organisational networks acted a critical resource.

Four organisations explained how their partnerships acted as an important source of support and resources. One organisation in the health sector described the sharing of PPE, tablets and smartphones amongst Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations and the broader health sector. A second said they combined forces to strengthen capabilities, a third to share helpful tips about getting things done during the pandemic, and a fourth highly valued the level of understanding they received from their partners, many of whom were experiencing their own pandemic challenges.

Zoom yarning with Bundiyarra, WA: Distributing emergency relief and food packages to communities

Bundiyarra's story resonates with that of many we spoke with and surveyed. The pandemic raised many issues for Aboriginal people – most importantly access to food – so a number of Midwest Aboriginal service providers in Western Australia banded together to deliver Emergency Relief Packages to those in need. According to Wayne McDonald, Manager Operations of Bundiyarra, around 800 food and hygiene packages were delivered to regional and remote Aboriginal communities across the Midwest and Gascoyne in the early days of the pandemic in 2020, to help combat isolation and further disadvantage.

Bundiyarra Aboriginal Corporation joined forces with the Midwest Employment and Economic Development Aboriginal Corporation (MEEDAC) and the Aboriginal Biodiversity Conservation Foundation (ABC Foundation), to contribute needed resources such as cleaning and sanitary products along with food donated through the ABC Foundation's 'Food for the Mob' program to organise, pack and distribute the Emergency Relief Packages.

Starting in August 2020, another vital service within the town of Geraldton was also started, with meals being provided to disadvantaged Aboriginal people including the homeless, large families, disabled and Elders during the pandemic to ensure food security. Bundiyarra's Jennifer Gregory-Kniveton coordinated the project and MEEDAC, Geraldton Aboriginal Streetwork Corporation (Streeties) and Bundiyarra delivered the meals to eligible people across town. Each partner organisation identified their own target group and delivered the meals to their Aboriginal clients over a period of 18 weeks. Meals were delivered the day before pay day to ensure people had access to a hot meal during this lean period, when most households would run out of food. Wayne McDonald, reported that:

> *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. Bundiyarra provided the logistics, assembling the packages, and delivering to some communities like Pia Wadjarri, Kardaloo and Barrel Well, while ABC coordinated the 700 km round trip with their community partners Yulella Aboriginal Corporation near Meekatharra and Mungullah Community Aboriginal Corporation near Carnarvon.*

As well as their natural cleaning products, Bundiyarra's Environmental Health Unit supplied soap donated by Soap Aid, a not-for-profit organisation that cleans and processes hotel soap into fresh, hygienic soap bars that are distributed to communities to encourage frequent handwashing. The Environmental Health Team Leader, Derek Councillor Jnr, said the soap was initially to educate people in frequent handwashing to combat trachoma, an eye infection found in communities that can lead to blindness. But now, he said it 'is an essential time to keep the hand washing hygiene education going with the COVID-19 outbreak.'

This was an extraordinary collective impact that was the result of local Aboriginal organisations getting on the front-foot very quickly, partnering together, coordinating logistics, and drawing in NGOs, to provide the sustained and much-needed delivery of food and COVID-safety products to Aboriginal families in the urban and remote communities of their region.

Additional sources of information: Organisation website – https://www.bundiyarra.com/

Organisations also sought out new partnerships with health services, community organisations and government to coordinate and develop ways to support their members. These relationships provided them not only with advice and encouragement, but with new alliances, new resources and collaborative sources of strength and resilience. The connectivity of organisations during the pandemic clearly improved the flow, accuracy and relevance of information. It also appeared to improve relationships with communities, between organisations, and with other organisations and stakeholders, which supported informed decision-making by boards and timely action by management and staff.

Adapting organisational governance

Incorporated Indigenous organisations in Australia are bound in their governance behaviour by many legislative and funding constraints. Moran & Elvin (2009, p. 420) have noted a downside of this regulatory positioning is that 'there are few entry points for Aboriginal leaders and the staff of local organisations to engage in the governance system in ways that might change it for the better'. A crisis such as the pandemic puts pressure on governance arrangements to change and adapt. However, it also provides a potential opportunity for innovation and creativity; a space in which productive adaptation can take place. It appears that during the pandemic, some organisations rose above their regulatory limitations to take adaptive action.

The established concept of 'adaptive governance' refers to the evolution of rules and norms that better promote the management of shared assets, particularly common pool resources and other forms of natural capital to meet human needs and preferences, in the context of changes in objectives and the social, economic and environmental context (Hatfield-Dodds et al., 2007, p. 4; Folke, 2005). As noted earlier, the concept has been introduced to explore the governance needs of changing social-ecological systems (such as climate change, multi-jurisdictional riverine systems). The governance of Indigenous organisations is not only externally regulated by government legislation; but also operates within, and is influenced by, a complex system of Indigenous cultural institutions and social relationships. During the pandemic, organisations appear to have effectively activated multiple 'entry points' and practices for adapting their governance arrangements to achieve desired outcomes.

The ways that boards adapted their governance to the crisis was as different as the organisations themselves. Three organisations carried on with their established board meeting protocols and communication processes, finding them already fit for meeting the demands of the pandemic, or that their region was relatively unaffected by the crisis. The majority moved to reshape and finesse their governing arrangements, structures and processes to enable strong direction and decision making for the organisation as a whole. A common aspect of this was that adaptive strategies for governance were focused on creating new combinations of teamwork and units within the organisation, in order to draw on various knowledge systems, expertise and experiences across the structure.

Zoom yarning with Bundiyarra, Western Australia: The Yamatji Regional Emergency Response Group

While governments seemed slow to act collaboratively, many Indigenous organisations mobilised their own local and regional networks to get the things done for their community members that required extra resources and coordination. Geraldton was a good example.

Wayne McDonald from Bundiyarra noted that in early 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic, 25 Aboriginal organisations and communities across the mid-west and Gascoyne region of Western Australia, united as the 'COVID 19 Yamatji Regional Emergency Response Group' (YERG) to 'act as a forum for an Aboriginal voice to understand and progress addressing the needs of the community at this time' and 'to keep Aboriginal people safe and prevent infection in the region'. The Group worked from the principle that all decisions should continue to be made putting Aboriginal health and wellbeing first, and economy second.

The YERG met regularly, made collective decisions, maintained meeting minutes and an action register, provided timely advice to government and took action on a wide range of issues, including regional food security, health and housing services, social isolation stress and suicide in communities, fly-in fly-out solutions for mining companies, quarantine boundaries, funding for communities etc. Its member Aboriginal organisations and leaders worked together to:

- 'Identify the infrastructure, supply and personnel needs in our communities during the immediate period, the initial 3 months and the period beyond 3 months.
- Communicate with government on meeting our critical needs and tasks during this State of Emergency (including via funding and/or service provision).
- Find ways to help and support each other through information, services and resources.'

The Group's coordinated approach was a demonstration of shared resources, capacity and collaboration across the region that resulted in critical areas of Aboriginal vulnerability being better met during the pandemic. The YERG quickly began working in collaboration with a wider Mid-West-Gascoyne District Leadership Group which had been operating before the pandemic, to bring together Commonwealth, state and local government agencies, Aboriginal organisations and not-for-profit sector to deliver coordinated, place-based real-time response to critical situations in the region. An innovative aspect of YERG's work was to adopt an Aboriginal Emergency Crisis Response protocol that had been initiated by Wayne McDonald from Bundiyarra organisation, and which immediately became relevant to the pandemic.

The group also helped to establish an emergency COVID-19 response website to help people across Western Australia. The website – recov19er.com.au – aimed to share clear, current and correct information, including government media releases and other health and community advice for people in Western Australia being affected by the ongoing changes impacting regional and remote areas.

Aboriginal leaders of the alliance of organisations noted that:

> *[w]hile we as a group have been successful as both a communication channel for our community and through instigating the delivery of critical response actions, much of this occurred through unexpected commitment of time, resource and expenditure from our own organisations and individuals.*
>
> *… [while] [w]e have valued the engagement from senior staff across these [government] agencies, we have also experienced some frustration with their slow responses and/or inability to act.*

Additional sources of information: Organisation websites: https://www.ymac.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Update-4.pdf

https://www.recov19er.com.au/

https://www.ymac.org.au/recov19er-website-launched-to-help-coordinate-covid-19-response/

Increased engagement with the board

Another common feature was that CEOs/executives worked extremely hard to ensure their board members were kept abreast of changing conditions and issues. Two-thirds of organisations introduced strategies to facilitate greater flow of communication to the board, as well as between the CEO and Chair. Predominantly, this was done by increased phone calls, emails and meetings between the CEO and board to provide updates on pandemic developments. Our follow-up Zoom yarns revealed that the frequent updates were not only about emerging risks, but also to discuss strategic options for how service delivery could be adjusted to better serve members and clients.

> *During the pandemic, health and service providers in our region met on a fortnightly basis. After each meeting I'd share information with our management, I tried to schedule our management meetings to align with the regional meetings. And then I'd send the board a quick email update on case numbers as well as disaster management and COVID planning in the region. It covered things like what was going on with the fly in fly out workforce and the grey nomads stranded with border closures – a lot of whom were using our GP services and required medication to be supplied.*

Of the responding organisations, 83% rated having a strong trusting relationship between the CEO and board as a very helpful strength for dealing with the pandemic. This was the most highly rated strength out of 14 options (see Figure 4).

Board meetings and reporting

Substantial changes were made to the ways board members met with each other during the pandemic, and especially lockdown phases. Two-thirds of organisations moved to virtual meetings. This included a mixture of teleconference, videoconference and hybrid (some directors attended in person while others joined via Zoom). The rest were able to locate alternative meeting facilities to accommodate social distancing requirements, except for three who ceased holding meetings because their directors were unable to travel, did not all have access to IT, preferred face-to-face meetings, or the organisation had shut down during the pandemic.

Given the commonly-stated Indigenous preference for boards to meet in person, pandemic lockdown and social isolation restrictions meant organisations had to do things differently. Not surprisingly then, there were diverse views about the efficacy of face-to-face, versus virtual board meetings. For some, it proved that their board could be just as effective in virtual meetings as face-to-face, and that the latter are not always required to get business done. Indeed, some discovered there were governance benefits to meeting online, as more directors were able to attend via videoconference than face-to-face meetings.

Zoom yarning with several organisations: The relationship between the Board and the CEO

The governing relationship between boards, chairs and their CEOs is cited in the literature as a critical yet problematic one; and not only for Indigenous organisations. In contrast to stories of debilitating conflict in these governing relationships, it appeared to be a source of considerable strength for Indigenous organisations during the pandemic. Interestingly, organisations noted that the standard governance injunction to ensure a clear separation of powers was superceded by a greater degree of collaborative co-governance:

> *… we haven't particularly had to change the scheduling of our formal engagement during the Covid we didn't add in particular meetings and so on. But we certainly made sure we still conducted all of our scheduled board meetings and board committee meetings. And I know there was, there were frequent conversations taking place between, between the General Manager and Board Chair.*

> *… I think we were, we were lucky, I mean we have a wonderful board. Yeah, as you would hope and expect, and they are all deeply interested in what's happening within the organisation. They're very accessible, very open to engagement with management and leadership at any time. But at the same time they're respectful of the fact that management needs to just get on with, you know, making the business happen. And so I think we strike a nice balance between management having that autonomy to be adaptable and to change direction, while at the same time having due regard to the role of the board to give guidance around that and to act as the checking the balance in the thinking that was going into what we were doing, and the sustainability of some of those decisions in the long term.*

> *… Over the course of that year, we actually changed our leadership structure a little bit and talked about ideas for reinventing organisations. And there was a model that appealed which has the organisation, arranging itself into more initiative or project-related clusters, and then pulling in resources as needed and so on. So that was a much more kind of self-governing approach to some of the administration aspects like, you know, leave and personnel matters during Covid. So the roles in those clusters sort of became peers if you like, rather than that sort of having that traditional sort of hierarchy.*

> *… it was very helpful to have a sort of consistency of vision, of understanding of where we come from, our purpose together in the organisation, and what were the challenges we faced and how best to address those; And what all that meant for our strategy and so on and for the board. They were very engaged with providing whatever help and guidance they could, but at the same time, you know, giving the latitude to us to try a few different approaches and think fairly extensively about how to do things differently so.*

Three organisations noted that meeting online actually improved engagement and decision-making, reporting that:[21]

> *We found more advantages in online meeting – the Board were able to participate more readily. [The] Board was more engaged and adopted improved decision making. 100% of the Directors participated in all meetings – which was not the case prior to COVID-19.*

> *It's a myth that our communities aren't connected through technology. You'd be surprised at the demographic who actually use it. One of our board members is in her 70s. We thought joining board meetings was going to be a challenge for her, because we had to hold them via Zoom as our board room isn't big enough to observe social distancing. At the first meeting, I was taking photos of what to do because I thought she was going to struggle the most. But no, she was schooling some of the other 40- or 50-year-old members about, 'hey you just press this button, and then that button, and then you'll be right'. She was the one saying, 'you're on mute'.*

However, two organisations felt nothing could replace face-to-face, and that virtual meetings posed challenges for maintaining good governance standards and enabling valued cultural ways of governing at board meetings.

One organisation noted that, although their directors had returned to face-to-face meetings once lockdowns had finished, having the infrastructure and procedures set up for virtual meetings provided them with more choice and flexibility into the future. Given lockdowns had become a feature of the pandemic in 2021, it may well be that hybrid meeting formats for boards will become a more common mode of board governance.

In light of the trend towards greater use of digital technologies for governance meetings (AIGI, 2018, 2020a; Bauman et al., 2015), it is important to note that some organisations experienced considerable technological barriers outside their control. These included non-existent mobile and internet reception or poor connectivity; inferior IT network systems that created serious delays and slowness for communication, decision-making and approvals processes; and low levels of confidence and skills in using digital tools. The issue of access to appropriate IT hardware, and digital confidence, have emerged as important issues going forward for organisations – not simply in the context of the pandemic.

Of the responding organisations, 20% revised their meetings schedule. One organisation increased the frequency of meetings at the start of the crisis when their board was developing a pandemic policy framework for the organisation, while another held fewer in-person meetings, and a third only met 'when absolutely necessary'. Others found it helpful to set their meeting dates well in advance, or to stick to their existing board meeting schedule (set the year prior) as that was seen to provide certainty during a time of great instability.

Three organisations outlined how they adapted their board agenda and documentation to streamline the matters and volume of reporting put before the boards, in order to avoid information overload and focus on crisis decision-making. This sometimes involved postponing strategic planning and general business to prioritise pandemic related issues (such as the status of the pandemic in their state or

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[21] Our respondent sample size was not large enough to make any conclusions about whether there were differences in perceived value and uptake of digital technologies by remote, rural and urban locations, and this is an important issue for future research.

territory; presenting updates on their organisation's response; issues of employee health and safety; changing funding needs; and ensuring board direction for priority actions).

Developing pandemic crisis plans

Organisations were able to quickly implement board-endorsed pandemic response plans, and related governance policies and financial strategies. One organisation found that a regular review of their COVID-19 Plan was helpful. A second noted that it was best to have a crisis management plan in place *before* any crisis actually occurs, so as to be able to kick start coordinated action in the face of an actual crisis. Those that did have such crisis plans and policies in place prior to the pandemic found it helped reduce the level of chaos as roles, responsibilities and the chain of command were able to be reshaped and then cleanly implemented. In follow-up Zoom conversations, a number of organisations noted forming alliances with other community-based Indigenous organisations in order to extend their crisis management plans and actions into a wider regional coordinated plan.

Effective decision-making in a crisis

Crisis-mode board decision-making processes were shaped differently depending on the context and needs. There was no single solution. Many organisations adapted and simplified their processes during the height of the pandemic to enable timely, informed and decisive decision-making. Monitoring the health advice to inform board and CEO decisions was a frequent tip, as was making 'values-based' decisions about pandemic action so they were aligned with the organisation's overarching vision. One organisation highlighted circulating out-of-session resolutions as being useful for crisis decisions that were required outside the normal meeting schedule, or if a quorum could not be reached because of lockdown or social isolation conditions.

Importantly, organisations experimented with ways of more closely connecting board decision making with operational decisions. The aim and effect appeared to be about needing to create more 'joined up' collaborative decision making between CEOs and Boards/Chairs. Three organisations found that appointing an interim Executive subcommittee was a very effective way to maintain cohesion across governance and management decision-making throughout the crisis. These committees often comprised the Board Chair, CEO and other senior executives. It meant that decisions could be made on urgent matters out-of-session, with the full board provided with updates at their subsequent meeting. Although useful for any organisation seeking to make rapid-response decisions, the subcommittee was particularly relevant for organisations with board directors dispersed across remote and regional areas, and having limited technological capacity or connectivity.

The crisis activated a different type of relationship between the board, chairperson and CEO, where they regularly worked more closely together in collaborative ways that went beyond the standard western governance protocol of 'separation of powers'. The pandemic brought CEOs/General Managers and Board Chairs together into a more braided or joined-up mode of decision-making that harnessed the strengths of a 'two-way' sharing of expertise, experience, and ideas for solutions. The (temporary) executive hubs for crisis management were also noticeably different from the more hierarchical, centralised mechanisms of many organisational structures. A significant finding from the survey and interviews is that during the pandemic, organisations experimented with more networked and devolved modes of operational decision-making across the structural divisions of board, management and staff. This was said to better enable fast responses and implementation of board and management decisions.

A shared vision

The combination of decisive informed leadership and having a strongly embedded organisational visions appeared to underwrite organisational resilience and acceptable adaptation during the pandemic. Two-thirds of organisations rated a united organisational vision as a very helpful governance strength (see Figure 4). Focusing on their purpose, goals and values helped guide organisations when making changes and new plans in response to the crisis. It was also said to reinforce collective confidence in the 'rightness' of their decisions. A unified approach and message from the leadership out to staff, clients and the community was also identified as generating a sense of confidence and calm during an anxious time.

Support from experienced leaders

The pandemic put a spotlight on board and management performance. Several organisations reported that the crisis highlighted the already existing strength of their boards: 66% rated strong board leadership, and 73% rated having a strong Board Chair as a very helpful strength (see Figure 4). Nearly one-half reported their board's experience and skill as a very helpful strength, with one organisation quoting it as 'the reason why we've managed to stay afloat'.

Executives particularly appreciated their board directors' ability to provide quick guidance, act as a sounding board, offer different perspectives, and provide them with backup. One organisation noted that a high level of support for the CEO from the board, really helped the CEO to get out there and do what was required.

Pivoting the way organisations do business

Adapting services

Governance is only as 'good' as an organisation's operations (and vice versa). It is clear from the survey responses and Zoom conversations that at a very early stage of the pandemic, organisations moved quickly to adapt their internal operations and service-delivery approaches in order to create COVID-safe environments for their staff, clients, and wider community members (30% and 40% respectively). A number of organisations also sought additional resourcing opportunities from government and industry to support the additional crisis services they were creating. Some organisations viewed this crisis-enforced adaptation through an optimistic lens, conceptualising it as an opportunity for improvement, and a time to reflect on and adapt how they conduct their business,

> *Working from home had never been a universally accepted practice. Learning to deliver services in a different way that still supported clients at a distance has been a key initiative arising from COVID.*
>
> *COVID-19 gave our organisation a bit of time to take a breath, regather the troops, and go back to the drawing board to consider our governance structure at the operational level. We implemented a new executive structure. We cover a large geographical area, so we created a hub and spokes model. Trying to make it easier for executive and middle management to get on with their work, and also give them delegation… We already had these changes in mind, but COVID-19 did play a big part, because it helped us realise that we could do things differently.*

Transitioning to digital service delivery was the most frequently reported way that organisations adapted (27%). Examples of this adaptation included a health organisation that quickly moved to using telehealth consultations to 'ensure that patients [were] still able to see doctors and get their

needs met', and an urban educational and arts institute that offered virtual training so that Indigenous students in regional centres could participate online from home. Others quickly activated a range of 'new' services to community members and clients that were directly linked to their pandemic-related needs.

The organisations that were able to continue operating 'on site' implemented a range of health and social distancing protocols to make their workplaces COVID-safe. Examples of such protocols ranged from providing hand sanitiser to all staff and clients, increased cleaning and purchasing personal protective equipment ('at exorbitant prices'), providing training to staff about new guidelines to reduce the spread of infection, and having vulnerable staff work from home. Often the new rules and guidelines were more than just the public health recommendations. Indigenous organisations added cultural finesse to guidelines, for example, by building in arrangements to ensure Elders were protected when accessing services, by making whole families and communities the focus for services, and ensuring women and children's needs and safety were protected. Often a combination of protocols were implemented together. For example, one organisation paid extra attention to contacting vulnerable families, while a health organisation outlined their process for interacting with COVID-testing clients alongside their usual schedule as,

> *We had already had everything clean and set up each time. We would meet people one at a time. We used a separate door so people could feel safe. They had to ring the bell and I would take their temperature then there was a sign on our door to ring and if they had been to area of COVID-19 they could not come in.*

Two organisations who couldn't create COVID-safe alternatives on the ground, or were unable to move to digital contact, had to cancel or postpone some events and services.

Whole of organisation re-prioritising

Of the responding organisations, 27% reprioritised their activities and staffing in tandem. Staffing emerged as a particularly important factor in the extent to which organisations were able to govern the pandemic. Again, a number of strategies were evident. Those working in high-demand service areas delayed non-critical aspects of the service, and those who couldn't undertake their regular activities because of lockdown or isolation requirements developed workplans and strategies for longer-term goals that could still be progressed, regardless of the pandemic.

Some organisations had to reduce the number of staff or their hours, others redeployed staff to support new pandemic activities, while others found that they didn't have enough staff to keep up with the substantially increased workload created by the pandemic and were looking to recruit or restructure their teams. In all responses on this issue, having committed and qualified people across all levels of the organisation was regarded as an invaluable resource and strength for navigating the pandemic impacts. Many organisations praised their 'outstanding' and 'hard working' staff, executive and board who quickly took on new roles and processes. An example of one such adept reprioritisation is captured in the following comment:

> *NT [Northern Territory] Aboriginal communities were locked down between February and June [2020] during which time only essential services travelled from Katherine to the remote communities that house [our] health clinics. During that time most [of our] programs delivered reduced services except for primary health care in the communities. There was a severe reduction in the amount of patients coming to the health clinics for non-essential or urgent consultations – e.g. Chronic disease checks were reduced as patients tended to avoid the clinic for fear of COVID-19 infection.*

> *The NT during this time did not experience any community transmission of COVID-19. [We] diverted most of [our] resources into preparations for COVID-19 pandemic spread procedures, staff and community education, health promotion, protective equipment ordering, social isolation practices. Since the ceasing of community lockdown in June, [our organisation] has slowly returned to its previous health service delivery and governance so that it currently operates in the same way as it did one year ago.*

<u>The role of technology</u>

The so-called 'digital divide' between Indigenous and other Australians describes the unequal access to digital communication technology and related digital training and resources. Our survey and interview evidence suggests a more nuanced consideration of this concept is needed. Indeed, we suggest the deficit is certainly not with respect to capability, but rather a failure of governments to provide equitable access to remote and rural communities.

In 2019, Indigenous Australians scored well below the national average in areas of access and sustained affordability required for their effective utilisation of digital technologies; with affordability showing the largest gap (Morgan, 2019). However, the so-called divide has diverse expressions in Indigenous contexts, which need to be better understood in contexts such as the pandemic. For example, the experience of the divide is not equally distributed. While Indigenous people living in rural and remote communities experience some of the lowest levels of digital inclusion, their urban counterparts are increasingly contributing to closing this gap (Radoll & Hunter, 2017; Samaras, 2005). The dynamics of the digital divide have important and ongoing implications for organisational and collective governance for Indigenous Australians. The pandemic highlighted some implications of this divide for Indigenous organisations.

Communications technology and project management software became critical resources used by organisations to reshape their services, efficiently redeploy staff, and mitigate the impacts of lockdowns and physical distancing restrictions. In the words of one organisation,

> *Video conferencing was a key technology for internal governance practice. Pivoting key programs online, such as virtual exhibitions, virtual exhibition tours, workshops etc was also important developments in how we deliver our programs and services.*
>
> *… 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.*

In the survey, respondents were provided with a list of technology and communication strategies and asked to select which best supported their governance and operations during the pandemic. Videoconference, teleconference, collaboration software and Facebook were used by more than one-half. Videoconference was the most commonly used, reported by 87% of organisations (see Figure 3). When asked if they used any other communication methods throughout the pandemic (that were not provided in the list) organisations referenced Snapchat, phone calls, email, newsletters, pamphlets, Slack and YouTube as effective.

These technologies ensured communication continued between employees, the executive and board members, as well as out to community and stakeholders. It meant that updates and operational

changes could be shared quickly, so that staff and board had the latest information at the same time. Virtual interactions via Zoom or other videoconferencing software also helped staff to feel connected and engaged during a stressful time. This helped to create a sense of collaborative effort and solidarity of purpose.

The pandemic highlighted a technological and connectivity gap for some organisations. This included whole-of-organisation capacity (hardware, systems and programs), as well as individual staff and board access to equipment:

> *… 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.*

> *There is an opportunity for us to strengthen our Board's use of and experience with technology. This was a pre-pandemic issue but has been reinforced due to pandemic and our need to conduct business more virtually.*

Close to 60% of organisations introduced new technology and/or expanded their capacity and frequency of use, to enable their staff and board to work remotely. Targeted investment went towards developing IT modernisations plans, purchasing webcams or other equipment, and setting up software programs (such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Monday.com). Many organisations provided IT training and support to strengthen digital literacy and help board and staff adjust to conducting business virtually. For example, one organisation checked everyone on a rotation basis working from home and then increased their tech capacity and capability as required, while another organised their IT manager to walk through the new programs with each member of staff once distributed.

> *The lack of digital literacy could be frustrating at times, particularly if we were dealing with Elders who were in another town… So, we made an effort to rotate meetings. For instance, if one of the Aunties down in Burdekin had difficulties connecting on Zoom, we'd say, 'let's go to Burdekin and host the Zoom meeting from there so we can help you to learn the process'.*

Of the responding organisations, 23% had already made a strong investment in tech prior to the pandemic and didn't need to introduce anything further. Those that already used online platforms to communicate and collaborate on documents with their teams and board members had an easier transition to working from home with minimal disruption.

Interestingly, despite initial capability gaps and the rapid pace of change created by the pandemic, only 13% of organisations rated technological difficulties as having a 'big impact' on their organisation (see Figure 1). This suggests that most organisations were able to mitigate the challenges through investment in hardware and training.

However, one organisation raised the point that effective communication via technology is a two-way street. They still had difficulty communicating with their clients (regardless of their good organisational capacity) as, 'many clients have low technology skills, which meant limited ability to connect fully'. And organisations located in more regional or remote locations experienced technological issues due to poor infrastructure and unstable connections.

Increased engagement with community members and clients

Just over one-quarter (27%) of organisations significantly increased their engagement and communication with their members, clients and community. Strategies included: creating or increasing their social media presence, updating their website, making phone calls, providing online resources, distributing regular service updates, boosting contact through community engagement teams and regional staff, holding more board-led community meetings, and using local community radio services. Just how big a priority engagement and communication was during this time is captured in the message from one organisation to 'use all means necessary to communicate'. This heightened organisational engagement has had to be sustained over an increasingly long time.

Looking after your team

Looking after staff mental health and wellbeing was identified as a critical role for leadership during the pandemic by 27% of respondents. Organisations implemented wellbeing programs and provided additional support structures to help staff cope with the additional stress, anxiety, and pressures. For example, many discussed striving to keep their staff informed and feeling valued by sharing frequent updates and hosting online check-ins to provide new information, answer any queries and thank them for their continuing contribution to clients and the wider community. One organisation described having weekly online games and social Zoom catch-ups to lift staff morale during isolation. Those with high workloads were encouraged to spread the load and roster breaks to prevent burnout. One organisation organised for all their staff to undertake Aboriginal mental health first aid training.

Two organisations raised the point that the pandemic affected everyone, and so allowances needed to be made to understand and support board members' own situations. It was also recognised that mental health and wellbeing support had to extend to the board and executive leadership level, as well as staff.

Funding and government resources

Government funding of Indigenous organisations has been characterised as a roller coaster of rapid changes since long before the pandemic (Hunt and Smith, 2008; Moran & Porter, 2014; Sullivan, 2010). Organisations are funded through a wide variety of government program arrangements, ranging from completely untied general-purpose grants, to tightly prescribed specific-purpose grants with cumbersome reporting requirements. Governments tend to over-emphasise 'risk and uncertainty' and have responded with measures that reduce local discretion and centralise government decision-making authority. The result is that public finances in Indigenous organisational contexts have generally become fragmented, unstable and unreliable. Early analysis by the AIGI of several rounds of applications by organisations to the Indigenous Governance Awards (see AIGI 2014 and 2016) noted that this has caused a deliberate move by organisations away from their historical reliance on government funds, to create more diversified funding sources with private-sector agencies, philanthropic foundations and NGOs. This strategic mix seemed to bring considerable value for organisational stability during the pandemic.

Zoom yarning with several organisations: Communicating with and looking after staff

> *We had daily meetings of staff when we were in lockdown. We touched base with each other every day at 9am. And that was important to us as a team, just to make sure that everybody's okay. We went through a process of asking, you know, 'how are you?' We checked what mark, what everyone reckoned what number they were today – how did you rate your own wellbeing? You know, people would say from 1 to 10, depending on how they felt. We made sure that there was support for everybody. And just catching up and talking about where each other was at for that particular day, what projects they required any assistance on.*
>
> *I think frequent communication was critical. You know, it's a classic thing – if you don't provide people with information they kind of make it up for themselves and that can be really difficult to manage, and create all sorts of complications which can be avoided if there's just frequent regular communication. Even if there was nothing to communicate we communicated that, because it prevents people from filling in the gaps with all sorts of imagined scenarios. And so I think communication was key; and having your personnel really believe that you are genuinely concerned for their safety and that you put their safety as paramount. That you are never gonna drive the business imperatives ahead of considerations around them and their feeling safe. That was critical, and trust – I think it's just such a key, key component.*
>
> *One of the things that the General Manager decided to do early on in the piece was create a whole new category of leave, which was simply called 'wellbeing leave'. And he was willing to offer people up to eight weeks paid leave, in addition to every other form of leave that we've got, if there were reasons why the pandemic was imposing significant challenges on them, either in a practical sense with need to do caregiving and all of that sort of stuff. But also just personally and emotionally and in terms of their mental wellbeing. And yeah there were a few criteria around needing to talk over what steps you were going to be taking to deal with the issues and what things you were going to be able to tell him that the organisation should be doing to help deal with that problem in the longer term and so on, so it wasn't just kind of, you know, write your own cheque for that period. But interestingly, there were maybe only one or two cases of people who ended up taking up that offer, for maybe two weeks each. People really wanted to stay on and keep helping with the organisation's work.*

Organisations impacted by funding issues were highly proactive and implemented a range of mitigation strategies. Close to one-half (43%) accessed the JobKeeper scheme, several of whom noted that the scheme was highly valued, made a genuine difference to the organisation and meant they were able to keep staff employed. However, JobKeeper was not a lifeline for all. Three organisations who did not access JobKeeper were ineligible to do so. Furthermore, since payments were linked to employees, volunteer-based organisations missed support. As one organisation explained, they lost most of their volunteers due to lockdowns, restrictions and recommended precautions for high-risk populations. This organisation couldn't find alternative volunteers, didn't have the funds to hire staff and were ineligible for the JobKeeper scheme, so in the end, had to close its doors.

In addition to those accessing JobKeeper and other pandemic-specific government grants or incentives, three organisations negotiated new funding solutions and collaborations with private-sector partners to strengthen their collective capability, supplement budgets to assist with pandemic initiatives, and restructure their programs and teams. Some organisations continued to receive recurrent funding, despite a reduction in service delivery.

Interestingly, only 13% of organisations rated 'funding problems' as having a big impact (see Figure 1). It is unclear whether the majority of organisations experienced a small or non-existent impact from funding stress because the above strategies were so effective, or because they had sufficient resources to get through pandemic lockdowns.

Three organisations reported an overload of information about government programs, which created confusion and uncertainty. In the words of one organisation, ‘at one stage there was too much information floating around about COVID and support packages and I feel we missed opportunities because there was too much information and not enough time to digest it all’. This suggests governments could be clearer and more targeted in their messaging. One organisation noted that their constant meetings with government officers were ‘tiring’ and not always productive.

Organisations had a mixed experience with ORIC and its newly introduced COVID-19 Special Rules. Two organisations described ORIC as very helpful, a good source of resources and the COVID-19 Special Rules as being useful. One organisation however, felt that the Special Rules ignored cultural governance considerations, and that ORIC did not account for the logistical and technological barriers that exist in some remote communities when approving requests to postpone meetings.

Looking to the future

Of the organisations surveyed, 23% noted that they intend to keep the newly introduced communication technologies and processes ‘post COVID-19’. In particular, platforms such as Zoom and other videoconferencing software for internal staff communication, board meetings and service delivery were highly valued, as was the growing use of social media platforms for communications with community members and the public.

> *The digital platforms will stay and that supports better access all round.*

Two organisations said they will continue to offer flexible and remote working arrangements for their staff. While three said they will also continue their alternative board meeting and decision-making processes, including: reconsidering ‘what really needs to be in front of the board’ when developing meeting agenda and papers; conducting meetings on an ‘as needs’ basis; and circulating out-of-session resolutions.

Three organisations mentioned that they now have a heightened awareness of the importance of crisis response planning and management. Particularly in ways that are based on local knowledge about local conditions and needs. In fact, one was undertaking planning and preparation for a ‘second wave’ of COVID-19 at the time of completing the survey in 2022. That has turned out to be especially insightful. Another reiterated that boards should have a (regularly reviewed) crisis management plan in place.

> *You can’t avoid major challenges, but you can prepare better for them.*

For a few organisations, the pandemic highlighted some areas for improvement which they will work on moving forward. Two discussed the importance of having qualified and experienced board members. One will undertake recruitment and the second will now provide additional governance

resources and training for their board. A third organisation noted that board induction and streamlining ways of distributing board papers were other longstanding issues, which had been exacerbated by the pandemic and needed new strategies. This organisation has already engaged a consultant to review their board director support processes and are in the process of developing the resources and platform recommended by the review.

Discussion: Adaptive self-determination

At the beginning of this research we asked the question: To what extent, and how did Indigenous organisations adapt (or not) in order to more effectively govern the impacts of the first phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic in their communities? Their responses reported here indicate the impacts of the pandemic were substantial from the very start, and accumulative in their nature (so that impacts in one aspect of life quickly led to and exacerbated impacts in other areas). In the early days, organisations found themselves having to address challenges linked to mental and physical health, social and artistic isolation, family violence, food shortages, income and employment insecurity, housing stress, and care of the elderly and children which impacted upon community members, board members and staff alike. This immediately led to substantially increased operational demands and pressures on governance to deliver enhanced and repurposed services and support.

The pandemic's impacts were experienced irrespective of location in remote, rural or urban settings; though not necessarily in the same combination or intensity. Accordingly, the solutions designed by organisations were tailored to deal with how those played out in different contexts. Our small survey and interview evidence leads us to conclude that in this fraught and rapidly changing environment, Indigenous organisations made a significant positive contribution to the health and general wellbeing of their community members and clients, their staff and board members.

It is likely that other factors have also been at play in the early positive health outcomes for Indigenous people from the COVID-19 virus, other than those for the rest of Australia. Additional possible factors include, for example, the younger age-structure of the Indigenous population; the lower incidence of Indigenous travel overseas; the remoteness of many communities from the largely metropolitan 'hotspots'; and the lower incidence of Indigenous elderly residing in private health-care facilities that have been sites of increased mortality for the wider Australian population. It would also be overgeneralising from our small sample to suggest that every Indigenous organisation has been able to function as effectively, or in such a timely way. However, even given such caveats, the extent of the positive contribution by Indigenous organisations to significantly improved local and regional outcomes in the first year of the pandemic stands out. How can this contribution of organisations best be understood? And what are the implications?

We suggest that many Indigenous organisations acted as 'adaptive agents', strategically assessing and reshaping their governance arrangements and areas of operational control in order to deliver critical services and support in a timely way, during the crisis. They were able to effectively govern the pandemic, through their 'successful adaptation in the face of disturbance, stress, or adversity' (Norris et al., 2008, p. 129). More specifically, the form of this adaptive behaviour was a self-determined one. Specifically, in the midst of dire fears and sometimes overwhelming global, national and local challenges, we conclude that many Indigenous organisations were able to marshal an existing Indigenous capability for adaptive self-determination, to great positive effect. We define adaptive self-determination to mean the collective capability of Indigenous organisations to freely determine, autonomously exercise control and take responsibility for decision-making, which enables them to take agile action to modify their governing and operational arrangements in a united, strategic and

innovative way, in the face of crises and high risk, and when available evidence is unclear and often contradictory.

Furthermore, our analysis suggests that this capability for adaptive self-determination mobilised by Indigenous organisations is a clustered, dynamic phenomenon; more a culturally situated process, than a trait or right. Because organisations are themselves thickly integrated into the wider networked web of their member communities, groups, families and kin relationships, their adaptive solutions tend to be rooted in Indigenous ways of being and doing (see Cronin & Murphy, 2019; Howard-Wagner, 2021; Smith, 2011). It follows then that their organisational capability for adaptive self-determination emphasises both relationality *and* autonomous action (where the organisation operates structurally as a 'relational self').

We suggest the concept of 'adaptive self-determination' offers a useful integrating lens that draws attention to, and reveals fresh insights into, Indigenous agency, innovation, resilience and self-governance during the pandemic. It focuses our attention to the constructive ways an organisation – in a rapidly changing environment – is able to act cohesively, promptly, make best-informed decisions, provide agile leadership direction, implement novel changes quickly, and communicate that to others, while assessing risk and readjusting for effectiveness.

This research indicates that for an incorporated Indigenous organisation, the practice of adaptive self-determination has three collective tethering points. It is about the practical 'work' of self-determination undertaken by the organisation:

1. With and on behalf of its members – the nations, groups, tribes, clans, families and community residents.
2. With and on behalf of its own staff, managers and directors.
3. With wider stakeholders, funders and other organisations in order to carry out its work in (1) and (2).

In the context of a pandemic, each of these areas of work required crisis governance and organisation. Below we provide a preliminary summary of the *set* of organisational functions during the pandemic, which we argue, activate the real-world capability for/of adaptive self-determination. These need further detailed research and will hopefully be refined and extended.

<u>Some organisational functionings of adaptive self-determination</u>

In the context of the pandemic and the role of Indigenous organisations, we extend Sen's 'functionings' (1999, p. 75) to be the valued states and practices of *organisational* 'being' and 'doing' – such as working on behalf of Indigenous clients and community members to ensure they are healthy, well-nourished, safe, sheltered, protected and socially supported. Again, extending from Sen (1992, p. 40), we take 'capability' for a whole organisation to be the various set of valuable functionings an organisation is able to effectively mobilise and harness to govern the impacts of the pandemic. We refer to this organisational capability as adaptive self-determination.

The survey and interviews document organisations functioning to:

1. Establish executive hubs for risk assessment and management that bridged board and CEO divides, allowing them to work together in novel ways that went beyond the more cumbersome corporate governance principle of 'separation of powers'.

2. Devolve and distribute decision making that extended across the structural divisions of board, management and staff to mobilise fast implementation. These were often less hierarchical and brought people together into short-term units to implement decisions.
3. Make changes at short notice to their way of governing, to service content and delivery, redeploying staff and resources, and communicating those changes as being not only necessary and crisis-effective, but also as having cultural integrity and public-good purpose.
4. Extend crisis management out to their wider networks with other Indigenous organisations, community leaders, and trusted individuals in government and industry, to coordinate resources and support cooperative solutions.
5. Collect and interpret their own data during lockdown periods, using their professional networks to check the accuracy of incoming public information.
6. Harness their extensive networks into Indigenous communities to quickly assess the extent of different pandemic impacts, which informed fit-for-crisis solutions.
7. Activate their foundations of shared cultural values and vision to quickly forge new approaches and a sense of collective purpose to govern the pandemic impacts.
8. Avoid becoming risk-paralysed by bringing local knowledge and expertise to bear on managing local risks, and take responsibility for risky decisions and quick actions.
9. Provide frequent updates to board members and staff about pandemic risks and options, and to correct misinformation.
10. 'Look after' the mental health and wellbeing of staff, managers and board members, and tailor support for psychosocial stressors in uniquely Indigenous contexts.
11. Reorganise communication processes, to quickly identify core pandemic messages needed by their community members, then use their expertise in Indigenous communication styles to accurately translate complex technical information into locally meaningful content.
12. Accommodate Indigenous communication and learning styles when adopting and adapting digital technology to respond to social isolation requirements.
13. Harness the potential of Indigenous social media pathways – local radio, MobBook, posters, visuals, language translations of information into videos and Indigenous graphics – to rapidly diffuse information updates and support.

Further, we suggest these functionings can be usefully grouped into three meta-functionings (i.e. a systemic cluster of related kinds of ways of being and doing things) for adaptive self-determination. In this we are following similar work by Nussbaum (1999, p. 41-42), Comim et al. (2008, p. 2) and Kavale (2011, p. 8) who differently consider the analytic, political and policy usefulness of constructing higher-order or 'essential' modes of human functionings. We argue the following categories of meta-functionings provide a similarly useful frame for considering the deeper bases for how some organisations have practically realised the capability of adaptive self-determination during the pandemic. A similar categorisation was explored by Smith (2008) in the operation of an urban Indigenous organisation. They are:

1. An Institutional meta-functioning:
   This refers to an organisation's rules, guidelines, policies, plans and procedures that indicate the preferred ways of collectively behaving and dealing with crises, change, risk and opportunity. Government scrutiny of Indigenous organisations often focuses primarily on an organisation's capability for, and performance of, this functioning. Those we

interviewed appeared to have a clear shared vision and strong purpose embedded in their institutional practices. Within an organisation, this function helps engender a sense of belonging and solidarity, enabling collective action to be mobilised around ‘working for’ and ‘looking after’ community members, clients and each other during times of great crisis.

2. A Cognitive meta-functioning:
   This refers to an organisation’s collective ability or will to solve problems and learn from that experience. It includes an organisation’s knowledge and the processes of understanding and reasoning involved in applying its expertise and knowledge to novel situations, and adapting to rapidly changing environments. It is sometimes referred to as the internal ‘culture’ of an organisation (see Smith, 2008) and is an under-researched and often ignored aspect of Indigenous organisations. The organisations we interviewed appeared to have a strong internal culture or ‘way of life’ that strongly reinforced relational and networked ways of understanding their operating environment, and rationalising the way they provide services for the good of their communities and clients as being distinctly Indigenous.

3. A Normative meta-functioning:
   This refers to the shared (and often unwritten) values, standards, behaviours in an organisation that promote a stabilising social cohesion for cooperative behaviour and trust. This has received some anthropological research attention, often in respect to the consequences for organisations when internal cohesion breaks down. The organisations we interviewed appeared to have strong normative functioning that emphasises the interdependent role each person plays in contributing to the welfare of their communities and members.

In combination, these three intersecting meta-functions constitute a foundational basis (for which an expanding set of constituent functionings could be identified) for an organisation’s capability for adaptive self-determination, which:

1. Encourages board, management and staff to work together on the understanding that their collaborative effort will make a positive contribution to the Indigenous people with whom they work.
2. Reinforces internal commitment to an organisation’s particular style of governance as being distinctly Indigenous, and so having greater value for creating solutions that will be locally relevant and work in times of crisis.
3. Produces the cultural legitimacy an organisation needs in order to introduce novel practices that win Indigenous approval and support.
4. Provides a deeply embedded adaptive reservoir for dealing with major stressors, and a foundation for acting autonomously, in self-determined ways.

The pandemic presented an organisational turning point that has been crucial for outcomes on the ground. Moreover, many organisations have worked hard to sustain their self-determined adaptive agency over the prolonged period of the pandemic, which continues as we write. A similar story has emerged from the work of Indigenous community organisations during the bushfires and the recent flooding in northern New South Wales (Williamson, 2022).

Conclusions

Wayne McDonald, the Manager of Operations at Bundiyarra Corporation in Geraldton, Western Australia, put the point succinctly in his Zoom conversation with us:

> *… We can do more and wish to be further involved and considered a vital link in the delivery of the Government's COVID response actions and activities in the Gascoyne and Murchison. We need government to work with us, not without us; involving us directly in finding solutions.*

The evidence and analysis set out here suggests that many of the solutions already exist in organisations; they are working at the forefront to provide immediate support and solutions by mobilising their practical capability for adaptive self-determination in times of disasters. Several concrete implications arise from the research for ongoing organisational governance and operational practice, as well as for government policy and funding. They are urgent given the unfolding pandemic has intensified its impacts in Indigenous communities, and is intersecting with other concurrent disasters happening across large parts of the country (including major flooding, bushfires, pestilence and Japanese encephalitis outbreaks).

The functionings and capability for adaptive self-determination which have been mobilised by Indigenous organisations arguably constitute a public good for the nation. Indeed, they have a growing relevance and value given the compounding impacts of multiple crises being experienced by both Indigenous and other Australians, and there is much that can be learned and built upon from this.

1. The capability and agency associated with adaptive self-determination is a pre-existing Indigenous one. It can be mobilised at short notice by an organisation. Its constituent functionings should be targeted for disaster/resilience funding support by governments at every level, and reinforced by Indigenous organisations wishing to strengthen their future ability in frontline governance of disaster risk and recovery.

2. Cultural values, knowledge, relationships and a collective vision lie at the heart of disaster resilience in Indigenous organisations. They were a source of real strength for organisations, providing a form of cultural capital that gave them an authorising mandate to make fast informed decisions and take agile action. This highlights the 'disaster value' of having strong cultural purpose and commitment within an organisation's vision and way of operating.

3. Indigenous Networks make a difference. Organisations reached out to their wider Indigenous networks – for information, advice, support, resources, and joint action. This meant they were able to quickly assess the nature and extent of different problems, impacts and needs, then realistically assess risks based on accurate local knowledge. As a result, while their pandemic strategies and solutions were often experimental, they were relevant, workable and able to be quickly put into action.

4. Partner networks are a resource in disasters. Organisations also reached out to harness their wider personalised relationships into government, industry, NGOs, philanthropic partners. This meant they were able to more quickly secure a greater range of resources and support. Personalised networks between Indigenous organisations and external stakeholders has substantial value in times of disaster risk and recovery.

5. Governance and management working in close daily collaboration creates a platform for action. Governance innovation works hand-in-hand with, and reinforces operational innovation; and vice versa. Managers, and Board Chairs and staff members regularly worked together in collaborative devolved ways that ventured beyond the western governance protocol of 'separation of powers'. Decision-making at the senior levels

of organisations (Board and management) was a more braided, joined-up process, based on regular personal conversations, sharing ideas for solutions, and exchange of updated information.

6. Agile decision-making structures with a mandate from the board. Organisations established new executive mechanisms or hubs for crisis management, and devolved decision making about ‘hotspot’ issues. These hubs often extended across the existing structural divisions of board, management and staff. This appeared to enable better flows of information and fast implementation. Such arrangements were often less hierarchical and brought people together into very effective short-term units to implement decisions.

7. Policy needs to reinvest where it is shown to count on the ground. In the recent context of Indigenous affairs policy whereby outstations and small communities have been deliberately undermined by government withdrawal of funding and program support, the pandemic has demonstrated convincingly that outstations and remoteness have positive survival value. However, the pandemic has also highlighted the extent of decaying infrastructure and amenities that has resulted from persistent underfunding for remote homelands and outstations. The remote locations need urgent re-engagement of funding and enabling policy by governments at national and state levels.

8. The digital governance of crises has arrived. The COVID-19 pandemic saw a fast transition amongst many organisations to the use of digital communication applications, and much greater use of social media, video, radio and television to locally circulate information and provide support. The benefits of digital applications for governance and mental health support were noted by several organisations. But the downsides were also raised. In particular, access to working technology, the lack of suitable IT infrastructure and low levels of digital literacy were noted as presenting real obstacles to communication, governance participation and decision-making.

9. A National Indigenous Digital Strategy: With the international trend towards greater use of electronic or so-called eGovernance amongst nation-state governments (Rossel & Finger, 2007), the issue of timely access to accurate and locally meaningful information has been highlighted as being paramount in times of disasters. Given the accelerated reliance on digital use by Indigenous organisations and communities during the pandemic, the gap in digital infrastructure and connectivity – especially in remote and rural communities – warrants the fast track formulation of a ‘National Indigenous Digital Strategy’ with linked funding.

There are urgent lessons to be learned from the effective agency of Indigenous organisations in the first phase of the pandemic that should inform its ongoing phases. These are entirely relevant for other disaster contexts. A rapid scoping review of international conditions and initiatives undertaken to inform the United Nations Research Roadmap for the COVID-19 Recovery (Jewett et al., 2021) notes that such shock events,

> *… uncover deficits in social cohesion and exacerbate existing social inequalities at the household, community, local, regional, and national levels. Recovery planning therefore requires careful engagement that centres on marginalised people.*

In Australia, Indigenous representative and service-delivery organisations have acted as crucial hubs to constructively govern the impacts of the pandemic, for local and regional coordination, distribution of resources and information, and for mobilising community cohesion and cultural capital during the pandemic. An important insight here is that Indigenous organisations and their extensive networks have been able to unlock resources, local knowledge and human capital for their communities and clients that would otherwise not have been available to them from government, NGOs, industry, or partner agencies. They have acted as service-deliverers *Plus*.

In conclusion, the ability of Indigenous organisations to govern the impacts of the pandemic have arisen from their own internal capability for adaptive self-determination, which has enabled them to make adept and effective interventions on behalf of their communities and clients. Their ability to make informed decisions about potential risks and impacts, take considered action to redeploy organisational resources (human, governing, service and financial), and to manage communication and urgent community needs, made a fundamental contribution to more positive outcomes than otherwise might have been possible. This has direct implications for government policy. It suggests that policy frameworks and long-term program funding need to be redesigned to incorporate greater self-determination for organisations at the local and regional levels, based on agreed processes of strengthening the functionings that underlie adaptive self-determination.

Indigenous organisations offer a crucial organisational entry point for the ongoing governance of the disasters and recovery efforts. There is a straightforward policy implication here: there is significant public and Indigenous value in governments providing greater direct funding support to local community organisations who are working at the frontline of various disasters and subsequent recovery. They are able to be effective where governments cannot be.

Postscript: Governing multiple disasters

Over the course of the last two years, renewed COVID-19 hotspots have emerged across Australia, involving an ever-changing number of highly infectious COVID-19 strains. At same time, national disasters have continued, in the form of bushfires, major flooding events, heatwaves, plagues and encephalitis outbreaks Indigenous communities around Australia are experiencing the compounding impacts of multiple concurrent disasters. The research on which this paper was based was undertaken at a point in time that correlated with the very early phase of the pandemic in Australia. We believe, nevertheless, that the insights and conclusions reached remain relevant to more recent unfolding disasters.

The early lessons of the pandemic need to be learned. Speaking in 2021 of her organisation's work to fast-track the Indigenous vaccination rates in Victoria, Registered Nurse Melodie Cameron, from the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation concluded:

> *These results have shown the crucial role community-controlled health organisations play in protecting and advancing the mental health and wellbeing of community (Smith, 2021).*

Indigenous organisations can govern the local impacts of disasters in their communities better than governments. But these organisations could do that work better still, if they had targeted government support and policy recognition of their expertise, local knowledge, relationship and practical capacity. Policy recognition of Indigenous organisations as preferred disaster Indigenous support providers would be one first step.

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Appendix A

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations Governing the Pandemic Survey

Consent

I agree to the terms and conditions provided in the Participant Information Statement and consent to take part in the survey.

◊ Yes
◊ No

Follow Up Yarns

In addition to the survey, we would like to hold follow up yarns to explore responses in more depth. These will take approximately 1 hour, be held via phone call or Zoom, and scheduled to suit participants' convenience.

Are you interested in participating in a follow up yarn? By clicking Yes, you consent to being contacted by the Research Partners.

◊ Yes
◊ No

About the Organisation

Q.1 Organisation name __

Q.2 Your position

◊ Board Member
◊ Senior Executive
10.

Q.3 State or Territory

◊ Australian Capital Territory
◊ Queensland
◊ New South Wales
◊ Northern Territory
◊ South Australia
◊ Tasmania
◊ Victoria
◊ Western Australia

Q.4 Postcode __

Q.5 Sector

◊ Health
◊ Culture, Heritage and Arts
◊ Community Development
◊ Native Title Bodies

- ◊ Land Management
- ◊ Education
- ◊ Employment and Economic Development
- ◊ Legal
- ◊ Local Government and Regional Bodies
- ◊ Child, Youth and Families

Q.6 Size

- ◊ A small corporation will have at least TWO of the following in a financial year:
    - o consolidated gross operating income of less than $100,000
    - o consolidated gross assets valued at less than $100,000
    - o fewer than five employees
- ◊ A medium corporation will have at least TWO of the following in a financial year:
    - o consolidated gross operating income between $100,000 and $5 million
    - o consolidated gross assets
    - o between $100,000 and $2.5 million
    - o between five and 24 employees
- ◊ A large corporation will have at least TWO of the following in a financial year:
    - o consolidated gross operating income of $5 million or more
    - o consolidated gross assets valued at $2.5 million or more
    - o more than 24 employees

<u>About the Board</u>

Q.1 Number of current Board members

- ◊ Total number of members __
- ◊ Number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander members __
- ◊ Number of female members __
- ◊ Number of male members __

Q.2 Is the Board remunerated?

- ◊ Yes
- ◊ No

Q.3 How are the Board members selected? __

Q.4 a) Before COVID-19, how often did the Board meet? __

Q.4 b) How has the way you run board meetings changed during COVID-19? For example, frequency and/or length of meetings, quorum number, number of agenda items, decision-making process, virtual meetings, minutes format, crisis updates etc. __

<u>Adapting to Challenges</u>

Q.1 a) What impacts has the COVID-19 pandemic had on your organisation overall?

Big impact Medium impact Small impact N/A

- ◊ Cut off from visiting communities due to lockdowns
- ◊ Difficulties in communicating with our community members/clients
- ◊ Difficulties in communicating with staff
- ◊ Funding problems
- ◊ Harder to plan and action
- ◊ High workloads
- ◊ Lack of information from government
- ◊ Lost managers
- ◊ Lost staff
- ◊ Low staff morale
- ◊ Onerous external reporting
- ◊ Restricted or reduced service delivery
- ◊ Technological difficulties (e.g. access, repair, maintenance)
- ◊ Other (please specify) __

Q.1 b) How have you managed the 3 biggest impacts?

- ◊ Impact 1 __
- ◊ Impact 2 __
- ◊ Impact 3 __

Q.2 a) What governance challenges have arisen from the COVID-19 pandemic?

Big challenge Medium challenge Small challenge N/A

- ◊ Board members ill or stressed
- ◊ Board workload
- ◊ Communication challenges for CEO/General Manager with Board members
- ◊ Difficulties in Board decision making (e.g. slower, harder)
- ◊ Difficulties in communicating with Board members
- ◊ Getting accurate information to the Board
- ◊ Getting Board feedback on issues
- ◊ Not being able to meet face-to-face
- ◊ Strategic planning challenges for the Board
- ◊ Staff-Board disconnected
- ◊ Other (please specify) __

Q.2 b) For the 3 biggest challenges, what did you do to fix each? What worked best?

- ◊ Challenge 1 __
- ◊ Challenge 2 __
- ◊ Challenge 3 __

Q.3 Has COVID-19 highlighted any capabilities gaps within the organisation or Board? What governance skills, expertise or training have you introduced (or do you plan to introduce) due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Q.4 What roles have your organisation's leaders played to help steer your organisation through the pandemic?

Building on Strengths

Q.1 What Indigenous cultural values, relationships and processes helped support your governance and the organisation during the COVID-19 pandemic? How did they help? __

Q.2 a) What existing governance strengths helped your organisation through the COVID-19 pandemic?

Very helpful Helpful Slightly helpful N/A

◊ Board committed to supporting the staff
◊ Committed hardworking Board members
◊ Good Board decision-making processes
◊ Our Board's experience and skill
◊ Our Board members' strong relationships out in communities
◊ Our communication processes work well out to our communities and members
◊ Our networks with other Indigenous organisations
◊ Our strong community network of support
◊ Our strong partnerships with external agencies
◊ Staff committed to supporting the Board
◊ Strong Board Chair
◊ Strong Board leadership
◊ Strong relationship between CEO and the Board
◊ United organisational vision
◊ Other (please specify) __

Q.2 b) How did these strengths help your organisation and/or Board effectiveness? __

Resources

Q.1 What kind of resources or support helped you the most during this time? __

Q.2 Has your organisation accessed the JobKeeper Payment scheme?

◊ Yes
◊ No

Comments __

Q.3 a) What technology and/or communication strategies have you used to support governance and organisational effectiveness during COVID-19? (You may select more than one response).

◊ Facebook
◊ Twitter
◊ Instagram
◊ LinkedIn
◊ WhatsApp
◊ Collaboration software (e.g. Microsoft Teams)
◊ Videoconference software (e.g. Zoom or Skype)
◊ Teleconference
◊ Translating information into local languages

- ◊ Translating information into video or multimedia forms
- ◊ Other (please specify) __

Q.3 b) How did these help? __

Q. 3 c) Did you introduce any technology or strategies that you did not use before COVID-19? __

Looking to the Future

Q.1 What changes to your governance model or ways of working will you continue beyond the current crisis? __

Q.2 What governance lessons, tips or insights from the crisis would you like to pass on to other Indigenous organisations, communities and nations? __

Q.3 Do you have any other comments about your organisation's governance experience during the COVID-19 pandemic? __

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