

# Self-determination

Self-determination means Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are 'in the driver's seat' and have genuine decision-making power and responsibility over their governance. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, achieving self-determination involves coming up with innovative ways to govern for nation-building, treaty and self-determined development people's interests, opinions, and values. These differences can lead to conflicts, disputes, and complaints.

## Self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, self-determination means having genuine decision-making power and responsibility about what happens:

- on their lands and waters
- in their affairs
- in their governing systems
- in their development strategies.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups have the right to experiment and be innovative in their governing arrangements.

It encourages a transition away from external governments to internal creativity and strengths.

## Self-determination and sovereignty

Sovereignty is about the authority and autonomy of a group to govern its own people and jurisdiction.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia today believe their sovereignty was never given up. They continue to fight for recognition of this fact.

## Achieving self-determination

The elements identified as key to achieving self-determination include:

**Leadership and succession planning:** genuine control over decision-making, projects and solutions for nation-(re)building.

**Autonomy:** control over how things are done

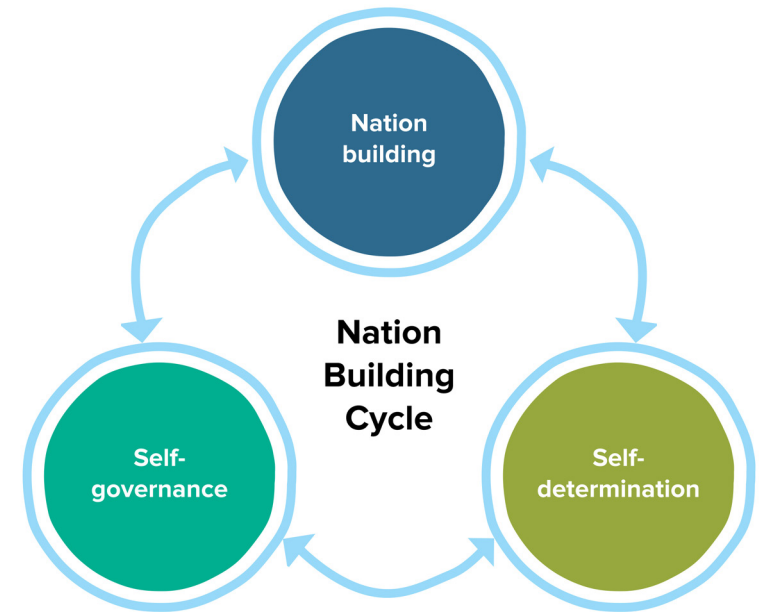
**Setting the agenda:** self-determined priorities and initiatives.

**Consent and decision-making:** free (no coercion or influence), prior (consulted before any activity is carried out) and informed consent.

**Culture-smart governance solutions:** governance practices informed by cultural values and practices.

**Community engagement and voice:** participatory processes, consultation and connection with the community.

**Financial independence:** creating self-sufficient sources of income.



## Nation building, treaty and development

### Nation building

Nation building, or rebuilding, is the process by which an Indigenous nation enhances its own capacity for effective self-governance, and self-determined community and economic development.

Nation rebuilding emphasises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups were nations before colonisation.

Nation building is about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can create the tools they need to build the futures they want - and put them in place. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups do this in diverse ways.

Governance for nation building focuses on maximising self-determination and ensures your group gets things done your own way.

## Core principles of nation-building

**Sovereignty:** be willing and able to assert self-governing power and make the major decisions.

**Nation solidarity:** build trust and unity to work together as one.

**Organise as a nation:** understand where to start and what needs to be done to meet future goals.

**Capable governing institutions:** have effective, non-politicised dispute-resolution mechanisms and build capable bureaucracies.

**Cultural legitimacy and credibility:** governing institutions match community beliefs.

**Strategic future orientation:** make decisions with long-term priorities in mind.

**Nation-spirited leadership:** recognise the need for change and engage with community to make that happen.

## Treaty

A treaty is a settlement or agreement arrived at by negotiation, which gives rise to binding obligations between two 'sovereign entities' (usually states, nations or governments).

Many First Nations use treaty negotiations to advance their self-determination and sovereignty.

In Australia, calls for treaty seek an agreement between First Nations and the nation-state of Australia that would recognise the sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

A treaty is not an end in itself. It's an opportunity for community members to work together to reclaim self-determined ways of governing.

## Development

Development is change or transformation that makes life better in ways that people want. It's about empowering people to achieve long-term community, social, cultural, political and economic benefits.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to decide what forms of development they want. Holistic development recognises that focusing on multiple areas, including community, social, and economic, is important for sustained development.

## Governing for sustained development

Strong governance enhances a group's capacity for sustained development. Development is sustainable when it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Taking a nation-building approach to governance is one way to drive capacity for sustained development.

## Nation building in practice

Nation building – or rebuilding – often requires rethinking the roles and strategic vision of your group's governance.

To begin your nation-building journey, involve your group in conversations and hard decisions.

Steps to build your nation's governance

The following steps are important in building effective governance for nation building:

- Consider an incremental approach
- Engage with your community
- Focus on credible leadership
- Identify strategic priorities and concerns
- Build capable and legitimate systems and plans
- Look hard at cultural solutions
  - Build governance capability
  - Monitor and review
  - Plan for the future
- Develop your networks



For more information,  
visit: [aigi.org.au/toolkit](https://aigi.org.au/toolkit) or  
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