Ten Key Messages from the preliminary findings of the Indigenous Community Governance Project, 2005

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The Indigenous Community Governance Project (ICGP) is an Australian Research Council Linkage Project between the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University, and Reconciliation Australia (RA). The Project is exploring the nature of Indigenous community governance in diverse contexts and locations across Australia through a series of case studies—to understand what works, what doesn't work, and why. This document presents some key messages emerging from a summary of the comparative analysis of the Project's 11 current Indigenous case studies, after the first phase of a longer study[1].

MESSAGE 1: RELATIONSHIPS AND REPRESENTATION ARE KEY

The research reveals that governance and decision-making in Indigenous community governance is shaped by multiple historical, cultural and political relationships. The research shows that the family connections, land ownership relationships, and governance histories associated with particular communities and sets of regionally-linked communities, are fundamental to community governance dynamics and arrangements.

In all the Project case studies, strengthening Indigenous community governance starts first with negotiating and clarifying the appropriate contemporary relationships among the different Indigenous people within a region or community. That leads directly into the work of designing systems of representation and organisational arrangements which reflect those important relationships. Working through Indigenous relationships and systems of representation thus becomes the basis for working out organisational structures, institutions and procedures.

The emphasis should be on starting with locally relevant Indigenous relationships and forms of representation, and designing governance structures from there.

MESSAGE 2: NO 'ONE SIZE FITS ALL', BUT NOT ALL SIZES ARE EQUAL TO THE TASK

The case studies stress that the process of building governance has to be based on local realities—it has to encompass culturally-relevant geographies and governance relationships which resonate with traditional relationships, jurisdictions, laws, customs, and specific histories. In other words, there will be no single model suitable for all community governance.

But community governance also has to be practically capable—it has got to be able to get things done for its members. Not all governance arrangements are equally effective. Some approaches, processes, and structures may work better than others in different local conditions.

Legislative, policy and funding frameworks should allow for quite diverse governance arrangements which take account of local complexities. But equally, Indigenous leaders and communities need to give hard-headed consideration to what organisational structures and processes are going to give best effect to their preferred representation and strategic goals.

Also, as the surrounding environment changes, so governance arrangements need to evolve and adapt. Indigenous groups are more successful in achieving their goals when they undertake periodic internal reviews of their own community governance arrangements.

MESSAGE 3: CULTURAL MATCH IS ABOUT LEGITIMACY

The idea of 'culture match' is seen to be relevant by a number of Indigenous communities and organisations, who are actively working to ensure that their governance arrangements embody and reinforce their preferred contemporary values, norms, and conceptions of how authority should be organised and leadership exercised. Their efforts to achieve an appropriate culture match appear to be central to the legitimacy of their organisations and the extent of members' confidence in, and support of, them.

Indigenous traditional principles of 'subsidiarity' amongst groups (where different roles and mutual responsibilities are dispersed across connected layers/units) and 'relational autonomy' (where separate groups and individuals retain their autonomy, at the same time as reinforcing valued wider linkages and relationships) inform the design of many contemporary governance and culture match arrangements.

There are complex conditions of 'culture match' in Australia—there are multi-layered sets of groups and organisations in which decision-making power, governing functions and service activities are dispersed. In such circumstances, culture match for Indigenous governance arrangements is very much about reaffirming and redefining collective identities. This is entailing a 'two-way' process of adaptation and innovation.

Culturally legitimate representation and leadership will not come about through externally imposed solutions. But where the process of rethinking collective histories and reviewing governance options has been facilitated within Indigenous communities, it appears to have contributed significantly to more enduring governance arrangements and outcomes. Initial models need to be monitored and refined over time.

MESSAGE 4: THE CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF REGIONS FORMS A BASIS FOR GOVERNANCE

The Project is reporting governance initiatives across a continuum of localised and regionalised scales of population and land ownership. We are seeing some problems of scale emerging as small organisations struggle to develop and sustain their service capacity, administrative systems, continuity of professional staffing, and to deliver tangible outcomes for their members.

Some regional models are being designed on the basis of desiring a balance between autonomy, subsidiarity and a larger scale of representation and service delivery. This is leading to federated and regionally dispersed forms of organisational governance.

Governments need to recognise the importance of the cultural geographies of governance that lend legitimacy to different aggregations and scales of governance for different purposes. Understanding the local content of Indigenous subsidiarity, representation and relational autonomy associated with these cultural geographies could usefully inform more enabling government policy implementation and community development practice to facilitate both community and regionalised governance.

MESSAGE 5: INSTITUTIONS OF GOVERNANCE MATTER

The effectiveness and legitimacy of community governance arrangements appears to be positively advanced as a result of building institutional capacity. Institutions are the worldviews, the normative and regulative structures, and activities that provide meaning and stability to social and cultural behaviour. They can be formal ways of doing things (such as policies, rules, constitutions, legal and judicial systems), or informal (such as taboos, gender norms, religious beliefs, values, kinship and marriage systems).

Institutions are often longer-lasting and more influential on peoples' behaviour than organisations. They are especially influential in determining the extent to which governance arrangements are judged to be proper and legitimate by members.

The institutions of governance can be actively built. They can be strengthened by people customising their institutional tools of corporate governance (such as codes, rules, constitutions, policies etc.) to suit their preferred values and ways of doing things, by establishing internal mediation and dispute-resolution procedures, creating shared goals, agreed procedures and so on.

Building the institutions of an organisation creates a strong internal 'governance culture'. It assists in designing workable forms of culture match, and provides a strong foundation for sustained good governance.

The institutions and representative structures of governance should not be too quickly concretised or juridified by formal legal, constitutional and technical mechanisms; early experiments need time to be refined and evolve.

MESSAGE 6: LEADERSHIP, LEADERSHIP, LEADERSHIP AND SUCCESSION

In every case study, the role of leaders is a foundation stone for community governance—for the better, or for the worse, depending on how it is exercised.

Leadership is extremely complex on the ground; being socially dispersed, hierarchical, and context specific (with ceremonial, organisational, familial, residential, age and gender dimensions). There are overlapping networks of leadership and authority in communities and regions; evident across organisations and familial webs.

Indigenous leadership is conferred based on a range of criteria and processes. But it has to be constantly retained. Leadership is not the same as power. There are strong norms about consensus, negotiation and consultation associated with leadership—leaders are expected to come back to their community constituents to discuss information and ideas with them. The communication and interaction between 'leaders' and community members is seen to be very important in sustaining their legitimacy.

Leadership is critical to the development of a strong governance culture within organisations and communities. Leaders experience enormous pressures in juggling the many demands upon them from family and others. Effective leaders seem to be those who can achieve the difficult balance between undertaking their role in 'looking after' their own families, and their wider capacity for stewardship and consensus-making within larger groups and communities.

The concept and style of leadership and decision-making in Indigenous cultures appears to be significantly different from those familiar to governments. Non-Indigenous stakeholders may not even recognise legitimate Indigenous leadership, and hence may inadvertently undermine it.

Succession of leadership is often neglected to the detriment of communities and their organisations. More coordinated program funding for leadership development, mentoring and succession at the community level is needed, to foster the next generation of leaders.

MESSAGE 7: GOVERNANCE MATTERS FOR SUSTAINED SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Our preliminary research points to governance capacity as being a fundamental factor in generating sustained economic development and social outcomes.

Economic development appears to be best achieved where effective Indigenous and non-Indigenous governance capacity coexists. Education, financial literacy and health status appear to be critical factors in achieving effective governance for economic development.

In some locations Indigenous aspirations for economic development differ from the mainstream, and Indigenous interests in developing the customary economy (in perhaps innovative ways) may not be acknowledged or supported by governments. Clarifying Indigenous economic aspirations, and the values which underpin them is an important basis for sustainable development.

From the comparative analysis of the case studies, it seems that: strong visionary leadership; strong culturally-based institutions of governance; sound, stable management and professional staff support; strategic networking with public or private sector partners to engage with the wider economy; having infrastructure substantially in place; and having access to relevant training and mentoring opportunities; and hard-headed strategic planning and review are important governance factors linked to achieving socioeconomic development outcomes.

MESSAGE 8: THE GOVERNANCE ENVIRONMENT CAN ENABLE OR DISABLE

The governance of Indigenous communities and their organisations operates within a complex wider environment that stretches across community, regional, State, Territory and Federal layers. We have developed the concept of the 'governance environment' to refer to this aggregate of surrounding systems, structures, forms of capital, players, conditions, resources, networks, and webs of relationships.

Indigenous community and regional layers of the governance environment are dynamic, with complex systems of representation and leadership, overlapping constituencies, networks of families and groups associated with organisations, and complex systems of mandate, accountability and authority. But the same complexity applies to the government component of the governance environment.

The role of government within this environment is a critical factor for the outcomes of community governance—it can enable or disable effective Indigenous community governance. In other words, the 'governance of governments' matters; not just the governance of Indigenous communities and organisations.

In order to enable Indigenous community governance, governments at all levels need to: better coordinate internally; reduce the number of separate departmental and program-specific consultations with communities; rationalise government program delivery; undertake a community-development approach to governance building; reduce the large number of different funding mechanisms and give more broad-based, longer-term funding linked to broad community development goals.

In particular, the lack of coherence of multiple departmental programs' funding objectives, grant application and acquittal processes, with the overall objectives of Indigenous communities in different locations needs urgent attention.

MESSAGE 9: ENHANCING GOVERNANCE CAPACITY REQUIRES A SYSTEMS AND DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

Inadequate capacity is being identified as existing across at least four layers or dimensions of governance, and across both Indigenous and non-Indigenous 'worlds' of governance. These are: the individual, the entity, the inter-relationship between entities, and the surrounding legal, political, and government environment.

These dimensions of capacity development need to be considered within a systems framework; that is, they need to be analysed and addressed as part of an inter-connected system, not in isolation.

The 'governance culture' of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous 'worlds', and the nature of their everyday interaction, is extremely influential on organisational capacity.

Capacity development should be a process that actively strengthens Indigenous decision-making and control over their governance institutions, goals and collective identity, and that enhances cultural match and legitimacy.

Governance capacity development within organisations appears to work best when it is: place-based; work and goal oriented; based on self-assessed governance priorities; in a relevant form and delivered in ways that are meaningful in terms of local community realities; and sustained and reinforced over the longer-term.

This means that building governance capacity—whether for individuals, groups or organisations—needs to be carried out within a developmental approach that emphasises the need for long-term partnering and support.

MESSAGE 10: GOVERNMENTS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE HAVE DIFFERENT CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING GOVERNANCE EFFECTIVENESS

Both governments and Indigenous people want community organisations to deliver reasonable levels of services, and provide sound financial management and accountability. The key areas of difference relate to the Indigenous processes and relationships at the heart of many organisations which emphasise internal accountability and communication, and governments' emphasis on 'upwards' accountability, risk avoidance, financial micro-management, and compliance reporting. Capacity in these areas promotes governments' assessment of an organisation as being effective.

Indigenous people want their organisations to provide clear, culturally-informed and regular communication with the community members they serve. People want to be consulted, to know what their organisation is doing, know what decisions are being made and why, and they want to be confident that the organisation is operating fairly and well. This promotes an Indigenous assessment that the organisation and its leaders are effective and legitimate.

The multiple and frequent reports required by government funders can stifle community organisations; divert precious, limited resources and staff time away from organisational service-delivery; and consume leaders' time away from governance processes which strengthen organisational capacity, and accountability to their communities.

Because of the systemic and developmental nature of governance capacity-development, there is an urgent need to monitor and evaluate the new 'whole of government' and partnerships arrangements for strengthening Indigenous governance and outcomes that are currently taking place around the country. Evaluation should focus on: the range and roles of government and other partners; the different objectives and priorities held by partners; the relationship between partners; the delivery processes; the adequacy of resources and funding; the community development and governance outcomes, and the community members' views, participation and ownership.

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1.   The full report of the ICG Project's early research findings from which this summary is drawn has been published as Hunt, J. and Smith D. 2006, *Building Indigenous Community Governance in Australia. Preliminary research findings*, CAEPR Working Paper No 31, The Australian National University, Canberra. It is available for download at <**http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/working.php#31**>.