

6 NATION BUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT

As an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leader put it, “Australian governments may not see us as a nation, but we are going to act like a nation, in every way we can.”

Tom Day, CEO Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation RNTBC.

One of the greatest challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today is exercising self-determination to:

- govern themselves in ways that are meaningful
- initiate economic development that is aligned to cultural and collective priorities
- make laws and decisions that solve social problems, and balance cultural integrity with change
- shape relations with wider Australia in ways of their own choosing.

But new stories of nation building resourcefulness, creativity and success—as realised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples themselves—are surfacing.

ABOUT NATION BUILDING, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT

The ‘nation’ in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia

A nation refers to a group or community of people who share a common language, culture, ethnicity, descent or history. The concept of ‘nation’ in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia can include:

- a small clan or tribal unit
- a traditional land-owning group
- people who are dispersed across a wide region or city, but see themselves as a single cultural unit

- a discrete community whose differently related residents share the desire to collectively govern themselves.

Nation rebuilding is about how Indigenous peoples can pull together and implement the tools—rules, processes, checks, balances, structures of governance—they need to build the futures that they want.

Governance for nation rebuilding is about the practical mechanisms that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people use to collectively organise how they go about trying to get the things done that matter most to them. It is self-determination in action.

Development is change or transformation that makes life better in ways that people want. It can take a variety of forms.

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the internal ‘test’ of **development sustainability** looks like answering difficult questions about the kind of future that they are trying to build, not only for themselves now but for the next generation.

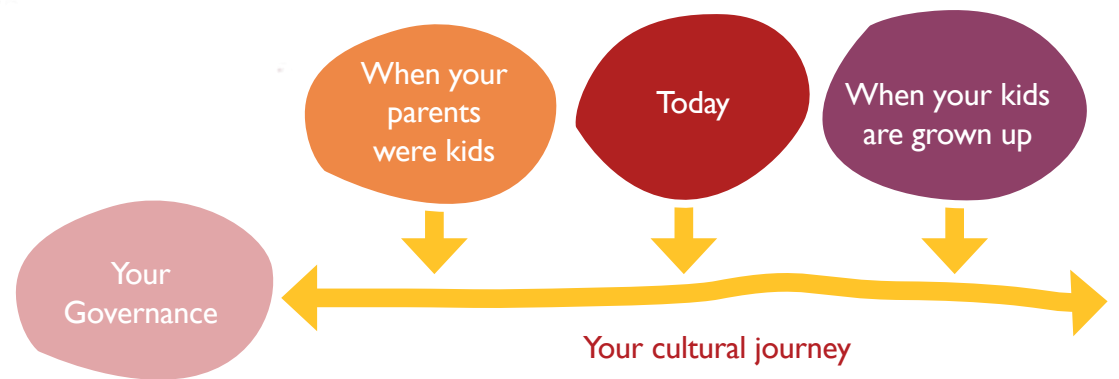
Kick-starting the process of nation rebuilding

So how can you:

- make a start on the work of rebuilding or refashioning governance for the new era, and act as a nation?
- rebuild effective governance that will strengthen self-determination, rather than undermine it?
- deliver real outcomes that are proactive rather than reactive?

And what would a new kind of effective practical governance for nation rebuilding look like?





TWELVE PRACTICAL STEPS: YOUR FOUNDATIONS

1. Define your nation. As a first step, you will need to consider who are the members of the group, clan, tribe or community that you may now call your nation.
2. Map your networks. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance is networked governance. Nation building will be more successful when wider networks are drawn on. So defining, managing and maintaining relationships with your key stakeholders is very important.
3. Seriously consider an incremental approach. Start off with one or two achievable priorities, then build on that.
4. Make sure your community is behind you. Your members give you the mandate to build governance.
5. Make sure your leadership is credible. Credible leaders work hard to involve and unite the entire community or nation.
6. Build capable and legitimate institutions. These are your laws, constitutions, regulations, rules, policies, and checks and balances.
7. Identify strategic priorities and concerns. You cannot do everything at once. Choose what you do now as a foundation.

8. Look hard at genuine cultural solutions. Look at your enduring cultural values and the realistic role they can play in revitalising your governance and nation.
9. Ensure the governance capacity and confidence of your people is being actively developed and continuously promoted. Do this in parallel with implementing your other strategic goals and agreements. It is no use having authority unless you can practically implement and exercise it.
10. Ask the hard questions along the way. This regular monitoring and review will help ensure that your governance solutions continue to work as you want them to.
11. Make sure you have a succession plan in place and that young leaders can contribute their new ideas now, not later. Leaders build for the future by mentoring youth who will carry on their good work long into the future.
12. Create genuine strategic alliances with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations and with non-Indigenous supporters. Experiment with networked and collaborative governance arrangements that will support your agenda.

(Drawn from the governance research and writings of Dr Neil Sterritt; the Australian Indigenous Community Governance Research Project at The Australian National University; and the research of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, Udall Centre, University of Arizona.)

NEXT STEPS

Once you've got these foundations in place, you can:

1. Consider your governance history. A sensitive reconsideration of your group's governance history can positively assist the process of reconfirming or renewing cultural choices about what kinds of contemporary governance you value.
2. Map your governance assets. Consider the kinds of strengths, assets, resources, talents, skills, experience and knowledge you can call upon from the members of your own nation, and draw up a 'map' of these assets.
3. Use a governance development and action plan. This is a combined strategic and action plan that focuses on setting out your specific plan of attack, and your best options, solutions and tactics for achieving the governance goals of your nation. It assists you work through the process of evaluating and rebuilding your governance. See the Indigenous Governance Toolkit for a detailed, practical governance development and action plan template.

For more information, please see the Indigenous Governance Toolkit: toolkit.aigi.com.au