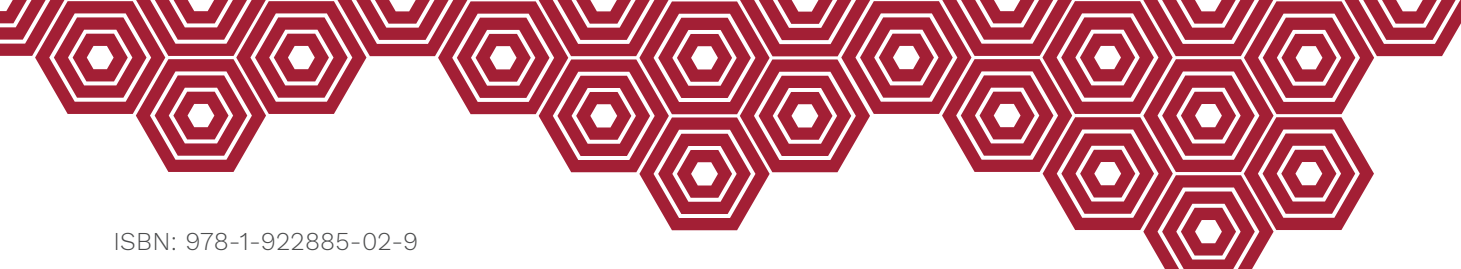# Indigenous Nation Building and the Political Determinants of Health and Wellbeing

Discussion Paper

Daryle Rigney, Simone Bignall, Alison Vivian and Steve Hemming

A PDF version of this report may be obtained from: www.lowitja.org.au

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that the following report may contain/contains images, names and voices of people who have passed.

About the Artwork:

Cover artwork: Design by Tom Day, citizen of the Gunditjmara people.

The dominating figure is the shield, representing our strength to have not only survived but in many ways thrive. It protects us and will continue to protect our future coming through our children. The design represented behind the shield are the bloodlines we carry for thousands of generations. The middle rim represents our country and our connections to it. The outer rim represents our unbroken connection of our ancestry, always protecting us and given us the strength to continue on.

Indigenous Nation Building and the Political Determinants of Health and Wellbeing

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Use of language in relation to cultural identity

Lowitja Institute's protocol is to use the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian context, unless specifically referring to Aboriginal peoples or Torres Strait Islander peoples. Where appropriate, specific nation names may be used.

The term First Nations peoples is used to refer to Indigenous peoples across the world.

The term non-Indigenous people is used for people in Australia who are not Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. When authors are being quoted, the terms in the quote will be those used by the author.

About Lowitja Institute

Lowitja Institute is Australia's only national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled health research institute named in honour of its Patron, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG. It is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisation working for the health and wellbeing of Australia's First Peoples through high impact quality research, knowledge exchange, and by supporting a new generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers.

The cultures and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are central to our endeavours. We recognise and respect the significance of Country, culture, and spiritual and social wellbeing to all aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' health.

Our national office is on the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and we pay our respect to their Elders past, present and emerging. We also acknowledge the more than 250 nations of sovereign Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who lived across this broad continent and islands for thousands of years prior to colonisation and who remain here, and pay our respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

About Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research

Through ongoing project work funded by the Australian Research Council, the Indigenous Nations and Collaborative Futures Hub within Jumbunna Institute is internationally regarded as a leading Australian centre for research and knowledge mobilisation about Indigenous nation rebuilding and self-determination. Led by Professor Daryle Rigney, a citizen of the Ngarrindjeri Nation, the multidisciplinary INCF team works with First Nations communities across Australia to achieve social, economic and political innovation through nation resurgence for self-governance and self-determination.

Jumbunna INCF acknowledges the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation, the Boorooberongal People of the Dharug Nation, the Bidiagal People and the Gamaygal People, upon whose ancestral lands our university stands. We pay respect to their Elders and leaders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these lands.

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Contents

1. Executive Summary

Complementing the influential body of literature that analyses the social and cultural determinants of health, the paper considers some implications of the mounting evidence that Indigenous nation building for self-governed self-determination results in improved outcomes for Indigenous peoples. We broaden discussions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' health and wellbeing by explaining how Indigenous nation building enables vital political determinants of health. This includes consideration of how Indigenous nation building can support and be supported by the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled health organisations.

First Nations across the world have created innovative measures to enhance their capacity for self-governance, which in turn enables better exercise of collective rights to self-determination in resistance to settler-colonial contexts. These have been the subjects of long-term study in the USA and Canada through the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and the Native Nations Institute at the University of Arizona, from which the term 'Indigenous nation building' originates (Harvard Project 2008; Jorgensen 2007). Over the past decade in Australia there has been growing emphasis on the concept of nation building, through which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collectives can increase their capability for effective self-governance.

Knowledge of the principles and practices supporting Indigenous nation building has advanced significantly within Australia through research led by Jumbunna Institute in collaboration with the Native Nations Institute and Indigenous peoples across Australia. The purpose of the Jumbunna nation building research programme is to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collectives across the continent who continue to enact their sovereign responsibilities and practice nation building as an effective pathway to increased self-determination through self-government.

As Indigenous nation building practitioners, researchers and theorists, we maintain that distinctive positive political determinants of health and wellbeing operate alongside cultural and social influences. These overarching political determinants include collective freedoms from oppression and domination by an external political power; and the collective freedom of a people to be self-governing. In this paper, we explain how techniques of Indigenous nation building may assist First Nations seeking to expand their political freedoms as a pathway to improved health and wellbeing outcomes.

> **Broadening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health discourses by attending to political determinants of health and wellbeing is crucial for two main reasons:**
>
> **1** As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander polities and governing bodies are strengthened through Indigenous nation building, they will play increasingly important roles as health policy decision-makers.
>
> **2** Research evidence demonstrates that Indigenous nation building mitigates the effects of settler-colonialism on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and individuals, thereby improving health and wellbeing.

As a community practice of empowerment, Indigenous nation building shifts the balance of power so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governing authorities can exercise increased control and reclaim jurisdiction over issues of key importance to their citizen communities. This significantly changes the way things are usually done in settler-colonial societies. Rather than positioning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as supplicants for recognition of their rights, Indigenous nation building supports communities to take charge of their affairs and create the conditions under which their rights can materialise in practice (Cornell 2019). With this in mind, the paper explains why Indigenous nation building should be pursued alongside federal, state and territory jurisdictional actions toward the implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart's calls for Voice, Treaty and Truth.

1.1 Context: Emerging opportunities and associated challenges

Appreciating the context within which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live and attempt to thrive is critical to understanding their health and wellbeing. Australia is defined as a settler-colony. Following a pattern replicated by settler-colonies globally, the Australian state has sought to erase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as distinct political collectives with inherent sovereign rights (Veracini 2010; Wolfe 2006). Settler-colonialism systematically imposes and normalises non-Indigenous cultural values, social structures and political economies, resulting in profound and pervasive institutional racism that denies, disrupts and dominates First Nations' life-worlds (Watego et al. 2021; Singh & Macoun 2021; Sherwood & Mohamed 2020; Parter et al. 2021).

The resulting colonial trauma is intergenerational and ongoing, resulting in persisting health disparities that decades of Australian government policy have failed to resolve, despite the stated aim of improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives. This can largely be attributed to the failure of Australian governments to recognise that settler-colonialism causes systemic social weaknesses, requiring holistic and structural solutions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have always resisted the imposition of settler-colonial power formations and worldviews. First Nations research bodies have presented holistic and structural solutions for health and the pursuit of social justice. These have been central to the ongoing advocacy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders seeking transformations within the Australian political landscape (e.g. Behrendt 2003; Calma 2020; Dudgeon et al 2020; Gooda 2014; Oscar 2021; Pearson 2014; Turner 2020; Huggins 2022).

Our discussion is focused on some important recent structural shifts emerging in this context. A groundswell for change is taking shape and gaining momentum in Australia, spurred on by earlier efforts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities working 'on the ground' to regain control over the processes and practices through which their affairs are governed. This paper considers two key developments in this contemporary 'people's movement', each motivated by the aim of self-determination for future health and wellbeing:

- The creation of local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs), where health services are appropriately designed and managed by the people who use them.

- The reinvigoration of local institutions of self-government by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collectives seeking more effective ways to express their political authority.

Through Indigenous nation building and other pathways to nation resurgence, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island leaders seek to reclaim for their communities the foundational capacity for self-determination and self-governance (See Jorgensen 2007; Vivian et al 2017, 2018; Yap & Yu 2016b; Pearson 2006).

It is important to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and leaders have always been nation builders. Prior to colonisation, Indigenous peoples had complex sovereign systems of law and lore, which governed relationships within and amongst First Nations. These systems and structures were systematically and intentionally dismantled by the colonial settler-state. Consequently, contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders are best thought of as nation rebuilders. Communities do not necessarily seek to replicate their pre-colonial systems and structures, but will often bring traditional ways of knowing, being and doing to inform modern approaches and processes of self-determination. This means that the Indigenous nation building framework does not seek to impose a universal model of contemporary Indigenous governance; each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nation will pursue its own unique pathway to rebuild its political voice and sovereign capacities.

Indigenous nation building enhances community governance capabilities in the wider context of calls for a Voice to Parliament and a Makarrata Commission truth-telling process. These remain topical in political debate following the recent election of the Federal Labor Government. Indigenous nation building also benefits from advocacy being undertaken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations working at the federal level to negotiate the transfer of power from settler-state governments back to relevant Aboriginal corporations.

This broad platform of Indigenous-led action for change has prompted settler-colonial governments to acknowledge the failure of previous policy approaches and to look for alternatives. The former Federal Liberal National Party Coalition Government consequently claimed it was committed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being an integral part of the decisions and service provisions that affect their communities. This was to be achieved through privileging place-based responses and regional decision-making. Both were significant components of the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which was co-created through the 'genuine partnership' between Australian governments and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations. At the state and territory level, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory have each announced their intentions to pursue regional treaties with Aboriginal political collectives.

Each of these endeavours envisage government interactions with Indigenous polities: groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having organised systems of authority to sanction the capacity and cultural legitimacy of negotiators. Each therefore presents an opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collectives to represent themselves as political entities having capacity to change the standing terms of engagement with the settler-colonial state (Jorgensen 2007; Hunt & Smith 2011; Cornell 2015; Rigney, Bell & Vivian 2021; Rigney et al. 2021). The new partnership initiatives reflect an important shift towards the use of a different evidence base in policy development, one with self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at its foundation (Vivian et al 2017; 2018). The inclusion of Indigenous nation building in federal health policy, in particular the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2031 (Health Plan 2021), further evidences this shift. Since self-determination is strongly linked with positive health outcomes, these new policy directions have significant potential to bring improvements to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and community wellbeing.

We have seen this emphasis on self-determination in the development of the community controlled health sector since its inception in Redfern in the 1970s. 'Self-determination' in Aboriginal health sector discourse refers predominantly to individual choices and access to the social and cultural determinants of health. It includes recognising the impacts of negative socio-cultural powers such as racism and colonial dispossession, which causes poverty. Local ACCHOs encourage flourishing communities supported by culturally safe care, which is achieved by seizing back community control of services from the settler-state. This sector's strong and vocal advocacy for self-determination to be recognised as a pathway to individual health and social wellbeing is complemented by an understanding of Indigenous nation building as community or collective self-determination.

Centring Indigenous nation building in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, in the work of ACCHOs, in the Health Plan 2021, and in future policy initiatives, is imperative to ensuring that the positive political determinants of health and wellbeing are equally prioritised alongside the cultural and social determinants. International research finds that nation building strengthens the sovereign authority of First Nations. Such authority sits effectively within the overriding, purpose-defined, political organ of that nation; its representative governing body. This body manages and disperses resources for nation development along diverse areas, including health, but also extending to environment, data sovereignty, repatriation, language, education, family and child protection issues, resource management, food and water sovereignty, wealth distribution, diplomacy, crisis management, and so forth (Harvard Project 2007). Indigenous nation building generates positive health outcomes by enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to transition towards collective self-determination over all issues that are important to their citizens. Such broad community

control supports communities to create the conditions where social and cultural determinants of health can be met.

Australia is shifting towards treaty arrangements that will bring new kinds of engagement amongst settler states and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including the potential for polity-to-polity relationships and self-government enabling greater self-determination (Brennan et al. 2005). These offer real opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations to assert sovereign powers and increase their jurisdictions and political freedoms through transformed relations with settler-colonial governments.

But they also present significant challenges. There is an urgent need to understand how the social and cultural initiatives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health organisations may support the political self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. At the same time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders need to know how First Nations that are rebuilding themselves for political self-determination can strategically plan and successfully organise their whole-of-nation affairs to achieve desired health benefits for their citizens.

1.2 Approach

Our discussion therefore teases out how self-determination is being conceptualised in key policy frameworks guiding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governing authorities, regional service providers, national Indigenous 'Voice' consortia including Land Councils, the Coalition of Peaks, and Aboriginal regional alliances such as Empowered Communities operating in ten regions across Australia, and the Local Decision Making initiative in New South Wales.

We provide understandings of self-determination and self-government that may enable these various centres of authority and policy-development to collaborate effectively in advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health and wellbeing by affirming the sovereign rights and responsibilities of First Nations.

Through this discussion, we clarify the significant political features of Indigenous nation building, defined as the processes by which an Indigenous political collective 'enhances its own foundational capacity for effective self-governance and for self-determined community and economic development' (Jorgensen 2007: xii; see Gooda 2014). In the words of Joan Timeche (2015), citizen of the Hopi tribe and Executive Director of the Native Nations Institute, the 'movement to increase Indigenous nations' capacities for self-rule and self-determination is called Native nation building.

The Indigenous nation building framework has been generated and tested by diverse Indigenous authorities among the international community of First Nations, each seeking to improve the health and wellbeing of their citizens. Indigenous nation building is also beginning to influence the political strategies and self-governance aspirations of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia.

While this paper focuses especially on the Indigenous nation building approach, we acknowledge there are various pathways to resurgent nationhood currently being travelled in Australia. Peoples of Cape York and the Kimberley region, for example, are proceeding by building the capacities of individuals, families and associations to participate in the work of the nation (Yap & Yu 2018; Pearson 2006). Land Councils seek to consolidate the territorial base needed for the expression of First Nations sovereignty (Yunupingu 1997). By comparison, the Indigenous nation building approach begins by strengthening the political structure of the collective as a means to support citizenship development and secure governance over/for/as Country. We affirm the importance of each nation choosing its own pathway; this, after all, is what it means to be self-determining.

We begin by outlining the important role of the community controlled health sector in addressing the social, cultural and political determinants of Aboriginal health and wellbeing. While all three determinants overlap and should be considered interdependent, discussions of social and cultural determinants of health and wellbeing predominantly attend to factors such as poverty, education, cultural identification, social capital and racism (Lowitja Institute 2020; Carson 2020; Fleming, Manning & Miller 2019), whereas political determinants refer more to sovereign status and collective governance capabilities. More needs to be done to illuminate the significance of these positive political determinants of health and wellbeing and to bring them into deeper consideration alongside socio-cultural factors.

We then turn our focus towards Indigenous nation building as a source of the effective governing authority needed for self-determining healthy futures and enabling collective wellbeing for First Nation citizens. Finally, we consider the wide-ranging jurisdiction that could be sought by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governments pursuing whole-of-Country/whole-of person health for their citizen communities.

1.3 Key findings

The key finding of this paper is that Indigenous nation building enables healthy futures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples because it comprehensively enacts self-determination and so addresses necessary social, cultural and political determinants of health and wellbeing. International and Australian research finds that a nation building lens ensures proper attention is paid to the collective political identities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, considered as self-determining nations. Understood as political collectives, nations embody the authority needed to materialise self-governance for improved health and wellbeing.

Through examples of nation building and governance success in specific policy areas, this paper illuminates how the governing body of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nation acts as a necessary coordinating agency bringing positive social, cultural and political

determinants of health and wellbeing together into an overarching vision of success for the future of its people. The implication is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should be supported to initiate and sustain nation building programs.

More generally, the paper finds that Indigenous nation building can assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to prepare for the potential political transformations that have emerged in the wake of the Uluru Statement and are fast taking shape. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples need to be ready for self-governance, treaty negotiation and public truth-telling, so that they can seize opportunities for self-determination and successfully address associated partnership challenges.

We highlight three key challenges requiring attention:

1. The current challenge of self-determination in the absence of treaties, a situation that constrains the conditions under which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing can flourish.
2. The emerging challenge of being prepared for treaty negotiations and polity-to-polity relationships, which require the capable exercise of sovereign authority (including holding settler-colonial governments accountable to their treaty commitments).
3. The future challenge of effective self-governance enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations to determine positive cultural, social and political conditions that uphold the health and wellbeing of their flourishing citizen communities.

These challenges raise important questions for the Aboriginal community controlled health services (ACCHS) sector, including:

- How may the sector best offer support to Indigenous nation building processes and the renegotiation of power occurring at local, regional and national levels?
- What relationship should exist between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governing authorities and community controlled organisations?
- How would responsibility for different elements of community health and wellbeing be allocated?

1.4 Next steps

Finally, we propose some actions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health organisations and research bodies could take to initiate and support nation building in communities that are striving for the sovereign self-determination of the cultural, social and political conditions enabling Indigenous health and wellbeing. They include to:

- Enhance political literacy within the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service (ACCHS) sector, for example by engaging expert facilitators to present education workshops on Indigenous nation building and political self-determination.

- Forge and engage in multisector alliances that support the broad agenda of nation building in communities and 'whole of nation' health and wellbeing.

- Develop a Charter of Principles or a Priority Framework for the Political Determinants of Health to align health research and policy planning in support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governing bodies as they progress sovereign-to-sovereign partnerships with settler-colonial governments.

By taking steps such as these, local ACCHOs will be better directed to support the needs of communities engaged in nation (re)building and will themselves participate as agents in nation building.

2. Background

2.1 Definitions and key terms

The conceptual framework of Indigenous nation building uses some key terms that must be properly understood in order to fully appreciate its potential to improve health and wellbeing. The definitions below have been adapted from key scholarship in the field including resources developed by the Native Nations Institute at the University of Arizona in the United States (Jorgensen 2007; Cornell 2015), and from standard political-legal sources including United Nations Declarations and Covenants.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander/Indigenous: wherever possible we refer to particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by the name they use to signal their sovereign identity as First Nations: e.g. Ngarrindjeri Nation, Gunditjmara People, Wik People. We use the general term 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' to refer to the wider community of Indigenous people in Australia; and in keeping with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we generally use the term 'Indigenous' to refer more universally to Indigenous peoples around the world.

Citizen: a member of a nation. In the context of this discussion paper, we predominantly refer to citizens as members of specific First Nations, rather than citizens of the Australian nation (although, of course, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at the very least are dual citizens, being citizens both of their own nation, and of the Australian nation more broadly).

Corporate governance: how organisations are managed. Organisations are important tools for Indigenous nations to achieve their goals and get things done. Compared with 'nation governance' or political governance (defined below), specific Indigenous cultures play a less central role in corporate governance and play no role at all in many service organisations.

First Nation: a Country-specific Indigenous cultural community considered as a political society (i.e., a 'polity'). In the context of our discussion, we use the term 'nation' to refer to specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their local Countries, and not to pan-national groupings such as 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' considered as a distinctive (and original) population existing within the Australian nation. Roughly equivalent terms refer to a people, tribe, iwi, hapuu, or polity. A specific Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander First Nation has identifying cultural traditions (many connected to local Country and continuing since time immemorial, with some changing over time while maintaining overall coherency in line with the values and practices of the people). These identifying cultural connections to local Country mean a 'nation' is distinct from the 'mob' or 'community' that signifies a pan-Aboriginal population.

Governance: the values or principles and practical mechanisms by which the shared vision of a people (nation, tribe, iwi, hapuu, polity) is translated into sustained, organised action.

Government: an organisational manifestation of governance in a set of offices, procedures, or protocols through which, according to identified values or principles, decisions are made and implemented, disputes are resolved, and actions are taken. Whereas settler-colonial governments tend to assume they are the only relevant political authority in Australia, Indigenous nation building enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to (re) develop their own governments for the purpose of sovereign self-rule. First Nations governments are culturally-matched structures of authority, needed for self-governance and self-determination.

Health/wellbeing: a holistic measure of quality of life, which is both individual and collective, and concerns the capacity for successful integration (or 'self-governance') of the positive elements and relationships that constitute a healthy self. Because they are centrally about agency and capacity, health and wellbeing are also primarily about power, empowerment, and the politics of self-determination.

Nation building: a process Indigenous political collectives can follow to enhance their own foundational capacity for self-rule and self-governance.

Nation governance (also called **political governance** in some Indigenous nation building literature): how an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander nation organises itself and uses its powers to achieve its goals. Specific Indigenous cultures play a decisive role in nation governance.

Polity: a political society comprising culturally distinctive institutions, processes and relations, which together define the privileges and duties of the society's citizens or members. Self-determining First Nations are polities.

Self-determination: communal decision-making for the future of a people, who define on their own terms the collective identity of 'the self' who is the subject of their self-determination. In international law, political self-determination is collective and grounded in group sovereignty, rather than about individual choice; and its sovereign source is people/culture/place-specific.

Self-governance: the capable exercise of a set of culturally-matched offices, procedures and protocols that have been developed by a people for the purpose of self-determination.

Settler-colonial system: the cultural, social and political system imposed upon First Nations through the invasion of a foreign power. Although we acknowledge Australia was a site of invasion (or 'colonisation') rather than peaceful 'settlement', we use the term 'settler' in keeping with international legal understanding that original sovereignty can be lost by conquest or cession, but not by settlement. Since Australia was 'settled' following the British invasion, First Nations sovereignty persists. We use the term settler-colonial governments to refer to the local, state and federal governments operating under the law of the Australian nation state.

2.2 Self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing

The social, cultural, economic and political disempowerment of Indigenous peoples persists in settler-colonial policy regimes, programs and governmental practices. These systems perpetuate trauma because they prevent Indigenous peoples from living according to their own cultural worldviews (Wolfe 2006; Strakosch 2015; Vivian & Halloran 2021). Settler-colonial governments reinforce domination and disempowerment when they maintain decision-making agency and authority over Indigenous affairs. There is abundant evidence that structural disempowerment leads to the overall poor health of communities and high levels of individual sickness across urban, rural and remote settings. Because the root cause of this problem is domination by the settler-state, the logical solution in Australia – supported by robust and consistent research evidence – is self-determination by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Since Australia is a signatory to all the major United Nations conventions on human rights, including the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Australian governments are obliged to uphold the fundamental international legal principle of self-determination and to incorporate it into domestic legislation and policy. Self-determination is the most fundamental of all human rights and is grounded in the idea that peoples are entitled to control their own destiny (Anaya 2004:98). Articles 3, 4 and 5 of the UNDRIP relate particularly to the political quality of self-determination:

> **Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.**
>
> **Indigenous peoples, in exercising their right to self-determination, have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs, as well as ways and means for financing their autonomous functions.**
>
> **Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State.**

According to Article 46 of the UNDRIP, the exercise of political self-determination by First Nations will usually involve the renegotiation of government, legal and policy arrangements with the settler-colonial state, and not secession. The UNDRIP therefore also outlines the responsibilities of States to engage with Indigenous peoples and to ensure that Indigenous peoples can attain those rights. Some of the particular collective rights of Indigenous peoples and of settler-state government responsibilities associated with the right to self-determination are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1:

Figure 1:

RESPONSIBILITIES OF STATES

or compensation where necessary. These include responsibility to protect specific rights included in the Declaration; Indigenous peoples' cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property; protection from assimilation or destruction of culture; Indigenous peoples' histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies etc; Culturally appropriate education, including in language, Culturally diverse media; Protection from economic exploitation, especially for children; with emphasis on the needs of Indigenous elders, women, youth, children and social conditions, Control of lands, territories and resources; Fair and just redress and discrimination; Improved economic, social, cultural or spiritual impact on Indigenous lands, territories or resources.

ARTICLES 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 32: The responsibility to protect redress or compensation where necessary. These include as distinct peoples, cultural values and human remains; Indigenous peoples' rights related to: Integrity as distinct peoples, cultural values and human remains; Repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains; Indigenous peoples' histories, where possible; Dignity and diversity of cultures, traditions, languages, oral traditions, Compensation for dispossession from Country; Improved economic and social conditions, children and persons with disabilities; Protection against violence and discrimination; for adverse environmental, economic, social, cultural or spiritual impact on Indigenous

RIGHTS OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

3 The right to self-determination, where Indigenous peoples have the right to determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

5 The right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions. The right to participate fully in the political, economic, social and economic life of the country.

7 The right to live in freedom, peace and security as distinct peoples.

9 The right to be an Indigenous community or nation in accordance with the community's or nation's traditions and customs.

11 The right to practise and revitalise their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to protect past, present and future manifestations.

35 The right to determine the responsibility of individuals to their communities.

39 The right to access financial and technical assistance to enjoy the rights included within the Declaration.

4 The right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs.

8 The right to be free from forced assimilation and from destruction of culture.

10 The right to not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories. Relocation should only take place with free, prior and informed consent and after agreement on compensation and the possibility of return.

33 The right to determine their own identity and membership according to their customs and traditions. The right to determine the structure of their institutions and membership according to their own procedures.

24,28, 29&32 The right to lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired, including the right to develop priorities and strategies for use of that land. The right to conserve and protect the environment and the productive capacity of their lands, territories and resources. The right to restitution for or compensation for such lands that have been taken, occupied, used or damaged without their free, prior and informed consent.

30 The right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and their sciences, technologies and cultures. The right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property.

INDIGENOUS SELF-DETERMINATION

14 The right to establish and control their own educational systems and to provide culturally appropriate education.

12 The right to practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; and the right to use and protect religious and cultural sites and ceremonial objects.

13 The right to revitalise, use, develop and teach their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures.

23 The right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditional Country, or lands that they occupy and use.

22 The right to determine and develop priorities for exercising their right to development. The right to develop health, housing and other economic and social programs and administer them (as far as possible) through their own institutions.

21 The right to improve their economic and social conditions, including in education, employment, vocational training, housing, sanitation, health and social security.

18 The right to participate in decision-making relating to matters that affect their rights through representatives that they have chosen. The right to maintain and develop their own decision-making institutions.

20 The right to maintain and develop their political, economic and social systems. The right to enjoy their traditional and other economic activities and means of subsistence and development.

ARTICLE 19: The responsibility to consult and cooperate in good faith with Indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions so as to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting legislative or administrative measures that affect them.

ARTICLE 32: The responsibility to consult and cooperate in good faith with Indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions so as to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before approving any project that affects Indigenous lands, territories or resources.

ARTICLE 38: The responsibility to take appropriate measures, in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous peoples, to achieve the purposes of the Declaration.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF STATES

The right to health appears in international legal instruments including the 1946 Preamble of the World Health Organization; the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. While these generally view the right to health as attaching to individuals, the UNDRIP provides an understanding of the collective nature of health and wellbeing for Indigenous peoples. It also highlights intimate connections between self-determination, governance rights and health rights. However, the Australian State has noticeably dragged its heels on these international responsibilities towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This may be because of the abstract and non-binding nature of the UN's international legal standards, and the requirement that they be translated into Australian domestic law where they can take effect. The real usefulness of the UNDRIP arguably lies, then, in the strong moral force it provides to First Nations leaders as they seek to hold federal, state and territory governments accountable for observing Indigenous rights to self-determination, and drive them towards implementing relevant legislative and policy changes in line with international legal standards. Indeed, writing from her experience as an expert member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Professor Megan Davis (2012:11) points out that the concept of *self*-determination implies 'that we take the lead – not the state – in putting the meat on the bones of the UNDRIP in a way that gives texture and nuance and meaning to the rights contained therein. As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we cannot remain passive in the role of rights beneficiaries'. For Davis, the right to self-determination, put into practice in Australia, 'looks a lot like "community control"'. Accordingly, the Aboriginal community controlled health services (ACCHS) sector and the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), as the peak body of this sector, 'has already established a path forward in how UNDRIP should be implemented' (Davis 2012, 12; Mazel 2016).

NACCHO defines community control in health services as: 'a process which allows the local Aboriginal community to be involved in its affairs in accordance with whatever protocols or procedures are determined by the Community'. It considers that the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural development is an essential approach to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. Aboriginal community controlled health services (ACCHS) enable local people to achieve their own goals in the areas of primary clinical care, community support, special needs programs and advocacy. Through community-based research, the ACCHS sector has been instrumental in defining the distinctive cultural and social determinants of Aboriginal health and wellbeing, and has played a leading role in government consultation and policy development to prioritise these determinants in accordance with First Nations perspectives.

2.3 Cultural and social determinants

Good health and wellbeing rely significantly upon the presence of supportive social and cultural conditions (Carson et al. 2020; Lowitja Institute 2020). Social determinants of health and wellbeing include secure housing, education, meaningful employment, sufficient income to support individual and household costs of living, gender equity, measures for supporting diversity, non-discriminatory access to services, and public protections against violence, including harmful State policing practices. Cultural determinants include sharing strong connections to Country and community; having intact and functional family relationships; speaking own languages; having the means and capacity for creative expression; having knowledge of ancestral stories; participating in ceremonial traditions; and having Indigenous perspectives publicly visible, including respectful use of Indigenous sciences by the wider community.

Cultural determinants of health often include the traditions, knowledge and identifications particular to a community. General cultural determinants of health and wellbeing are also common to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people due to a broadly shared worldview that emphasises a holistic understanding of health and wellbeing. This viewpoint corresponds with widely-held Indigenous relational philosophies that see individuals as inseparably connected with Country and community and subject to natural, social and scientific 'laws of interdependence' (Cajete 2016: n/p; see also Dudgeon & Bray 2019; Moreton-Robinson 2007). First Nations concepts such as Ngarrindjeri *yannarumi* (Hemming et al. 2019) or Yaruwu *mabu liyan* (Yap & Yu 2019) show how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health 'means not just the physical wellbeing of an individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole Community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being thereby bringing about the total wellbeing of their Community. It is a whole-of-life view and includes the cyclical concept of life-death-life'.

Support for the importance of interconnectedness and a whole-of-life view of health is common across studies investigating the social and cultural determinants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing, as defined by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For example, the *Mayi Kuwayi* national longitudinal study, based at the Australian National University, shows the significance of culturally appropriate services for supporting five foundations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing. They include: belonging and connection; holistic health; purpose and control; dignity and respect; and the fulfilment of basic needs (Garvey et al. 2011). Woven together, these make up an overall 'fabric of wellbeing'. The National Empowerment Project, an Aboriginal-led research project to promote social and emotional wellbeing and reduce community distress and suicide in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, similarly takes a holistic view. It proposed strategies for strengthening Indigenous wellbeing across the interwoven domains of body, mind and emotions, family and kinship, community, culture, Country, and spirituality (Dudgeon et al. 2020). In a recent survey of 33 social and emotional wellbeing programs, researchers identified the significant benefits and improved outcomes from holistic, culturally-grounded, community controlled health services. These findings affirm the ongoing need for community-led research, policy, program design, implementation, evaluation and self-determination in the delivery of improved health outcomes among Indigenous peoples (Murrup-Stewart, Searle & Jobson 2019; Harfield et al. 2018).

Evidence from Australia and other parts of the world shows that shifts towards the community control of health services are underway globally. First Nations communities are becoming empowered to manage health services that centre relevant social and cultural determinants of health and wellbeing, as defined and experienced from Indigenous perspectives (e.g. Auger 2016; Walters et al. 2018).

This is evident in the Inuit context in Nunatsiavut in Canada, for example, where transformations in the health system help ensure that health policy will respect Inuit claims that 'we have our own ways' (Sawatsky et al. 2019: 223). Canadian Government health policy is required to take Inuit health and wellbeing perspectives into account and support community control of services. Nonetheless, the shift to recognise and integrate cultural elements into health services does not always redefine governmental authority so that jurisdiction over health is owned by Inuit nations, or ensure that health legislation and policy is created and governed through Inuit political and legal agencies. While Inuit voices and cultures are placed at the centre of Inuit health policy, jurisdiction and policy directives may still be significantly controlled by non-Inuit powers.

Overarching control over health policy and legislation is similarly situated with settler-colonial governments in Australia. This can undermine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews, causing harm to Indigenous people, and limiting community self-governance. For example, in a Yaruwu context, Yap & Yu (2016a) note the tension and sometimes conflict between the cultural worldview of the Yaruwu people and the reporting frameworks of Australian governments. Because of this, it makes a difference who is in charge of defining and managing reporting processes and who makes the decisions on cultural wellbeing indicators. In Australia, the agency of a community can be empowered through local corporations that operate under principles of Indigenous leadership, but these are not in themselves considered to be the political institution through

which a community exercises self-governance rights and capacities. This means that settler-colonial governments ultimately maintain jurisdiction over a community's affairs. This can be seen, for example, in the statutory obligations of Incorporated Organisations, through which many First Nations manage their affairs (Gertz 2021). In this way, the potential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander empowerment through the ownership of services and service delivery is often significantly undermined by settler-colonial powers. The tension between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander empowerment and the approach of the settler-colonial government was seen most recently in the COVID-19 pandemic where settler-colonial government control was unnecessary and even potentially harmful. Whereas numerous remote communities showed themselves capable of self-governance to deal with the crisis situation in health and manage other urgent community service needs at this time, the usual process of policy mediation by a distant settler-colonial government authority put the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote places at risk (Mohamed 2021; McCalman et al. 2021; Dudgeon et al. 2021). When the funding model ultimately relies on external, settler-colonial government sanction, programs must inevitably satisfy the funder's evaluation criteria. As we shall suggest in the later parts of this paper, this is a difficulty that the 'nation building' paradigm seeks to address.

Crucially, having local control over primary health care and wellbeing programs enables communities to focus on the relevant social, emotional and cultural contexts that support healthy lives, as defined (for example) in the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People's Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing (see also Gee et al. 2014; Dudgeon et al. 2020). Recent reference books on Indigenous wellbeing (e.g., Fleming, Manning & Miller 2019; Carson et al. 2020) highlight the interconnected physical, social and emotional, intellectual, economic, cultural and spiritual elements of healthy lives supported by *strong communities*. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people therefore perceive social and emotional wellbeing as determined by a range of inter-related social and cultural domains,

revealing distinctive benefits of empowerment, cultural continuity and community strength (Butler et al. 2019; Gee et al. 2014; Dudgeon et al. 2020). This implies that social, cultural and *political* elements are interconnected in Indigenous holistic conceptualisations of wellbeing.

The World Health Organisation likewise understands the social determinants of health encompass political elements at play in the 'wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life. These forces and systems include economic policies and systems, development agendas, social norms, social policies and political systems' (WHO n.d.). Yet, this perspective also illustrates the tendency of health sector discourse to subsume political determinants within the wider category of social determinants. This is problematic because it can shift attention away from the distinctive political situations of Indigenous peoples who are subject to settler-colonial domination. Through colonisation, the loss of sovereignty and associated rights to self-government and self-determination remains a primary consideration affecting the health and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples. These primary political factors must therefore be addressed directly. This highlights how the political determinants of Indigenous health should not be viewed simply as elements evident within social and cultural frames for understanding the holistic quality of wellbeing; in fact, the prerequisite political status of self-governing self-determination is a foundational condition for Indigenous peoples seeking to create and sustain the culturally distinctive social conditions in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives can flourish.

Figure 2: interconnected political-social-cultural determinants
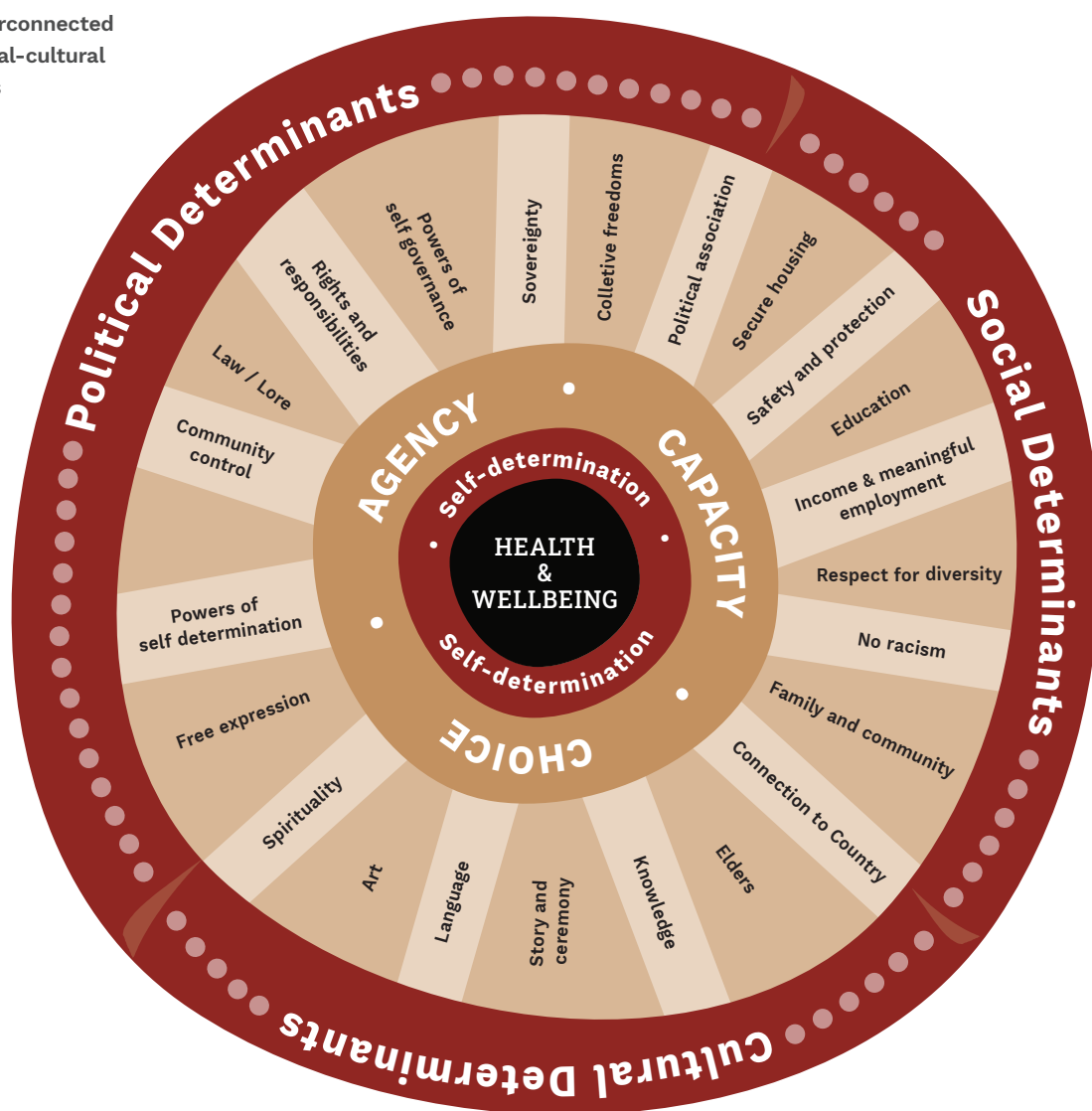
Advocacy for the return of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services to community control implies these understandings: that social, cultural and political elements are interconnected in Indigenous holistic conceptualisations of wellbeing; and that the political conditions of collective self-governance and sovereign self-determination are *primary* enablers of positive social and cultural conditions for health.

2.4 Political determinants of health and wellbeing

The World Health Organisation understands the 'unequal distribution of health-damaging experiences is not in any sense a "natural" phenomenon but is the result of a toxic combination of poor social policies and programmes, unfair economic arrangements, and bad politics. Together, the structural determinants and conditions of daily life constitute the social determinants of health' (CDSH 2008:1). Settler-colonial control, dispossession, institutionalised racism and the denial of Indigenous sovereignties are widely discussed 'toxic' political influences affecting the health and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples. While it is important to maintain a critical focus on these negative elements, a constructive focus on the *positive* political determinants is equally important, though far less frequent. In Australian public discourse, positive political factors considered most relevant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's wellbeing have historically entailed participation in the political processes shaping the Australian nation. These include equal access to citizenship rights, Constitutional

recognition, and genuine opportunities for the informed consent of 'stakeholders'. These are undoubtedly important political qualities that support the broad social inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Yet more important for our discussion are some less commonly acknowledged positive political determinants of health and wellbeing that relate to the collective exercise of self-determination, including:

• sovereign decision-making

• the ability to collectively define and pursue diverse developmental futures

• the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Law/ Lore to guide community life and maintain public order

• having own-defined institutions of self-government and associated powers of self-governance

• having collective freedoms of political association (including the freedom not to associate)

• enjoying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community control of services, and

• maintaining access to cultural property while also controlling external access to privileged information.

These political factors underpinning self-determination concern the authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collectives that claim to be in some ways distinct from the mainstream political body of the Australian nation.

There are good reasons to link such political considerations more firmly to programs that seek to improve health and wellbeing. For example, a recent study found that lack of political self-determination through loss of self-government and sovereign territorial status in the Pacific island of Guam is a distal social determinant of health, that is, a factor that indirectly influences health; and accordingly that 'cultural-political-social work' can promote health by advocating for the collective self-determination of a people (Diaz, Ka'opua & Nakaoka et al. 2020). Moreover, international research comparing relative enjoyment of political and civil rights amongst different societies found greater empowerment has significant positive associations with life expectancy (Garces-Ozanne, Kalu & Audas 2016). Research also suggests that increasing individual civil and political rights enables collective empowerment, which is needed as a foundation for Indigenous self-government. And, collective empowerment enables choice and access, improving the health and wellbeing both of Indigenous individuals and of communities (Bobba 2019; Litalien 2021). Furthermore, collective empowerment is needed to resolve the ongoing trauma of community breakdown resulting from dispossession and dislocation from homelands, and to successfully resist the continuing control settler-colonial states exert over Indigenous lives (Vivian & Halloran 2021).

The ACCHS sector fully appreciates that positive social connections and strong cultural identifications embedded in preventative and primary health care can empower individuals and communities and is mindful that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing is shaped by key political determinants. This political insight is reflected in NACCHO's input to the

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013–23 (Health Plan 2021), which for the first time includes Indigenous nation building as a key conceptual paradigm. This is a very significant development in federal government policy and reflects an important shift within health sector discourse. Indigenous health and wellbeing not only stem from positive social connections and sources of collective cultural identity, but also from strong political identifications and self-governance.

The following part of our discussion explains the practical significance of this increased political emphasis on the determinants of health. While it is well established that self-determination exercised by community controlled health services improves outcomes within Indigenous communities, we argue that further improved outcomes could be achieved by self-determination that is enabled through collective self-governance – whereby communities control all issues that concern them. Arising political considerations would include, for example, jurisdiction over Country, control over its life-supporting resources, and the power to choose and pursue economic development agendas that are culturally matched to the values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

We elaborate the core principles and processes involved when First Nations build their capacity for successful political self-governance; we consider how community controlled health organisations currently participate in the work of nation building; and outline the benefits of planning future health and wellbeing initiatives using the theory and practice of Indigenous nation building.

3. Indigenous nation building

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, scholars, leaders and citizens often assert that, prior to colonisation, First Nations were flourishing sovereign societies that were self-governing and self-determining. Collectives managed resources collaboratively and sustainably by engaging in relationships and trade with neighbour nations over vast distances. Social and political relations were managed through culturally specific but interactional systems of diplomacy, conflict resolution and the Law that comes from Country (see Black 2010; McMillan 2014). In other words, First Nations had rule-based systems for governance and government, which allowed them to live together in groups, pursue shared objectives, and sustain themselves over time. First Nations had no need of Western colonisation to make them 'orderly' or to 'save them from extinction'; the oldest cultures in the world had thrived for many generations without collapsing into chaos precisely because they practised effective self-government (Cornell 2019).

On the contrary, invasion introduced unprecedented chaos into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives: damaging or destroying social bonds; interrupting intergenerational knowledge transmission; dispossessing individuals and communities from the Countries in which specific First Nations legal, political and economic traditions originate; and ultimately imposing foreign political and legal systems that sanctioned such injustices. Indigenous nation building, or 'rebuilding', is an internationally applied, tried and tested process that Indigenous political collectives can use to regenerate their own cultural institutions of government, jurisprudence and jurisdiction, and so work to heal their societies. This process might involve First Nations reinstating earlier institutions and protocols, redefined for the contemporary context of settler-colonialism; or it might involve the invention of entirely new governance structures and political tools that a community agrees are appropriate for it at the present time.

The Indigenous nation building paradigm was developed through long-term research involving Native nations in the United States and Canada and has been applied and further elaborated in Australia and elsewhere. Researchers with the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development (Harvard Project) and the University of Arizona Native Nations Institute (NNI) wanted to know why some Native nations were so successful in improving their economic status, while others remained mired in poverty and associated structural disadvantage and poor health. The principal finding of the research conducted in North America is that stable political governance – the exercise of Indigenous self-governance enabling self-determination – is a foundational prerequisite for improving socioeconomic conditions. Capable Native nation governance has a direct, positive impact on tribal communities, and on measures of socioeconomic success or failure (Cornell & Kalt 2007). On the other hand, poor governance undermines the building of sustainable and workable tribal societies and economies. Despite different legal, political, constitutional and social histories and distinctly different contemporary challenges, there is striking similarity between research findings from Australia and the US. For example, in Australia, the Indigenous Community Governance Project, a collaborative action research project by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research and Reconciliation Australia which ran from 2005 to 2008, reinforced the Harvard Project's findings. It concluded that

'when Indigenous governance is based on genuine decision-making powers, practical capacity and legitimate leadership at the local level, it provides a critical foundation for ongoing socioeconomic development and resilience' (Hunt & Smith 2011:31). More recently, between 2010-2022, a series of Australian Research Council funded research collaborations were co-conducted by Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at UTS and the NNI, in partnership with individuals and groups from the Gunditjmara People and the Gugu Badhun, Ngarrindjeri, Nyungar and Wiradjuri Nations. They found that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations in Australia were creating decision-making institutions and processes of self-governance to effectively define their goals, strategically implement these priorities, and enter into beneficial partnerships with governments and other entities (Cornell 2015; Rigney, Bignall & Hemming 2015; Vivian et al. 2017; Gooda 2014). In other words, the Aboriginal nations participating in this research were seeking to self-govern in the same sense as it is understood in North America.

Combined, these investigations have generated consistent Australian and international evidence that effective, legitimate and culturally specific Indigenous governance is a crucial factor in the realisation of an Indigenous nation's self-determined goals. The research findings emphasise the importance of stable political governance, demonstrating that it is a crucial factor for economic development (Jorgensen 2007). In general, Indigenous nations progress towards their self-defined economic and community development goals when they exercise genuine decision-making control over their internal affairs and resources; that is, when they exercise 'political jurisdiction'. This requires them to have mechanisms of self-governance ensuring that things get done

predictably and reliably; be accountable to internal and external stakeholders; have cultural legitimacy within the community they serve; base their actions on long-term systemic strategies; and have community-spirited leadership engaged in creating stable political institutions (Cornell & Kalt 2007). Importantly, Indigenous nation building research emphasises that the 'fundamental challenge of economic development and social progress is a political challenge' where the 'ultimate focus is self-determination and governance' (Jorgensen 2007:1). Furthermore, Indigenous self-governance is not only a necessary precursor for economic prosperity but contributes to effective service delivery in health, education, natural resource management, and so forth (see Smith et al. 2021).

3.1 Five principles for Indigenous nation building

Five interconnected features are almost always evident in strong and vibrant Indigenous communities that are focused on achieving sustainable futures and collective wellbeing (Jorgensen 2007).

First, they are **self-governing polities**. The community self-identifies as a political entity – typically as a 'nation' – and makes decisions about the issues that affect it. The nation exercises genuine decision-making authority autonomously or in partnership with other political entities such as settler-colonial governments, with shared, overlapping and hierarchical sovereignty (Vivian et al. 2018). In relation to nation-specific jurisdiction or 'Traditional Owner' business, local, state or federal governments are the 'junior partner' (see Davis 2012). The evidence demonstrates that outcomes are better when Indigenous polities determine their own priorities and make their own decisions for their people as a whole, rather than for particular sectors of the community

or through separate service delivery organisations. Evidence from North America shows that Native nations consistently out-perform external decision-makers in areas ranging from crisis management and law enforcement, to natural resource management, economic development, health care, and social service provision (see Harvard Project 2008). Settler-colonial governments or other external bodies are less effective when they try to administer Indigenous community development than Indigenous polities which run these programs or enterprises themselves. Indigenous self-determination through self-governance works because it better reflects the interests, values, vision and concerns of the group that will be affected by the strategy, and not those of non-Indigenous government bureaucrats, funders or other external bodies. The nation can focus on what its own citizens think is most important. Furthermore, self-government increases accountability to the nation. When decision makers have to directly face the consequences of their decisions – positive or negative – the quality of decisions improves (Cornell & Kalt 2007; Hunt & Smith 2011). Nonetheless, being a polity and exercising self-determination is not enough alone; polities need effective and efficient institutions and mechanisms to make and implement decisions. That is, they must be self-determining in practice.

Secondly, self-determination cannot be achieved without **nation governing bodies** creating appropriate – and, ideally, excellent – institutional capacity. Indigenous polities must create governing institutions and mechanisms to make and implement decisions and strategic plans for the nation effectively and efficiently. That is, an Indigenous polity needs the practical capacity to translate decisions into action as it adopts a stable governing system. The polity must also then protect that system with fair and independent mechanisms for dispute resolution, efficient administration, and systems that separate politics from day-to-day business and program management. This can be especially challenging for First Nations whose traditional governing institutions have been dismantled by invasion, or have been eroded as a consequence of the settler-colonial denial of First Nations sovereignty. In Australia,

there is a longstanding tendency of colonial powers, including law, to deny that First Nations were ever self-governing, and so 'government' is often a term reserved for the settler-colonial State. Indigenous nation building reinforces to First Nations the understanding that they were self-governing before colonisation and can reclaim their original powers of self-government as a necessary support for genuine self-determination. Nonetheless, there are important cultural differences at play between Indigenous and Western conceptualisations of sovereignty and government. Whereas Western political philosophy conceives sovereignty as an exclusive possession of power and a marker of territorial and political independence, Indigenous peoples tend to conceive of sovereignty in relational terms of interdependence and reciprocity (Moreton-Robinson 2007; Dudgeon & Bray 2019; Alfred 2009). This is a fundamental feature of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal traditions concerned with obligations to Country that is the source of Law/Lore. As such, Western government tends to be imposed as a top-down operation, whereas Indigenous political traditions tend to take a bottom-up approach to governance. Yet the cultural diversity amongst First Nations in Australia entails that there is no single form of self-defined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander government that will apply universally across all peoples.

Third, then, governing bodies must be perceived as **culturally legitimate** in the eyes of the Indigenous collective that they serve, and must be reflective of citizens' Law/Lore, culture, values and needs. Their structures and processes must have 'cultural match' that citizens 'own', representing who they are and what they aspire to be as a nation. The nation's political approach, and its governing body, must correspond to its defining cultural values and norms – their 'ways'. Indigenous societies are diverse; each nation must equip itself with a governing structure, economic system, policies and procedures that fit its own *contemporary* culture. Ongoing legacies of settler-colonialism and the diverse aims and ambitions of Indigenous peoples mean that achieving cultural legitimacy can be complicated. For example, the exercise of Law and Lore and cultural practice

was prevented and disrupted when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were forcibly dislocated or relocated from Country under settler-colonial policies of land acquisition, social assimilation and, today, 'normalisation'. As a result, pre-invasion practices and governance systems might not be able to meet contemporary globalised and technological demands. Therefore, creating culturally legitimate decision-making institutions and mechanisms is not a call to replicate pre-colonial forms of organisation and governing. While cultural legitimacy arguably has tended to be treated as a historical artefact in Australia (Hemming & Rigney 2008), the relevant focus for nation building is on formalising governing arrangements that embody *contemporary* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of 'cultural match', in both the form and the process of governance (Cornell & Kalt 2007). Culturally legitimate and practically effective institutions are critically important to a nation's contemporary political identity and are equally necessary to achieve nation-identified aspirations.

Fourth, the research emphasises the central role of **community-spirited leaders** who can act as agents of change. Such leaders behave as *nation builders* (Begay et al. 2007a; Diver 2021). Public-spirited, community-focused leadership puts the nation ahead of individual interest or family-first concerns. Successful leaders frequently operate at an inter-cultural interface where Indigenous and settler-colonial governance formations come into contact and sometimes clash, requiring highly-honed political literacy (Hemming & Rigney 2008). Leaders are members of nations, who have been chosen in some way to represent their people, but they must also negotiate with settler-colonial governments. This means that they are subject to various – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – pressures with respect to their leadership. This complex set of demands may not be readily understood or seen by members of a nation, or by outsiders. Nation builders are accountable to different measurements of 'success', which sometimes overlap but often can be in tension. Effective leaders face the challenge of establishing the strategic foundations for sustained community

welfare and must impartially balance family and community obligations.

A successful response to this challenge embraces the fifth principle of nation building: **strategic and long-term decision-making**. When based in sound political literacy, this allows the nation to plan for sustainable futures and take steps towards creating lasting foundations for collective wellbeing. The opposite of this approach, as Cornell & Kalt (2007) explain, is short-term and opportunistic decision-making that is driven by external funding opportunities. Proactive, long-term and system-wide decision-making enables a nation to shift from responding reactively and narrowly to 'problems', to taking a broader 'societal' and future-oriented focus (Cornell & Kalt 2007:26). A nation building approach therefore adopts a wide lens focus, rather than following small, short-term gains. Strategic decision-making involves leaders thinking about how, when and where to assert rights and authority. This is not easily achieved in practice. It requires decision-making that uncompromisingly assesses whether that decision fits with long-term priorities and concerns, and may require putting short-term gains on hold. This requires an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander nation to have a firm vision and an established set of priorities to guide decision-making (Rigney, Bignall, Vivian et al. 2021).

In summary, a thriving Indigenous nation is a politically identified collective that organises itself in accordance with its own values and Laws/Lore to meet contemporary challenges and realise the goals its citizen members have set for themselves as a community. These key elements establish a common pathway for Indigenous nation builders to move through interrelated stages of:

• identifying politically as a cultural collective

• strategising to achieve the nation's purpose

• organising for self-governance, and

• acting sovereignly to realise collective goals.

This is the iterative and reflexive 'I.P.O.A' (**i**dentify/**p**urpose/**o**rganise/**a**ct) model for success in nation building, which was developed following an inter-nation summit of the Gunditjmara and Ngarrindjeri peoples in 2012 at Kingston in South Australia, and through decades of participant action research in association with Indigenous peoples in the US, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia (Cornell 2015). The model conceives of four phases of Indigenous nation building that are interconnected, fluid and continuous. Phases take place simultaneously and may also vary in sequence depending on external circumstances, and on the capacities of the collective and/or individuals and groups concerned.

3.2 The Indigenous nation building process

According to the I.P.O.A model outlined above, the first 'phase' of Indigenous nation building is **collective political identification as a 'nation'**. This essentially involves a local people defining, on their own terms, their collective response to a fundamental question: 'who is the "self" in our self-determination processes?' (Cornell 2019: 26). This phase is about group membership and cultural foundations. While many First Nations in Australia remain strong in their culture, a more politically focused cultural identification can be prompted when a collective finds itself needing to defend its traditions and/or land base from desecration sanctioned by settler-colonial governments (for example, this happened for Ngarrindjeri when the Hindmarsh Island Bridge development was proposed (Rigney et al. 2015)). Nation identification can result from the need for cultural knowledge and community coherence in Native Title processes (Ingram 2021). Or it can arise when a remote society understands it cannot rely upon settler-colonial governments to address its specific local needs or uphold its basic rights, and so the people self-identify as a political collective in order to take matters into their own hands. Or again, identifying as a nation can result spontaneously from processes of community-gathering and cultural revival informed by the knowledge of Elders and leaders; for example, through language programs (Murray & Evans 2021). Often nation identification involves all these things simultaneously: an external problem might require a community to band together to define and defend its collective goals in a crisis circumstance; they ground themselves and their goals in a strong cultural background that can sustain the group and its vision; and this results in initiatives and further actions that then take on a life of their own as nation building ramps up. Evidence suggests the 'identification' aspect of Indigenous nation building can create opportunities for the expression of cultural connectivity, with demonstrated health benefits (MacLean et al. 2017).

Importantly, while appropriate cultural grounding is essential for a First Nations identity, the 'identification' phase of Indigenous nation building is especially about identifying collectively in *political* terms; that is, as a 'polity' of some sort (Jorgensen 2007).

Having a **strategic vision and clear purpose** is the second 'phase' in the Indigenous nation building process. The collective must know its long-term goals. Perhaps more importantly, it must know that its vision represents the nation's aspirations as a whole, and does not simply reflect the aims of a minority interest group within that community. This second, 'purposeful' phase of Indigenous nation building involves the collective coming to know itself better through activities such as community outreach, citizenship forums and citizen surveys (see Wesley 2021; Yap & Yu 2016a). In knowing its purpose, the nation is better equipped to understand who is 'the self' at stake in its '*self*-determination'. As the nation's leadership comes to know its constituents better, its governing identity will become stronger.

The third 'phase' of Indigenous nation building then involves developing or strengthening the **institutional capacity** required to realise the nation's goals (Cornell 2015). This can require polities to rethink their governing systems by asking: Do we have the tools we need to effectively pursue our purpose? Importantly, the nation building framework recognises that each nation will have its own culturally specific organs, mechanisms and mode of self-government. These will be evident in the governing institutions and processes designed by and for the nation to match the core values of its citizens (Jorgensen 2007). The significant cultural differences between Indigenous and Western political concepts explain why Indigenous governance styles and values generally differ from standard Western models, although these are also diverse. Moreover, some do align quite well with certain Indigenous political practices (see, for example, Alfred

2009). However, the cultural diversity amongst First Nations means that not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will share the same governance values or structures. Some may opt for a federated arrangement of clan authority, allowing each family group within the nation an equal say in decision-making. Others could use their Native Title Prescribed Body Corporate as a basis for political representation and self-government (Petray & Gertz 2021). Still others might elect a Ministry from each of their key community organisations, which then become defined, for example, as the nation's departments of Health, Country/Environment, Culture, Education, and so forth. There are as many governance possibilities as there are First Nations. However, in each case, the nation's capacity to assume decision-making control over its own affairs is at stake. Importantly, decision-making institutions must have 'cultural match' if they are to be perceived as legitimate by their citizens. Furthermore, the organs of government must be capable and effective, and should be transparent to the community that they exist to serve: they must enable the nation to take action and not hinder decision-making; and they must have the support of the community they claim to represent.

'**Acting as a nation**' is often the 'final' element in nation building (Cornell 2015). Having consolidated a culturally relevant, collective political identity and (re)developed the political mechanisms needed for self-governance, a First Nation is able to practise the sovereign authority it claims. Acting as a nation involves strategic pursuit of priority goals, responding to problems and opportunities as they arise, and managing external partnerships so that they enhance the powers of the nation rather than threaten or detract from them. The general aim for many First Nations is expansion of jurisdiction over all areas influencing the wellbeing of the community, ultimately resulting in full self-determination through self-governance.

3.3 Nation governance is not corporate governance

Indigenous nation building shifts the balance of power back to nation control for the issues over which the community seeks to exercise jurisdiction. In doing so, it significantly changes the way things are usually done in settler-colonial societies (Cornell 2019). Rather than waiting for Indigenous rights to be recognised and supported by settler-colonial governments, which positions First Nations in the role of supplicants for recognition, Indigenous nation building is about communities taking charge of their affairs and creating the conditions under which their rights can materialise in practice. This refocus is important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, given the decades of settler-colonial policy failure to improve the disadvantaged situation of many communities. It also significantly changes understandings about power and responsibility. In essence, Indigenous nation building refuses to centre settler-colonial power as the authoritative source of policy solutions. Instead, it shifts public discourse to a conversation amongst First Nations that centres Indigenous initiatives and actions. At the same time, Indigenous nation building in Australia moves debates about 'reconciliation' away from the prevailing focus on the politics of settler-Indigenous relations, and towards the socially transformative possibilities opened up by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples governing for themselves. These important changes are associated with an emerging global Indigenous politics of 'refusal' and 'resurgence' (Simpson 2017a; Simpson 2017b; Birch 2018). Indigenous nation builders also challenge prevailing settler-colonial assumptions and political categories inherited as a legacy of colonial policy-making: they shift the focus from a politics organised in general terms of 'supratribal' or pan-Indigenous categories of identification, to a politics focused on specific, local nations operating as self-defined polities with the governing authority to determine their own futures. Local self-governing, sovereign nations could then form the foundation of a potential coalition of nations, to provide a federated Voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander polities in Australia. The Indigenous nation building framework therefore enables a stronger, independent conceptualisation of self-government, while still allowing for the formation of wider political associations. Under this thinking, self-government is not primarily about self-administration or self-management, but involves the genuine exercise of political governmental authority situated in First Nations polities. Nation governance is not corporate governance.

This crucial feature signals a challenge, not only to settler-colonial governments, but also to First Nations in Australia, where the colonial legacy (including the non-recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignties) has led to a 'tendency to narrowly focus on corporate governance principles, management and compliance, and where a limited conception of Indigenous self-determination emphasises service delivery, community consultation and organisational governance' (Behrendt, Jorgensen & Vivian 2016:27). It is clear some community organisations do play a wider community governance role. However, as Sullivan (2007:15) observes, it is crucial for First Nations seeking enhanced powers of self-determination to 'distinguish between management and governance', understanding that a 'developmental or service delivery organisation should not be conflated with an institution of self-government'. An exception to this would be when the citizens of a nation explicitly determine that their service delivery organisations constitute a political body that represents them. In fact, in the Australian context where the sovereignty of discrete Indigenous peoples with inherent rights to self-determination has never been formally acknowledged, Indigenous peoples have used community organisations to act as vehicles for self-determination. It is to be expected that such organisations would support a transition from corporate to nation governance. Generally, however, Indigenous nation building requires a shift in focus from the community organisation to the governing body of the polity; it moves from seeing the community as a service delivery population to seeing it as a collective of First Nation citizens; and it shifts from bottom-line accountability to external funders or non-Indigenous governments, to organisations being primarily and ultimately responsible to their

Figure 3: Corporate Governance is different from Political Governance

Corporate 'governance' Organisational management	Political governance Collective self-governing
Service population/clients	Self-defined constituency/citizens
Corporate board or organisation leaders make decisions for clients	Legitimate 'political' body makes decisions for the collective
Focus on 'programs' and service delivery	Focus on creation of public value for citizens/community
Leaders authorised by outsiders	Leaders authorised by the community
Scope of responsibility set by external parties	Scope of responsibility set by nation/governing body/citizens
Accountability to non-Indigenous government and/or funders	Accountability to community/nation
Dispute resolution mechanisms determined by outsiders	Dispute resolution mechanisms determined by governing body or community
Australian governments view their interactions as government-to-organisation	Australian governments view their interactions as government-to-government

Source: Miriam Jorgensen and Alison Vivian, in Behrendt et al (2017, p.28)

community, and to the community's own governing body. Separation between political governance and corporate governance also allows an organisation to fully concentrate on its statutory and constitutional obligations as a service provider (Behrendt et al. 2017).

We began this discussion paper by noting how the Australian political landscape appears to be moving towards the institution of local, regional and national Indigenous Voices, beginning new partnership arrangements and treaties between settler-colonial governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As this happens, there is a need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and communities to scrutinise the authority that they will use to renegotiate power in the new sovereign-to-sovereign, government-to-government, polity-to-polity format. All parties need to ensure the proposed new partnerships will foster Indigenous self-government, and not only self-management. This is a challenge to which we will return in the concluding section of the paper.

3.4 Indigenous nation building and health

It is clear that NACCHO and local ACCHSs have played and do play a vital role in contemporary Indigenous nation building. Community control of health services contributes to nation building by:

- strengthening cultural foundations in the community

- targeting service provision to community needs, as expressed by the community

- embedding Indigenous leadership in the corporate governance of health services and in health research partnerships, and

- successfully advocating to embed nation building in policy statements conceived in partnership with the settler-colonial State.

As a result, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2031 (Health Plan 2021) recognises the importance of embedding Indigenous leadership in 'national governance mechanisms' to enable 'cross-jurisdictional partnerships' (Australian Government 2021:9). Nation building is very significantly identified as a contributing element to improved cultural, social and economic outcomes and factors that are 'critical to holistic health and social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' and for enabling change through 'genuine shared decision-making and partnerships' (Australian Government 2021:23-24). The Health Plan 2021 notes the need for 'equal weight' in such partnerships. This insistence on political parity is vital as more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

nations begin to self-govern and settler-colonial governments begin to adjust to greater Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-identity and autonomy. This shift will also require some careful thinking around how service delivery organisations, regional decision-making bodies and Indigenous nation governments will interact into the future.

The Health Plan 2021 identifies the ACCHS sector and similar 'peak and professional community controlled organisations', such as the National Health Leadership Forum, as relevant leadership and partnership groups for implementing its goals through collaborations with settler-colonial governments. While this marks a significant departure from entrenched colonial attitudes shaping the Australian political and policy environment, these remain challenging for First Nations leaders attempting to reform standing relationships with settler-colonial governments. As illustration, although the new Health Plan 2021 includes significant mention of Indigenous nation building as a result of persistent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander advocacy, the precise political role of authoritative First Nations governments remains implicit (Australian Government 2021:10-13, 24). Similarly, the Health Plan 2021 identifies holistic health and wellbeing across the life course and attention to social and cultural determinants as foundations for a healthy life, but does not explicitly address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collective political self-governance (p.17). Vibrant and capable sovereign nationhood is viewed as an *outcome* of healthy Indigenous lives, rather than as a positive political *determinant* for health and wellbeing (Australian Government 2021:17). It is certain that strengths-based approaches to holistic health and wellbeing need what the Health Plan 2021 describes as 'collaborative efforts across the cultural and social determinants

of health'. The Indigenous nation building framework suggests these collaborations should also support self-governed self-determination. As international research by the Harvard Project demonstrates, these political factors are crucial for addressing settler-colonial dispossession and disempowerment, which is a main cause of the poor health of Indigenous individuals and lack of wellbeing in communities. The Health Plan 2021 rightly notes that 'laws and policies that disconnect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from culture have led to disparities in health outcomes and opportunities' (Australian Government 2021:18). Furthermore, our discussion has sought to illuminate how colonial processes and policies that have prevented First Nations from enjoying their *sovereign political power* and self-governance have led to community breakdown and individual trauma. The Health Plan 2021 emphasises the need for 'strengthening cultural authority' (Australian Government 2021:19) to garner lasting health benefits. We agree whole-heartedly, and have been arguing furthermore that improved health and wellbeing for Indigenous peoples relies upon strengthening *political authority* in nation self-governance; having a strong political foundation is a primary safeguard for communities striving to rebuild strong cultures. The inclusion of Indigenous nation building in a high level policy directive such as the Health Plan 2021 is hugely significant and has enormous promise for changing the status quo on health and wellbeing for First Nations and their citizens. In our view, the place of Indigenous nation building in the Health Plan 2021 and in future policy initiatives can be strengthened if the positive political determinants of health and wellbeing are given equal priority alongside the cultural and social determinants of health.

There are strong reasons for emphasising political determinants when Australian and international evidence suggests Indigenous nation building has the potential to strengthen holistic health outcomes and should be a consideration in social justice formulations (Gooda 2014). As McMillan and colleagues note, the 'right to health for Indigenous peoples is a collective right, which exists in a symbiotic relationship with the rights to greater self-determination and governance'; they are 'collective, interdependent and indivisible rights' that in combination attest to 'the need for healthy Nations in order to ensure the health of our peoples, and vice versa. The health of peoples and the health of Nations is thus symbiotic' (M. McMillan, F. McMillan & Rigney 2016:148,156, 157). The 'health of Nations' is the overall objective of nation rebuilding. The political process of 'identifying, strategising purposefully, organising and acting' as a self-defined polity necessarily strengthens a community's cultural and social foundations in terms of a long-term strategic vision for the cultural, social and political continuity of the community.

Indigenous nation building supports a strong 'sense of cultural identity' and 'intergenerational cultural connectedness', both of which are associated with wellness (Lowitja Institute 2020). It provides citizens with a sense of social belonging. Further, self-governance, exercising powers of decision-making, enables leaders to strengthen social infrastructure in areas where it is most needed by the community. Indigenous nation building is therefore important for achieving positive social determinants of health and wellbeing. Indigenous nation rebuilding consolidates the structural authority First Nations need if they are to engage as equals in crucial government-to-

government partnerships, including the successful transfer of responsibility for community health services back to First Nations control. In these ways, Indigenous nation building addresses the full range of cultural, social *and political* determinants of individual health and collective wellbeing. Nation governance is furthermore important for the successful coordination of services and programs across the community, which may cover a wide range of social, educational, economic and environmental services not directly concerned with health care, but which cumulatively improve health and wellbeing.

International research finds the overall benefits of nation-led self-determination include significant improvements in health and wellness (e.g. Carroll, Cornell & Jorgensen 2021). This is clearly demonstrated, for example, in outcomes by First Nations peoples in Canada and the United States, and by Māori iwi in Aotearoa New Zealand. Self-governed, nation-authorised initiatives such as the Carrier Nations Wellness program in North Central British Columbia, the Yappalli Choctaw Road to Health across the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, the Alaskan Native Qungasvik (toolbox), and the KaHolo Project in Hawaii (Walters et al. 2018), all report positive outcomes for health and wellbeing issues such as women's safety, alcohol use, suicide prevention, hypertension management and cardiovascular health. Behrendt, Vivian & Jorgensen (2016:14; see Harvard Project 2008:226–227) recount an example from North America, where the Mississippi Choctaw Nation has recorded a remarkable story of improved health and wellbeing from nation building leading to community control:

In the 1960s, the members of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians subsisted in miserable economic and health conditions. Nearly all tribal housing was substandard; 90 per cent of tribal members lived in units with no plumbing and 30 per cent had no electricity.

Life expectancy was less than 50 years of age, and the infant mortality rate was among the highest in the United States. Poverty and ill-health went hand in hand. With substandard living and health conditions and dependent on federal programs and spending that seemed to offer little prospect of improvement, the Choctaw government pushed to take over more and more management control of reservation health and has achieved remarkable improvements in healthcare capacity and outcomes.

By 1999, the health centre had seven full time physicians and over 240 employees, as well as an 18-bed inpatient acute care unit, a 24-hour emergency medical services department, outpatient and dental clinics, a mental health centre, a diabetes clinic, a disability clinic, a women's wellness centre, and a variety of preventative programs.

The immunisation rate for children was raised from 70 per cent in 1990 to 95 per cent in 1999. And in a stunning testament to the results that are possible, the average citizen's life span, which had been 44 years of age before the drive to self-determination began, was raised to 68 years of age by 1999.

Our discussion so far has considered how Indigenous people's good health and wellbeing rests upon processes of self-determination that have cultural, social and political influences; and we have outlined Indigenous nation building as a theoretical and practical framework First Nations can use to increase their capacity for self-governance that enables self-determination. We have also analysed how community-controlled health organisations currently participate in the work of nation building; and we have pointed to research and examples demonstrating the significant benefits to health and wellbeing from an Indigenous nation building approach that can 'restore the holistic understanding of health for our nations and their citizens' (McMillan et al. 2016, 148).

The final section of the paper builds from this foundation to consider the wide-ranging jurisdiction First Nations could employ to realise a 'whole-of-nation' vision of wellness and wellbeing.

4. Governing Whole-of-Nation Wellness for Healthy Citizens

For Indigenous peoples whose worldviews and concepts of wellbeing are holistic and relational, the separation between individual, cultural, social and political determinants of health is an artefact of settler-colonialism and prevailing Western ways of thinking. In the first section of our discussion we examined how the ACCHS sector has in many instances returned primary health care to community control and focused research on the cultural and social determinants of health. Now, we hope to show that an inclusive focus on political determinants enabled by Indigenous nation building can help shape societal conditions through which individuals and communities can thrive. This comes when holistic, collective self-governance is incorporated in frameworks for understanding and supporting self-determined health and wellbeing.
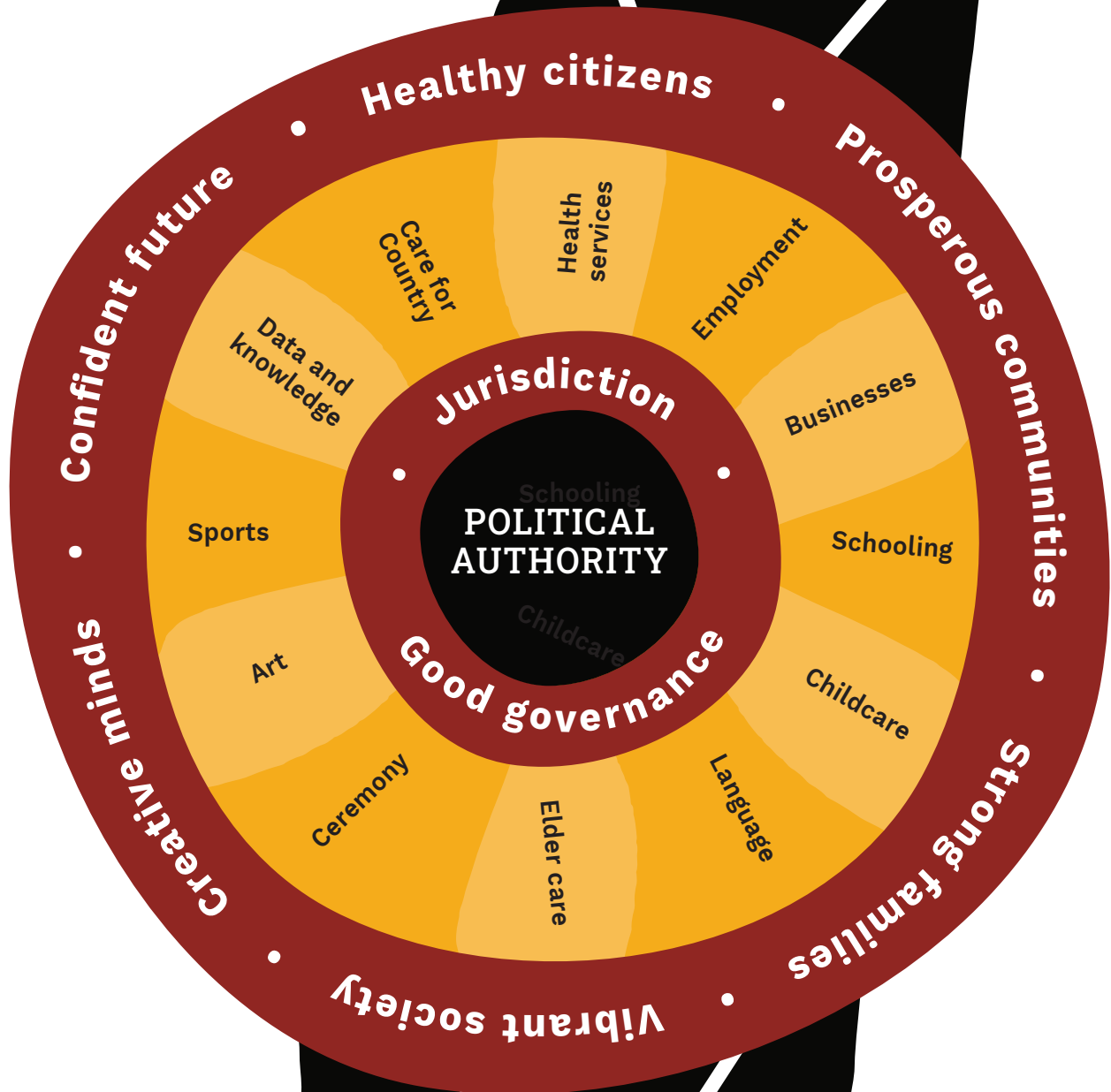
Building public health for First Nations requires multi-sectorial and 'systematised' responses (Mashford-Pringle 2016; Turner et al. 2019; Vivian & Halloran 2021). Amongst other things, these will:

- improve economic security and cultural safety

- provide access to appropriate housing and other infrastructure

- enable pathways to higher education and access to culturally relevant learning

- ensure legal protections

- guarantee food security and water sovereignty

- manage the resources of Country wisely in contexts of profiteering and climate change

- attend to diversity within communities, and

- address structural racism, discrimination and colonial trauma as causes of poor health.

These are system-wide governance responsibilities, and to realise them in a public health agenda requires overall coordination by the governing body of a political collective. For self-determining First Nations, they help focus priorities for reclaiming jurisdiction and self-governance according to the long-term vision of a people. As First Nations move towards better self-determination through increased self-governance, their leaders and citizens must decide which aspects of public life their governing body should assume control for, given the community's needs and vision for the future, and which services could safely remain the responsibility of settler-colonial governments. Thus, for example, almost all Native nations in the US prefer the federal government to remain in charge of the postal service to their community, while many want their own Native governments to have primary responsibility for decisions on primary health care, early childhood education, management of Country, policing, or Elder care (Harvard Project 2008).

In this section of the paper we briefly consider some (not all) of the most pressing matters over which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may wish to assert governmental jurisdiction, and we indicate some health benefits that could arise as a consequence.

Figure 4: Governing for 'whole-of-nation' health and wellbeing

Healthy citizens

Prosperous communities

Confident future

Strong families

Creative minds

Vibrant society

Care for Country

Health services

Employment

Data and knowledge

Jurisdiction

Businesses

Sports

POLITICAL AUTHORITY

Schooling

Art

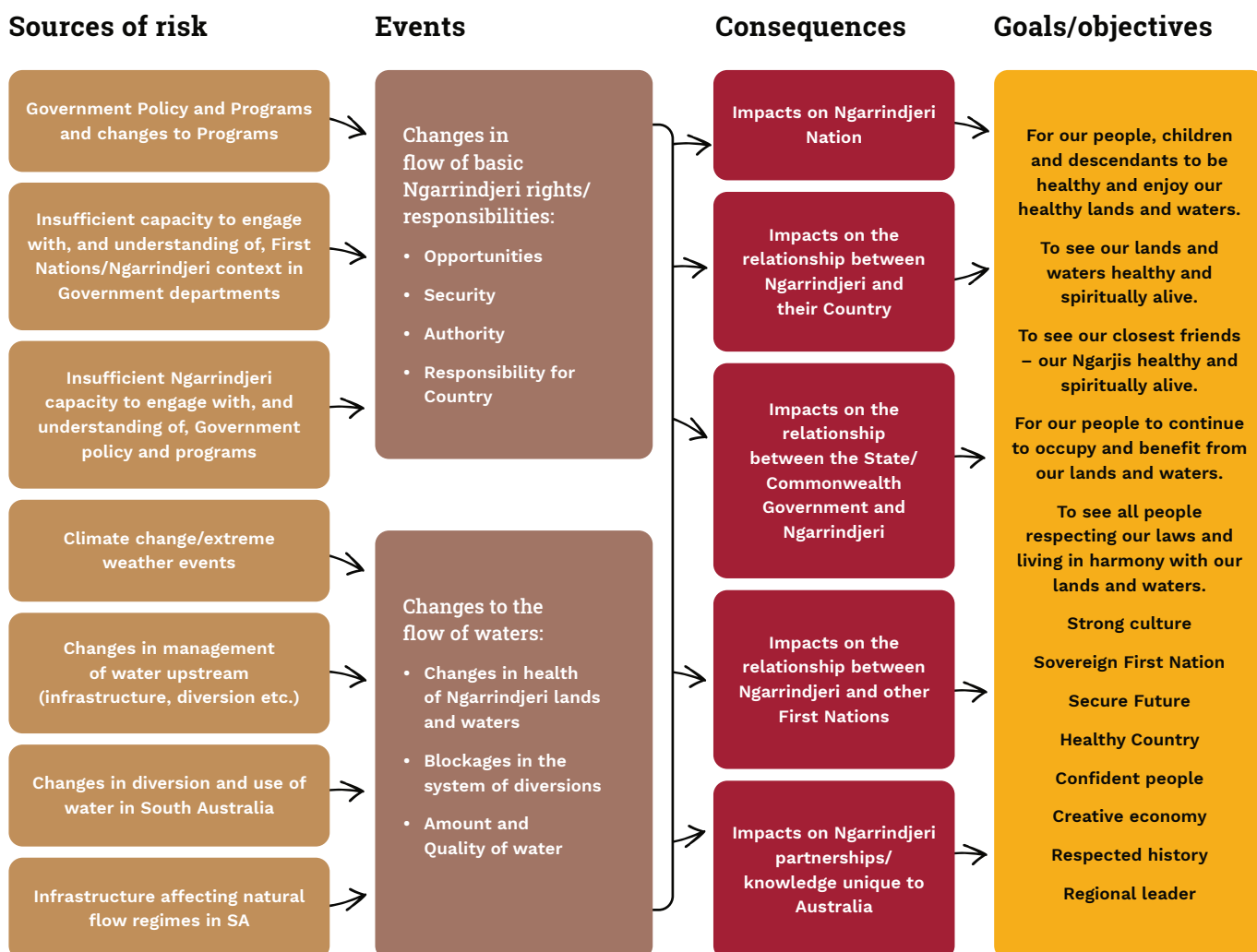Childcare

Ceremony

Good governance

Elder care

Language

4.1 Healthy Country, healthy people

First Nations and community-engaged researchers have long associated the health and wellbeing of Indigenous people with the strength of their connection to Country and Homelands. At the same time, they have asserted the environmental benefits that result from Indigenous environmental governance (e.g. Hemming & Rigney 2011). Often representatives of First Nations are considered to have a 'guardianship' role, but First Nations authorities are far less likely to be recognised in political terms as environmental 'governors' with rightful decision-making authority capable of

protecting Country and wisely managing resources (Reed et al. 2021). Yet, this kind of governmental authority and agency is absolutely necessary if First Nations leaders are to negotiate equitably with developers or settler-colonial governments who have plans for the use or appropriation of Indigenous lands. As a consequence of being Indigenous to a place, and because belonging to a place is core to First Nations' identities, including a healthy sense of self and wellbeing as peoples, First Nations do not only have a responsibility to 'care for Country' but also have the need to 'speak *as* Country' (Hemming et al. 2019). Risks to Country carry ontological risks to the Indigenous people belonging to that Country and

Figure 5: Ngarrindjeri risk assessment related to water resource management

The diagram integrates Ngarrindjeri cultural knowledge in a 'Yannarumi' (Speaking authoritatively as Country) assessment methodology and remains the property of the Ngarrindjeri Nation. Other First Nations may view risks to Country in different ways.

Sources of risk	Events	Consequences	Goals/objectives
Government Policy and Programs and changes to Programs	Changes in flow of basic Ngarrindjeri rights/responsibilities: • Opportunities • Security • Authority • Responsibility for Country	Impacts on Ngarrindjeri Nation	For our people, children and descendants to be healthy and enjoy our healthy lands and waters. To see our lands and waters healthy and spiritually alive. To see our closest friends – our Ngarjis healthy and spiritually alive. For our people to continue to occupy and benefit from our lands and waters. To see all people respecting our laws and living in harmony with our lands and waters. Strong culture Sovereign First Nation Secure Future Healthy Country Confident people Creative economy Respected history Regional leader
Insufficient capacity to engage with, and understanding of, First Nations/Ngarrindjeri context in Government departments		Impacts on the relationship between Ngarrindjeri and their Country	
Insufficient Ngarrindjeri capacity to engage with, and understanding of, Government policy and programs		Impacts on the relationship between the State/Commonwealth Government and Ngarrindjeri	
Climate change/extreme weather events	Changes to the flow of waters: • Changes in health of Ngarrindjeri lands and waters • Blockages in the system of diversions • Amount and Quality of water		
Changes in management of water upstream (infrastructure, diversion etc.)		Impacts on the relationship between Ngarrindjeri and other First Nations	
Changes in diversion and use of water in South Australia			
Infrastructure affecting natural flow regimes in SA		Impacts on Ngarrindjeri partnerships/knowledge unique to Australia	

identified with that Country. Accordingly, innovative First Nations governments including Ngarrindjeri in Australia, Swinomish in the US, and Mi'kmaw in Canada have begun creating their own evaluative frameworks to assess environmental risks to health and wellbeing (Hemming et al. 2019; Donatuto, Campbell & Gregory 2016; Lewis et al. 2021).

Such risks are defined by the First Nation itself, according to the potential impact on its health and long-term goals. A First Nation must have political authority and consistent internal governance if it is to compel external parties to attend properly to the risks it identifies to the health and wellbeing of its citizens and/or Country. Participating in policy development as a political partner with an authoritative voice is especially important in contexts of global climate change, which stands to have the greatest impact on First Nations communities living in extreme environments such as desert regions and low-lying islands (Birch 2018; Jones 2019).

Beyond risk mitigation, international research finds increased Indigenous participation in environmental decision-making and resource management is clearly linked with health benefits (Black & McBean 2016; Burgess et al. 2005). These are good reasons for First Nations communities to organise as political collectives with the institutional capacity to repossess stolen land or reclaim governing authority over Country (Hemming et al. 2019; Nightingale & Richmond 2022). Numerous studies across Australia's diverse ecologies show that symbiotic health benefits arise for individuals, communities, and environments when First Nations citizens re-engage with Country (e.g. Taylor-Bragge, Whyman & Jobson 2021). Furthermore, Indigenous nation building often involves the revival and authoritative use of place-based ecological knowledges, such as 'cultural burning' (Kerr 2019), thereby strengthening the foundations of a First Nations' collective identity.

Budj Bim cultural landscape

Nation building has enabled the Gunditjmara People to achieve numerous successes through a community-wide decision-making forum. Rebuilding their ancestors' weir to re-flood Tae Rak (Lake Condah), achieving a native title determination by consent and becoming a leading contributor to regional planning for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people all required stable, effective governance strategies delivered by the Full Group.

Attaining UNESCO World Heritage listing for Budj Bim Cultural Landscape (BBCL), a goal conceived in the 1980s and realised in 2019, is perhaps the most high-profile among all the nation's achievements and the one that most clearly illustrates the Gunditjmara People's deep commitment to self-determination and to regaining control over Gunditjmara Country.

Although nominations to UNESCO's World Heritage Committee are conventionally made by State Parties, in this case the Gunditjmara People took the initiative. Gunditjmara People drove the process, determined the shape and scope of the nomination, collected the necessary data and conducted necessary analysis; this was an exercise of self-determination and not a negotiated role. In fact, when it appeared that the Australian Government might not support the nomination, the Gunditjmara People was prepared to assert its status as a distinct and sovereign Indigenous nation and nominate the BBCL itself. Ultimately, the Gunditjmara People did not have to test UNESCO's admission boundaries. The Australian Government lodged the nomination in February 2018 and the BBCL was inscribed on the World Heritage List in July 2019.

Source: Rigney et al. 2022.

4.2 Strong Law/Lore

The protection and support of Country is additionally vital because Country is the source of Indigenous Law/Lore. At its most abstract level, Law/Lore defines the rules of proper conduct that safeguard and encourage the positive relationships and interdependent life forces that constitute a place. Expressed in the songlines and the stories of Country, with specific sacred knowledge often kept by Elders in trust for the community, First Nations legal traditions are maintained as living acts of jurisprudence that apply Law/Lore in daily life (Black 2010). Indigenous law is not 'irrelevant' or 'extinct', but rather is revitalised continuously through everyday practice and application.

Nation building can help a community to centre its legal culture in its own political institutions. This would support the role played by Law/Lore in binding a community together as an ordered collective that behaves with integrity. Being strong in Law/Lore is often not enough to stop over-policing by settler-colonial governments. However, when an Indigenous community is represented by its own nation authority that asserts jurisdiction and speaks and acts according to its own strong legal traditions, it can more strongly negotiate to increase community control over policing and criminal justice. Since First Nations' Law/Lore is essentially a cultural practice, appropriate learning and knowledge of the Law/Lore by a citizen body at the same time supports the 'identify' phase of nation building.

Research shows that Elders who are Law-keepers and educators play a vital role in promoting social, cultural and emotional wellbeing by imparting values and strengthening cultural identity, thereby building community cohesion (Murray & Evans 2021; Rowe et al. 2020). The important role of Elders can be better supported when this work is undertaken as part of nation building and a nation's own Law/Lore is used to guide all of its undertakings. For example, the Anishnabe Nation in Canada employs its political and legal order to strengthen its food sovereignty: grounded in their legal principle of *mino bimaadiziwin*, everyday practices of protecting and regenerating

food economies have resulted in the resurgence of self-governance and increased community control over nutrition, including growing and harvesting. At the same time, by reclaiming cultural food practices as political practices, the Anishnabe Nation has become stronger in its cultural identification and self-governance capacity (Daigle 2019). Observing Law/Lore can also have direct health benefits for individuals. An example from Saskatchewan in Canada suggests that Indigenous Natural Law teachings can promote good mental health based in the mindful observation of cultural ways, significantly reducing suicide risk amongst citizens (Mihalicz 2020).

Ngarra law painting

The customary law of Yolgnu people is Ngarra. In 2011 Yolngu presented a Ngarra Law Painting to the Northern Territory Government to show Balanda (white) people that Yolgnu law is alive and strong and is able to guide communities in the right ways of living.

The painting is a legal document. It tells the story of the honeybee, who flew amongst the people and brought them together to live in peace and recognise each other equally as subjects under the law.

As a type of Constitution, the painting is the highest category of authority. When Yolgnu speak in the presence of the painting they must speak the truth. The law is all-encompassing and following it guarantees discipline, respect, and peace amongst the people and in the Country.

Ngarra law shows people how to maintain their responsibilities and achieve peace, order and good government of Yolgnu people. Ngarra is about whole-of-society health and wellbeing. The law informs education, marriage, hunting, camping, looking after children and youth, domestic violence, community safety, trade, employment and crime.

Presenting the painting to NT Parliament, Mr Gurrwanngu Gaykamangu explained that 'Ngarra law can work together with the Balanda law, if the Balanda law will let it'.

Source: Gaykamangu 2011

4.3 Families

Recognising the ongoing impact of colonial policies that forcibly remove Indigenous children from families and communities, many First Nations want greater self-governance over child protection and family health matters (Paul 2016). Initiatives such as the Charter of Lifelong Rights in Childhood Recordkeeping in Out-of-Home Care, developed at Melbourne's Monash University, (Golding et al. 2021) are crucial for protecting the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Nation building processes can ensure Indigenous governing bodies have the necessary capacity and authority to enforce the chartered rights of their citizens when these are also subject to other regimes of power.

The strong cultural identifications and supportive social structures enhanced during nation (re)building can also help communities address family violence and enable healthy child and youth development. International research finds significant improvements to wellness when young people are engaged in nation building activities of environmental repossession through connection to Country, and when they are able to take on responsible roles in community representation, knowledge transfer and governance (Hatala et al. 2019; Lines & Jardine 2019). As stated by Auger (2016), 'cultural continuity plays a role in maintaining healthy and strong communities and families'. Nation building that revives, maintains and protects cultural knowledge can therefore result in self-governed initiatives and programs to support the extended family practices that are common in many First Nation cultures. Such programs can work across the entire system of services: from antenatal care and birthing practices, to postnatal

support and early childhood development; from nourishment to language acquisition and schooling; through ceremonial recognitions of life milestones and associated community obligations including Elder-care, sorry business and honouring ancestral connections (e.g. Gallagher 2019; Gilpin & Wiebe 2018). Indigenous governments can strategically orient their policies towards the long-term realisation of nation goals around collective strength, flourishing and confidence. For citizens, families and communities facing traumatic colonial legacies, this can provide a supportive framework for personal and community healing.

Noongar family safety and wellbeing

The Noongar Family Safety and Wellbeing Council in Western Australia takes a holistic approach to healing, incorporating autonomy and Aboriginal leadership.

The Council understands its role is to 'influence' and 'contribute' to child protection policies, legislation and programs that affect Aboriginal children and families, rather than to 'determine' and 'govern' such policies. However, because its core values and vision centre on culture, law, self-determination and autonomy, this Noongar enterprise is also in some ways an element of nation building for a self-governed future where Noongar children and families are healthy, strong, and empowered.

Source: www.nfswc.org.au

4.4 Repatriation

The return of stolen ancestral human remains and cultural artefacts from museums, research institutes and other colonial agencies can also restore dignity and bring healing (Fforde, Knapman & Walsh 2020). First Nations are required to exercise political authority and coordinated governance in repatriation efforts. The process of negotiation with powerful international collection agencies for the recovery and return of First Nations Ancestors and cultural items is highly political. It requires nation-to-nation engagements between an Indigenous people and the foreign government/s who are responsible for the collections in which the remains are now kept (Hemming et al. 2020). Repatriation typically requires extensive and expensive research to locate remains and cultural property that have been dispersed across the globe and are often stored in facilities with inadequate records and poor archiving practices. When Ancestors are found, further technical research using specialised equipment can be needed to identify who the person is, from where they were taken, and in what circumstances. When a return is successfully negotiated and agreed, the First Nations community must arrange financing for the transport of fragile and sensitive material; decide collectively where the remains can be kept until their reburial; and agree on a reburial protocol that is in keeping with their cultural traditions. This all requires funding, communication and coordination that can only be managed effectively at the level of the cultural collective, with the strong political backing of the nation's governing authority.

Haida Gwaii repatriation

The Canadian First Nation of Haida Gwaii is known internationally for success in repatriating Ancestors back to their homelands, and consequently for the outstanding diplomatic capacity of its politicians to negotiate good working relationships with foreign governments and cultural institutions.

Beginning in 1979, by 2005 the Nation had repatriated and reburied every one of its known Ancestors from museums in North America and Canada. Today the Nation continues to negotiate the return of cultural property back to its own Haida Gwaii Museum, and of Ancestors from European institutions and private collectors worldwide.

The program is managed by the Haida Repatriation Committees of Skidegate and New Massetts, who are formally authorised by the Hereditary leaders of Haida Gwaii, the Council of the Haida Nation, the Skidegate Band Council and the Old Massett Village Council. Repatriation is a whole-of-community affair, that must be governed sensitively and inclusively, by the appropriate representative authority.

As the Skidegate Repatriation and Cultural Committee explains, repatriation is also a Haida nation building activity:

"School children and volunteers make button blankets and weave cedar bark mats to wrap our ancestors in. Artists teach apprentices how to make traditional bentwood burial boxes and paint Haida designs on them. The Haida language has to be learned by more and more people so that the ancestors can be spoken to and prayed for. Elders and cultural historians teach traditional songs, dances and rituals.

Many more people have begun to look towards and embrace traditions that until Repatriation began, only a handful of people participated in. And perhaps most important, after each ceremony, one can feel that the air has been cleared, that spirits are resting, that our ancestors are at peace, and one can see that healing is visible on the faces of the Haida community".

Source: www.repatriation.ca

4.5 Data sovereignty

Self-governing First Nations are decision-making entities whose governing bodies need reliable information about their citizens if they are to effectively represent them, understand community priorities, and design policy for the pursuit of a shared vision (Rodriguez-Lonebear 2016; Rainie et al. 2017; Yu 2012). Indigenous data sovereignty refers to the right of a First Nation to govern the collection, ownership, and application of its own data (Kukutai & Taylor 2016). For self-governing First Nations polities, data may be politically sensitive and raise issues of 'National security'. Control of data by the nation is best able to protect culturally sensitive information relating to specific people and places (Hemming et al. 2019).

Indigenous data sovereignty returns information resources to community control and builds research capacity within communities (Walter & Suina 2019). This is especially important in settler-colonial contexts, where data concerning Indigenous peoples has historically been gathered and held by external governments and their research agencies, for the purpose of exercising control over Indigenous lives. For First Nations, data is a strategic resource that can drive processes of self-determination. Citing nation-driven data initiatives by Ysleta del Sur and Cheyenne River peoples in the United States, Rainie and her colleagues (2017) explain how it is essential that First Nations authorities are able to secure the data they need to determine a community's vision of a healthy, sustainable society. Robust research and whole-of-community engagement are needed to build community trust in data that is nation-produced and used by First Nations governments for policy-planning purposes. As Walter & Suina (2019) point out, 'Indigenous peoples are, and have always been, highly numerate in how we understand our worlds', yet the methods aligned with Indigenous research approaches tend to be 'qualitative'. Since statistical data often provide the primary evidence base for Indigenous policy – including health policy – the development and use of Indigenous methods of quantitative analysis can serve the goal of Indigenous self-determination.

Furthermore, local or nation-situated information repositories allow for better security in the regulation of access to cultural information and nation authorities can control data-sharing with external agencies. When data sovereignty is vested in the governing body of a First Nation, information can also be more effectively shared and coordinated amongst the various departments, organisations and agencies that operate in a community (Tsosie 2019). This, in turn, can improve holistic health when data inform health and wellbeing programs that 'expand across the whole system'; for example, Māori *iwi* taking this approach have improved primary health, including reduced levels of rheumatic fever (Jansen 2016).

Yaruwu Nation knowledge and wellbeing

In 2011, the Yawuru Nation decided to collect census-type data for its own purposes and to support strategic planning for the community's self-determined vision of its future health and confidence.

The 'Knowing our Community' survey marked a first step response to the Yaruwu Nation's Knowledge and Wellbeing Project.

Source: Yap and Yu 2016a.

4.6 Food sovereignty and water security

Healthy and sustainable food systems are essential for thriving First Nations. The international food sovereignty movement has been a force for Indigenous self-determination and decolonisation, emphasising the cultural responsibilities and rightful relationships First Nations have with their Countries (Cote 2016). In Australia and elsewhere, settler-colonial governments have moved towards population-wide policies to improve diets; yet recent research finds Indigenous-specific concerns regarding culturally-safe food systems and good nutrition are not well represented in these policy processes (Browne et al. 2021). Food sovereignty is indicated by nation control over production and access to food sources; trade; consumption; agricultural policy; and community involvement at all levels of the chain. Food sovereignty can increase self-sufficiency, build nation economies that are culturally grounded in traditional ecological knowledge, and ensure better access to culturally significant and nutritious food (Blue Bird Jernigan et al. 2021). Indigenous food sovereignty is supported by Indigenous data sovereignty, which can help First Nations build effective governance models that take account of the multiple factors affecting culturally safe and culturally strong (or 'wise') food practices (Johnson-Jennings, Jennings & Little 2019). Chief amongst these is the need to assert authority and effective jurisdiction over seasonally scarce resources that are shared with other communities (e.g. Lowitt et al. 2019).

Food sovereignty typically relies on water security; both are key governance issues for First Nations. In Australia, as in many places globally, water is a precious resource that has cultural, social and political significance to many First Nations. According to Indigenous ways of being and knowing, bodies of water cannot be separated out from the wider ecologies in which they participate and that they sustain. The interest of First Nations in water is not simply economic or social; more profoundly, it concerns identity and existence. Since Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples *are* Country (conceived as a complex ecology of interdependent life forms and other environmental agencies), First Nations polities claim the right to secure the continuity of water flows that move through Country and are needed for the health of Country and people (Martuwarra River of Life et al. 2020; Hemming et al. 2019). For this reason, water sovereignty is a matter for Indigenous nation building; only by asserting authority through capable self-governance of people and Country will Indigenous peoples be able to enact their social and cultural roles as guardians of 'rights to nature' (Argyrou & Hummels 2019).

Rivers flow across territorial boundaries including those separating settler-colonial states and the markers of Country that distinguish individual First Nations. Water sovereignty therefore necessarily involves negotiation with other powers across overlapping jurisdictions (Hemming et al. 2011). For example, in the Yukon Basin of Canada, intertribal collaboration is needed to effectively monitor water quality and ensure flows are adequate for maintaining river health. Local community-based monitoring by specific Native nations is an exercise of self-governance, which is needed to ensure a local collective can contribute authoritatively to collective decision-making for 'wise use' of the river as it moves downstream (Wilson et al. 2018). Also in Canada, Indigenous governments such as Muskowekwan First Nation have asserted their collective political right of self-determination to produce their own water policies that aim to ensure they have a law-abiding relationship with Country and a 'healthy relationship with the Creator', in accordance with their own Laws/Lore (Patrick, Grant & Bharadwaj 2019). In Australia, some First Nations articulate this collective political right through Sea-Country planning (Smyth et al. 2016).

Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan agreements

The Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority (NRA) in South Australia has developed a range of political tools for rebuilding Ngarrindjeri nationhood and enabling better collaboration with non-Indigenous governments, especially in natural resource management policy and practice.

One of the most important is the Nation's creation and use of innovative legal mechanisms known as Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan Agreements (KNYAs), meaning 'Listen to Ngarrindjeri Speak Authoritatively As Country'. These are culturally-grounded legal contracts that bind parties in mutual recognition of Ngarrindjeri authority. Among other things, KNYAs have helped the NRA establish leader-to-leader Taskforce Meetings for the co-design and co-management of policy affecting Ngarrindjeri Country. In turn, this has better enabled the NRA to exercise a decision-making and planning authority over the lands and waters in its jurisdiction, thereby more effectively exercising its sovereignty in the context of partnerships with the settler-colonial State.

As a marker of the success of this strategy, the Ngarrindjeri Yarluwar-Ruwe (Sea-Country) Program, in partnership with the South Australian Government, won the Australian Riverprize 2015 for delivering excellence in Australian river management.

Source: Hemming et al. 2017

4.7 Infrastructure, housing and place-making

Inadequate and over-crowded housing is a major cause of poor health, particularly affecting remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Bailie 2020). Accommodation insecurity (affected by institutionalised racism) is also a major cause of the relatively high levels of homelessness affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in urban areas. The history of settler-colonial government policy in this area is one of failure and neglect. Housing will benefit if localised decision-making control is returned to First Nations polities, and they are properly resourced to build the priority infrastructure most needed by their citizens. Discussing the similar 'housing crisis on Indian Country', Kunesh (2021) describes how Indigenous nation building can enable tribal polities to design, prioritise and operate their own housing and accommodation programs

according to citizen needs, resulting in structural transformations and sustained improvements in health and wellbeing. Housing designed by and for communities is more likely to be culturally appropriate, for example providing for extended family living. Important cultural determinants of wellbeing are experienced most intimately in the domestic spaces where key activities of life are centred. Local governance of housing and other basic infrastructure can more effectively support these conditions.

More broadly, the communal culture of many Indigenous societies suggests that having welcoming and culturally safe social spaces improves individual health and wellbeing, as evidenced in a study involving the Victorian Aboriginal community (Kingsley et al. 2021). First Nations are, of course, concerned to support the individual health of their citizens through access to culture; but, as polities, they also have a wider interest in providing and maintaining

Malahat community housing

Community housing is a high priority for the Canadian Me' le' xelh Mustimuhw (Malahat) First Nation in British Columbia. The Malahat government recognised that providing community housing is an essential service and that housing is an underlying contributor to community wellbeing. Housing supports health, education, employment, income and family resilience. Housing has consistently been a focus of strategic planning as a critical part of community development and a key component of community health and wellness.

The Malahat government undertook a collaborative approach amongst its departments in developing the skills of citizens to build and maintain their once incredibly poor housing. It created a program whereby eligible Malahat nation members could build their own houses. First, community members who were selected for the program undertook the equivalent of an Australian pre-apprenticeship program that enabled them to work as builders' labourers and commence an apprenticeship to build their own home. This developed community skills in construction as a means to meet citizens' goals of mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health. The initiative resulted in 35 full time salaried positions for

Malahat members, as a work crew able to support both infrastructure and housing services for their community and find employment off-site as professional contractors.

This project radically increased available housing and beautified their community. It also had the ancillary effect of citizen empowerment, self-esteem, healthier lifestyles and pride in their nation.

A critical (but unplanned) element of the program was the wellbeing support provided to the future home builder. If the person was unable to work on their home due to ill health, substance dependence, family difficulties or any other reason, building would stop but the program continued to reach out to them offering assistance and encouragement until they were able to recommence work.

Furthermore, having built the home themselves, homeowners are able to undertake maintenance themselves and the homes have been kept in good repair. This has saved the Malahat government significant infrastructure and maintenance costs and it is clear that the nation is benefitting.

Source: personal communication, Renee Racette, March 2018.

social 'gathering places'. These not only strengthen community bonds but can also act as citizenship forums for civil and political engagement. Gathering spaces for conduct of the political business of the nation need not be place-based or located 'on Country'. For example, Citizen Potawatomi in the US have created a virtual political community using digital technology, which allows members of the nation who are spread across vast distances to participate in the democratic processes and decision-making of their polity (Harvard Project 2008). Furthermore, the essentially *political* character of Indigenous nation building means that it can be applied by a culturally diverse local collective, so long as this understands itself to be a polity; that is, as a community that has come together for the purpose of self-determined self-governance (see John 2017; Nelson & Wilson 2021; Simpson 2017b). Whole-of-nation public gathering places enable collective wellbeing and support the health of the nation itself, by bringing citizens together so that they can 'identify as a nation' on an ongoing basis and thereby foster shared understandings of community values, priorities, problems and solutions. In Aotearoa New Zealand, in light of the specific cultural and social values that make a place 'most liveable' to Māori (Hudson 2016), some iwi in urban South Auckland are replenishing their 'marae' as gathering spaces at the tribal level, in regional satellite formations, and at the pan-Māori level (Lee-Morgan et al. 2021). This effort of 'place-making' for nation rebuilding and resurgent self-government enables the kind of multi-levelled conversations needed for effective sovereign partnerships amongst First Nations, and with settler-colonial powers at local, state and federal levels. Some marae have taken on responsibility for the provision of housing to Māori living in their area of jurisdiction.

4.8 Economic strength

The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development (HPAIED) was initiated in 1987 by economist Joseph P Kalt and sociologist Stephen Cornell, who wanted to know why some Native nations experienced entrenched poverty and associated social issues, while others shared inspiring stories of wellbeing. Such questions are as relevant today as they were in the 1980s for both Indigenous people and for settler-colonial governments, in Australia and internationally (see Colbourne & Anderson 2020). As we discuss in Chapter 3, stable political governance is the most significant indicator of Indigenous nation economic prosperity. In the US, Cornell and Kalt (2007) state that they were not able to find 'a single case of sustained economic development in which an entity other than the Native nation is making the major decisions about development strategy, resource use or internal organisation'.

Damein Bell and Aunty Denise Lovett speak about Gunditjmara nation building activities at the 2015 Inter-Nation Summit hosted at Lake Condah by Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation.

While the findings of the HPAIED have been criticised for imposing capitalist ideals on Indigenous communities, its research strongly demonstrates that wealth and economic prosperity is rarely an end in itself for Native nations, or for their citizen 'shareholders' (O'Regan 2019). Instead, the goal is self-determination and the freedom that it generates (Begay et al. 2007b:34, 36). Cornell and Kalt (2007:36) define economic development as 'the process by which a community or nation improves its economic ability to sustain its citizens, achieve its sociocultural goals, and support its sovereignty and governing processes'. They note that a common characteristic of economic development on 'Indian country' is the explicit concern with the effects that it has on the community: 'on the land, on social relationships, on culture and on the nation's political autonomy' (2007:38). Economic activities are adopted for quite different purposes, to generate profits to fund tribal programs or expand economic activity, to generate sustainable jobs and to provide for the cost of living (2007:38). Some nations must accommodate ceremonial obligations, hunting or fishing seasons or kinship obligations, while others do not; but all must accord with 'contemporary, Indigenous conceptions of the right, the proper and the possible' (Harvard Project 2008:2). Chief John (Rocky) Barrett describes the Citizen Potawatomi's economy as its 'freedom program'.

Ngaanyatjarra Council

The Ngaanyatjarra Council Aboriginal Corporation (Ngaanyatjarra Council) is based in Mparntwe/Alice Springs and represents the interests of around 2,000 Ngaanyatjarra, Pintupi and Pitjantjatjara Traditional Owners (Yarnangu) who reside in 11 member communities. Each of the 11 Ngaanyatjarra communities is an autonomous, separately incorporated body. The Ngaanyatjarra Council 18-member Board consists of the chairpersons of each community, four elected women directors, two non-member directors and the elected chairpersons of the Board.

The Ngaanyatjarra Council provides support to its member communities in myriad ways. It is the principal organisation in a large conglomerate of Ngaanyatjarra service delivery organisations and businesses. Its roles include:

- providing corporate services to the communities

- coordinating service delivery in health, education, training, employment, housing, law and justice matters

- providing essential services including ensuring the supply of reliable power and safe drinking water, sewage, and road and airstrip maintenance

- running financial wellbeing and capability programs, a sports development program, and land and culture programs.

It also owns a number of viable commercial businesses, including:

- a construction company that is the biggest employer of local residents in construction in the region

- a fuel distribution business that supplies bulk petroleum and lubrication products throughout Alice Springs and surrounding areas

- a camel company that musters and sells feral camels and provides camel meat to Africa, and

- a warehouse in Perth and transport company to handle the requirements of all Ngaanyatjarra Community stores and to provide them with a regular bulk delivery service from the warehouse direct to each of the community stores.

While Ngaanyatjarra Council's operations are principally funded by grants from a range of Commonwealth and state government ministries, its businesses provide employment to community members and support the economic viability of the communities that could not exist on government funding alone.

Source: Ngaanyatjarra Council www.ngaanyatjarra.org.au

4.9 Education and language

Education is a powerful force for the transmission of culture. But, on the other hand, educational environments and curricula that are culturally irrelevant can cause students to feel alienated and disengaged. This contributes to the relatively lower rates of participation and levels of achievement reached by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children during formal schooling. Whilst education is important in its own right to First Nations, the strong evidence that Indigenous health and education are interconnected (Mashford-Pringle 2016; Rigney et al. 2019), means that education is an area of social life over which many First Nations would like to have far greater community control as a way to enhance health and wellbeing.

Language revival and maintenance is especially important for many Indigenous nations. This is in part because language is so central to cultural identity, and also because living language comes from Ancestral Country and so attests to the unbroken connection between a people and a place: 'when we understand the place names, we recognise the land' (Amery & Power 2019:51). Land, language and culture are thus interrelated, with the maintenance of one helping to protect and sustain the others (Biddle & Swee 2012). In urban areas, people with higher levels of formal education are more likely to speak, understand or be learning an Indigenous language; and research finds a positive link between Indigenous peoples' knowledge of language and emotional wellbeing (Biddle & Swee 2012). Education, language and health are interrelated.

Language revival is a collective affair that can benefit from the kind of systematic coordination that nation-based governance can provide. A First Nations government that envisages a flourishing citizen community strong in language can embed its terminology across all its areas of oversight, as well as including language in the curriculum of any schools it establishes within its jurisdiction. At the same time, Indigenous language acquisition can be a powerful tool for nation building (Murray & Evans 2021). Education for nation-centred language revival enhances cultural identifications and strengthens social bonds. This includes intergenerational relationships needed for cultural transmission from the Elders who are cultural knowledge-keepers, to the young people who are a nation's future.

Aunty Lorraine Tye, Aunty Joyleen Simpson, Aunty Flo Grant and Uncle Jimmy Ingram describing their Wiradyuri nation building work and the challenges ahead. 2015 Inter-Nation Summit hosted at Lake Condah by Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation.

Wiradjuri Council of Elders

One of the most notable Wiradjuri Nation building efforts has occurred through the leadership of the inaugural Wiradjuri Council of Elders.

In the late 2000s the Council became frustrated that Charles Sturt University (CSU), a major regional university in New South Wales with six campuses on Wiradjuri Country, was insufficiently engaged with the Wiradjuri community. The Wiradjuri Council of Elders' position was that CSU did not provide sufficient support to Aboriginal people generally. Instead, CSU needed to show its commitment to the Wiradjuri Nation as the Traditional Owners of Country from which the university as an institution – and all its faculty, staff, students, and alumni – benefited.

This nationhood-grounded advocacy by the Council of Elders paid off: CSU agreed to help create and fund a Graduate Certificate in Wiradjuri Language, Culture and Heritage (GCWLCH). The course is open to both Wiradjuri and non-Wiradjuri students. Devised primarily by Uncle Stan Grant and Aunty Flo (Florence) Grant under instruction from the Council (with the assistance of Wiradjuri nation builders and non-Indigenous allies), the GCWLCH's four subjects – deep language, deep culture, Wiradjuri nation building, and community service – each have Wiradjuri cultural concepts at their core. Further, the GCWLCH is taught by Wiradjuri people according to the concept of *Yindyamarra* (respect), which embodies Wiradjuri sovereignty and self-determination and privileges Wiradjuri pedagogical practices, including multi-generational engagement, service, learning and connection to Country.

Source: Jorgensen et al. 2022

4.10 Crisis management

Effective and capable governments respond quickly to opportunities as they arise and deal with crises as they emerge. In Australia and internationally, many First Nations rose to the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic by taking charge of a public health emergency threatening at-risk populations (Mohamed 2021). Reacting to the failure of settler-colonial governments to adequately protect and provision Indigenous communities, ACCHOs at the forefront of the emergency public health response shifted their priorities and operations, and utilised their local networks to organise health and safety measures in communities. Indigenous communities also used innovative measures, such as social media and 'virtual gathering grounds' to maintain community connections in times of necessary social distancing. However, the notable absence of dedicated funding from Australian setter-colonial governments prevented many communities from enacting the public health measures they wanted to initiate (McCalman et al. 2021; Moodie et al. 2021; Dudgeon et al. 2021).

A highly effective Māori response to the emergency situation of COVID-19 pandemic was self-governed by a coalition representing nine Iwi of the South Island, Te Pūtahitanga o Te Waipounamu. This overarching governing body provided necessary resourcing while enabling local communities the flexibility to respond to the priority needs of their people. As a consequence, a number of these Māori communities reported better outcomes relative to non-Indigenous populations in Aotearoa, including lower rates of infection (McMeeking, Leahy & Savage et al. 2020).

Nation building to amplify self-governing authority and to develop independent nation economies can help Indigenous communities become more self-reliant, with increased flexibility for self-determination. Having a firm authority base also helps First Nations communicate and negotiate more effectively with settler-colonial governments in times when emergency resourcing is required.

Gur A Baradharaw Kod Sea and Land Council Torres Strait Islander Corporation (GBK)

While the Covid-19 pandemic health crisis has been at the forefront of governance activity in many Indigenous communities, the worsening global climate crisis likewise needs firm input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governments.

Many island-dwelling peoples stand to be most affected by the effects of climate change, when rising sea levels threaten homes, traditions and sacred sites. In 2019, the GBK supported eight Torres Strait Islander representatives to lodge a complaint with the United Nations Human Rights Committee against the Australian Government over its lack of action on the climate emergency. GBK, collaborating with Client Earth, also supported a regional political representative, Kabay Tamu, to attend the first ever global Declaration for the People's Summit on Climate, Human Rights and Survival in New York. It is crucial for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authorities to participate in intergovernmental discussions on the global stage, so that resulting climate action and policy takes into due account the specific risks faced by First Nations.

Source: Special Projects at www.gbk.org.au

In this section of the paper, illustrated by glimpses of efforts by First Nations in Australia and around the world to exercise self-determination and reclaim community-control and self-governance, we have indicated how Indigenous nation building can strengthen the political authority that enables communities to create and sustain the social and cultural determinants of self-defined health and wellbeing.

First Nations want to exercise self-determination and self-government over multiple areas of social life. We have touched on a few of these in this paper: own healthcare service design and provision, the development of community-based schools that teach Indigenous children their own languages and those of other First Nations, protection of Country through natural resource management, return and reburial of Ancestors, the development of culturally-matched Indigenous economies, and so forth – but there are many other areas for self-governance that self-determining First Nations might wish to pursue.

Overall, we hope to have presented a persuasive case for Indigenous nation building as a theoretical framework and a practical community-based approach to increasing self-determination. We maintain that Indigenous nation building can enhance the power and capacity of the governing body of a nation as a coordinating agency, bringing all aspects of social and cultural life into an overarching vision of success for the healthy future of a people. Nation (re)building has the potential to address 'the urgent need to restore the social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous citizens within our Nations, *as well as a focus on the health of our Nations themselves*' (M. McMillan, F. McMillan & Rigney 2016:152).

In Australia, Indigenous nation health could be set to improve if emerging treaty processes bring about new kinds of political relationships that enable Indigenous collectives to be self-determining with enhanced powers of self-government.

The final sections of our paper identify a set of associated challenges and propose nation building actions that could assist First Nations navigate pathways to self-determination in this context.

5. Opportunities, Challenges and Next Steps

5.1 Opportunities

We began our discussion in this paper by noting how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders calling for Voice, Treaty and Truth are driving shifts in federal, state and territory government policy to open up new opportunities for self-determination, creating the potential for enhanced community control and associated improvements in health and wellbeing. This pathway forward is clearly outlined in the 'nation building' agenda of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2033 (Health Plan 2021). Commitment to political partnership and regional decision-making by First Nations authorities is also evidenced in the four Priority Reforms of the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap, co-created by the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks 2020) and Australian federal, state, territory and local governments. These envisage 'formal partnership arrangements'; 'agreed joint decision-making roles and responsibilities'; 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities [enabled to] make informed decisions'; and acknowledge 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have chosen their own representatives'. The Indigenous Voice Co-Design Process Final Report, developed under the former Liberal National Party Coalition Federal Government, likewise outlines a vision of political partnership, potentially enabling the laws, policies and services that affect First Nations peoples' lives to be 'community-led, community-designed and community-run' (NIAA 2021). Similarly, by committing to the establishment of treaties, the state governments of Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory are moving towards new kinds of political partnership with First Nations authorities considered as sovereign entities

or polities. As put by the Victorian Government in explaining the Victorian Treaty Act 2018, treaties are made 'between states, nations or governments. This can include an agreement between Indigenous peoples and governments' (First Peoples-State Relations, undated).

Each of these policies has the political self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collectives at their foundation. They enable localised governance processes that can account for relevant social, cultural *and political* determinants of health and wellbeing. The potential for increased self-determination formalised through treaty accords, guaranteeing equitable political partnerships in policy formation, therefore offers a significant opportunity for the community-controlled health sector to build upon the foundation it has established and to extend its mandate.

5.2 Current, emerging and future challenges facing the ACCHS sector

The potential for peace-making, power-sharing and just settlement presents new political opportunities but also a series of challenges for First Nations. In particular, First Nations must exercise sovereign responsibility through capable political authority if they are to negotiate successfully for self-governing control over their futures. The prospect of treaty is worth fighting for, since the absence of treaties in Australia has been a persisting source of insecurity for First Nations leaders and service organisations. Without a solid legal foundation to guarantee the proper conduct of polity-to-polity settlements and respectful intergovernmental relationships into the future, ACCHS are faced with the ongoing unreliability of settler-colonial policy processes and *ad hoc*

LEFT: Professor Miriam Jorgensen from the Native Nations Institute at the University of Arizona delivering an Indigenous nation building workshop to Gugu Badhun people in Townsville. *MIDDLE:* Welcome to Country and cultural gift exchange at the 2015 Inter-Nation Summit hosted at Lake Condah by Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation. *RIGHT:* Ngarrindjeri Nation repatriation protocol Professor Daryle Rigney, Uncle Major (Moogy) Sumner and Dr Christopher Wilson. Image courtesy Royal Albert Memorial Museum, UK, 2008

funding regimes. This means continued sector uncertainty about whether the gains made towards community self-determination of culturally safe health and social services will last. Furthermore, in the absence of formal and binding agreements, there is no clearly defined or coordinated federal government process for returning more control to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, allowing them to consolidate and enrich the significant improvements to health and wellbeing enabled by the ACCHS sector.

To address these challenges in the absence of treaties, First Nations governing authorities will inevitably seek the support of the health sector as they progress sovereign-to-sovereign partnerships with settler-colonial governments. This, in turn, will challenge the sector to understand how it may best offer such support at local, regional and national levels.

While exercising self-determination in the absence of treaty settlements is difficult in itself, First Nations also face the emerging challenge of being

well prepared for the coming treaty negotiations and the eventual conduct of self-government and polity-to-polity relationships. In part, this challenge arises because the sovereign activities of First Nations leadership bodies have been constrained by the structures, processes, assumptions and policy language inherited as a legacy of colonialism. Breaking with this historical legacy is an ongoing challenge. The efforts of the ACCHS sector to create awareness of the specific cultural and social determinants underpinning Indigenous people's health are a case in point, and the significant achievement of this goal attests to the strong leadership of the sector in processes of decolonisation.

This paper has explained how Indigenous nation building helps First Nations address this set of challenges. By growing self-governance capacities, Indigenous nation building helps Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collectives develop the political literacy they need if they are to act sovereignly, and at the same time consolidates and strengthens the political authority First Nations leaders need if they

are to bring settler-colonial governments to the discussion table regarding the issues that most matter to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In other words, Indigenous nation building can help First Nations assert their sovereign authority base, governance capabilities and voice needed to drive Australia towards truth-telling and treaty-making processes. Furthermore, because Indigenous nation building is a holistic framework for developing and maintaining thriving, confident communities, it is a tool for achieving the positive social and cultural determinants of Aboriginal health and wellbeing. To harness the potential of Indigenous nation building as a preparation for treaty-making and a holistic framework for improved health outcomes, **First Nations governing bodies will need the ACCHS sector to engage in multisector alliances that support the broad agenda of nation building in communities.**

Ultimately, the current prospect of treaty raises the future challenge of effective self-governance that will enable First Nations to maintain the positive cultural, social and political determinants underpinning the health and wellbeing of their citizen communities. This future challenge includes having the authority and the governance capacity to hold settler-colonial governments accountable to their treaty commitments. As Rainie and her colleagues (2015) discuss, Native nations' experiences with community-controlled health and wellbeing programs in the North American context show that the existence of treaties does not end Indigenous governance challenges, but rather is the point at which the challenge of genuine self-determination properly begins. Native nation governments with majority responsibility for the provision of health care to their citizen populations continue to face problems of inadequate funding,

shortfalls in their own institutional capacity, uneven information provision and data-sharing, unequal citizen access to comprehensive health care services, and lack of trust that the State will not step back from its ongoing responsibilities towards First Nations as communities assume increased control over their own affairs. Yet, Harvard Project research finds clear health and wellbeing benefits arise from collective self-determination; and for the majority of First Nations, the challenge of self-governance is as rewarding as it is difficult. As outlined above, the Indigenous nation building framework enables a stronger, independent conceptualisation of self-government that is not primarily about self-administration or self-management, but involves the capable exercise of political authority situated in sovereign Indigenous polities. The research clearly demonstrates that collective political identification is a fundamental determinant of health and wellbeing, and is essential for successful self-governance. In this context, as First Nations engage in this political transition and begin practising self-governed self-determination for whole of community thriving, new understandings and structures will be needed to guide internal governance processes, interactions amongst community organisations, and other issues of nation jurisdiction.

This will **raise questions important for the sector to consider, including**:

- What relationship should exist between First Nations governing authorities and community controlled organisations?

- How would responsibility for different elements of community health and wellbeing be determined and allocated?

5.3 Next steps

An important next step will be for the ACCHS sector to grow wide appreciation of the notion that good health is underpinned by positive political determinants that authorise and enable the necessary social and cultural determinants identified in community-based research. This will capitalise upon, extend, and help consolidate the policy platform established for nation building by NACCHO in partnership with the Australian Government, expressed in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-31. As part of this action, we suggest significant benefit could result from a coordinated effort to **enhance political literacy within the sector**, for example by engaging expert facilitators to present education workshops on Indigenous nation building and political self-determination.

A second step the sector could take is to **develop a Charter of Principles or a Priority Framework for the Political Determinants of Health**. A shared set of principles would help organisations and community leaders to develop the understandings, structures and processes needed to manage internal governance interactions amongst community service organisations and guide intersections with the overarching juridical and political body of their nation community. Potentially aligned with the priorities outlined in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the aim of such a Framework would therefore be to support the governing authorities of First Nations as they progress sovereign-to-sovereign partnerships with settler-colonial governments. As First Nations transition to self-governed self-determination, a Framework such as this would likely benefit all community service

sectors including education, housing, business, and so forth. For this reason, NACCHO might lead the formation of a Charter of Principles that becomes endorsed widely by the Coalition of Peaks. A generally agreed framework for action towards political self-determination can thereby assist Aboriginal community organisations to **engage in multisector alliances** that support the broad agenda of nation building in communities.

Having this form of Framework in place could also assist the ACCHS sector to take a third step forward in the changing political landscape: to direct some of its activities towards encouraging the development of positive political determinants of health and wellbeing within its service communities. This step will primarily involve the sector **aligning its health research and policy planning** to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations identifying as political collectives to become stronger, more capable and confident in their exercise of authority. In this way, local ACCHOs will be better directed to support the needs of communities engaged in nation rebuilding, and will themselves participate as agents in the nation building process.

6. Conclusions

Through strong First Nations leadership and advocacy by the community controlled health sector, the current National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031 (Health Plan 2021) introduces a new concept to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health policy planning: key *political determinants* accompany the positive social and cultural determinants upon which Indigenous health relies. These political influences include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and decision-making in policy processes, equitable political partnership, and nation building to enhance local governance capacity for genuine self-determination. The Health Plan 2021 is illustrated by a star design, which tells a story about shared responsibility for supporting the cultural and social determinants needed for healthy lives, at every stage of life.

The vibrant and shining star becomes our purpose. When we work together with shared knowledge and support, the star shines bright, illuminating the way forward through leadership and decision-making. When the star is at its most vibrant, our communities are healthy, connected and supported, enabling all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to enjoy long and healthy lives.

The social conditions and cultural elements of health and wellbeing sit at the very heart of the star design. This discussion paper has sought to position the political determinants of health also in the heart of the vibrant star, alongside the cultural and social determinants that are now widely understood to be vital supports for individual health and community wellbeing. While we understand the political, cultural and social domains of life are interdependent and together contribute to a holistic understanding of health and wellbeing, we have further argued that attention to political factors should be a primary consideration within the ACCHS sector. The capable exercise of political authority by First Nations is needed for self-governance that enables self-determination, thereby securing the social and cultural conditions that underpin healthy lives and thriving communities. As is signalled in the Health Plan 2021, Indigenous nation building is an effective means to building community capacity and developing the kind of shared purpose and coherence that is needed when collectives work strategically to realise a long-term vision. Indigenous nation building is therefore an important and useful activity for First Nations to pursue as they strive to recover from colonial trauma, govern effectively for whole-of-nation wellbeing, and create healthy futures for their citizen communities.
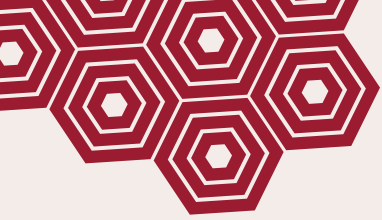
Figure 6: Resting on a strong political governance foundation that enables beneficial social and cultural conditions, Indigenous nation building is the thread weaving positive conditions for self-determined healthy citizens and community wellbeing

To extend current political understandings within the sector, and to facilitate the political transformations underway within Australia, this paper has defined Indigenous nation building in line with an international paradigm constructed from robust evidence gathered over many decades of research. We have discussed Indigenous self-determination and self-governance as positive political determinants that enable the social and cultural conditions required for the good health and wellbeing of First Nations citizens and communities. We have explained how Indigenous nation building supports these important political determinants of health and wellbeing. The implication is that Indigenous nation building, as defined in this paper, establishes authoritative pathways forward into healthier futures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. To take such pathways, leaders will have to bring their communities together around

a shared vision of health and wellbeing, setting strategic goals for realising the vision, organising politically, partnering effectively for the governmental capacity to reach these goals, and taking necessary actions to bring them into effect. Importantly, while Indigenous nation building is a general process that any community can follow, it is always based firmly in specific laws and traditions that are unique to each First Nation collective. This means that Indigenous nation building is non-prescriptive regarding the kinds of governmental structures First Nations should seek to re-establish, re-invent, or rebuild for themselves. This is only fitting: each self-determining people will, of course, follow their own unique steps to self-government and resurgent nationhood. If Indigenous polities manage this challenge well, then all signs suggest the future will indeed shine far more brightly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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ABOUT THE LOWIJA INSTITUTE

Lowitja Institute is Australia's only national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled health research institute named in honour of its Patron, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG. It is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation working for the health and wellbeing of Australia's First Peoples through high impact quality research, knowledge exchange, and by supporting a new generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers.

Established in January 2010, the Lowitja Institute operates on key principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, a broader understanding of health that incorporates wellbeing, and the need for the work to have a clear and positive impact.

The history of the Lowitja Institute dates back to 1997 when the first Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal and Tropical Health was established. Since then, the Institute and the CRC organisations have led a substantial reform agenda in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research by working with communities, researchers and policymakers, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people setting the agenda and driving the outcomes.

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