



# The Impact of COVID19- on Indigenous Communities

[The writer briefly explores the early days of the impact of COVID19- on indigenous communities and traces the changing nature of such an impact up until the present day]

On the 19th of January 2020 a man from Wuhan, flew to Melbourne from Guangdong as a result of which the Federal Minister, Greg Hunt, informed Australia, that 'Victorian and Commonwealth authorities will be undertaking "contact tracing" for passengers who travelled on this flight and to provide them with information and advice.'<sup>1</sup> A year later, a report by the 'Australian Institute of Health and Welfare'<sup>2</sup> stated that, up until the end of 2020, this first year of the pandemic resulted in the following numbers of cases and deaths in Australia:

- Up to the end of 2020, there were around 28,500 cases of COVID19-, with 2 distinct peaks (or 'waves')—one in March/April (affecting all states and territories with most infections being acquired overseas) and one in June to September (mainly affecting Victoria with most infections being acquired via community transmission). In 2020, the majority of cases were notified in Victoria.
- There were around 900 deaths from COVID19- in Australia in 2020 notified through surveillance systems and 866 registered and compiled by the ABS.
  - %89 of deaths were in Victoria and %7 in NSW.
  - The majority of deaths were in the older age groups: %24 in the 89–85 year age group and %34 in those aged 90 and over.
- By 20 June 2021, there had been just over 30,000 confirmed cases of COVID19- and 910 deaths in Australia

## And during the ensuing two years what have we learnt about how we, as a society, are managing this pandemic?

Not just in terms of specialised medical protocols, but, of equal importance, the impacts on the socio-economic fabric of Australian society. The 'Economic and Labour Relations Review'<sup>3</sup> specifically addresses the 'Impacts on First Nations Peoples' As this Institute has addressed in previous published papers, the Review makes the point, yet again, that 'susceptibility to the pandemic is heightened by poor nutrition and inadequate housing infrastructure'<sup>4</sup> And, similar to the proverbial 'broken record', the Review further reminds us that 'in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face health, social and economic risks.'<sup>5</sup>

1. The Australian Department of Health-Ministers Media Centre January 25th 2020

2. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 'The first year of COVID19- in Australia: direct and indirect health effects

3. The Economic and Labour Relations Review 2020, Vol. 31(2) 133-157

4. Ibid

5. Ibid

# Sound familiar?

They then go on to further remind us that ‘First Nations peoples in urban, regional, remote and very remote locations tend to be highly mobile, and communities are exposed to .... a higher risk of morbidity and mortality, and the more rapid spread of disease, if the pandemic enters communities.’<sup>1</sup> As far away as Ireland the plight of indigenous Australians has caught the attention of the ‘Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine’ In an article entitled ‘Culture counts: the diverse effects of culture and society on mental health amidst COVID19- outbreak in Australia.’ Once again, it is immediately recognised that ‘Remote *Aboriginal Australian Communities have been identified as a high-risk subpopulation in view of their unique vulnerabilities owing to their compromised health status*’.<sup>2</sup> The following map reminds us all about the geographical extent of these communities.

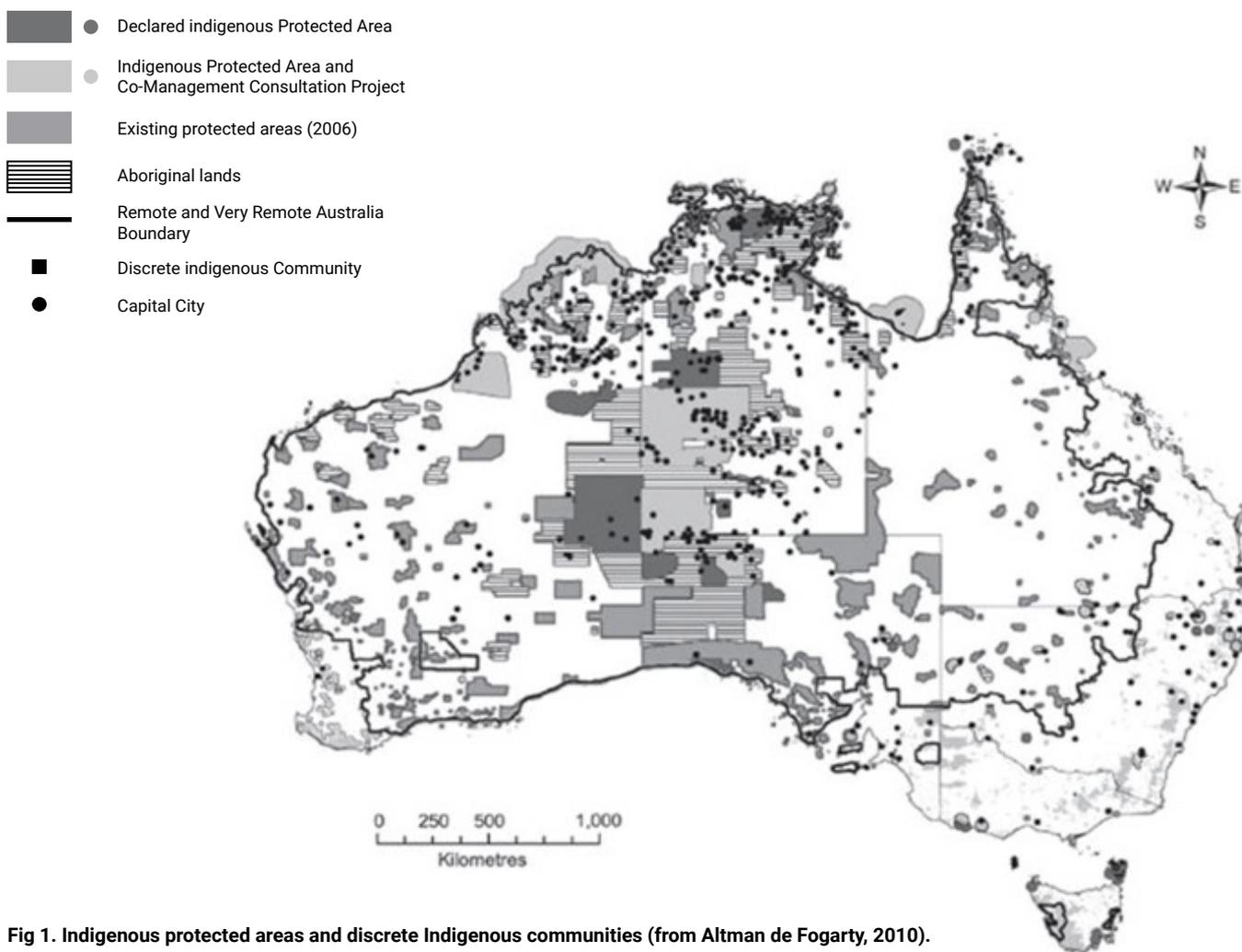


Fig 1. Indigenous protected areas and discrete Indigenous communities (from Altman de Fogarty, 2010).

1. Ibid  
2. Culture counts: the diverse effects of culture and society on mental health amidst COVID19- outbreak in Australia Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine, (2020), 37, 237-242



Returning to the previously referenced 'The Economic and Labour Relations Review' the authors strongly recommend that, 'an agenda going forward vis-à-vis the pandemic should focus on the 'National reconciliation: urgent implementation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart to give meaningful voice to Indigenous people',<sup>1</sup> thereby, hopefully, enabling the delivery of appropriate COVID19-treatment strategies in the context of the socio-economic and cultural aspects of not just remote indigenous communities', but also those in the urbanised sectors' of Australia. It is also necessary to point out the link between such socio-economic disparities between indigenous and non-indigenous communities' by examining how those disparities were reflected in Australian schooling during the COVID19- pandemic. In July 2020 Buckley, Flack, et alii produced a report entitled 'Socio-economic Disparities' in Australian Schooling During The COVID19- Pandemic ', in which they put the spotlight on equity in the Australian school system. It should come as no surprise that one of their key introductory statements reiterated, yet again, the plight of the indigenous communities. 'While problems were apparent across all sectors, the results suggested less advantaged students – particularly students from low-income backgrounds, students living

in remote areas, [and] Indigenous students [were] the worst affected.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in order to add some evidence-based research to the disparity factor, The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) for Australian schools Created by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), was designed to assess equity by comparing differences in student performance among similar schools. The Socio-Educational Advantage (SEA) component of the ICSEA score is derived directly from information in student enrolment records, such as parental occupation and educational level. These metrics (i.e., ethnicity, geographic location, occupation, education) are frequently included in indices of socioeconomic status. Educators working in the least and most advantaged schools in our sample had different, but overlapping, sets of priorities. Figure 3 below displays the top concerns of Quartile 1 and 4 educators. 'The top concerns of educators working in Quartile 4 schools were social isolation of students (%72.7 | n = 379), a decrease in student well-being (%63.0 | and learning loss (%46.6 | The latter two concerns, decrease in student well-being and learning loss, were among the top three concerns of educators across all four ICSEA quartiles.'<sup>3</sup>

1. Op Cit page 149

2. Flack, C. B., Walker, L., Bickerstaff, A., & Margetts, C. (2020). Socioeconomic disparities in Australian schooling during the COVID19- pandemic. Melbourne, Australia: Pivot Professional Learning. page 4

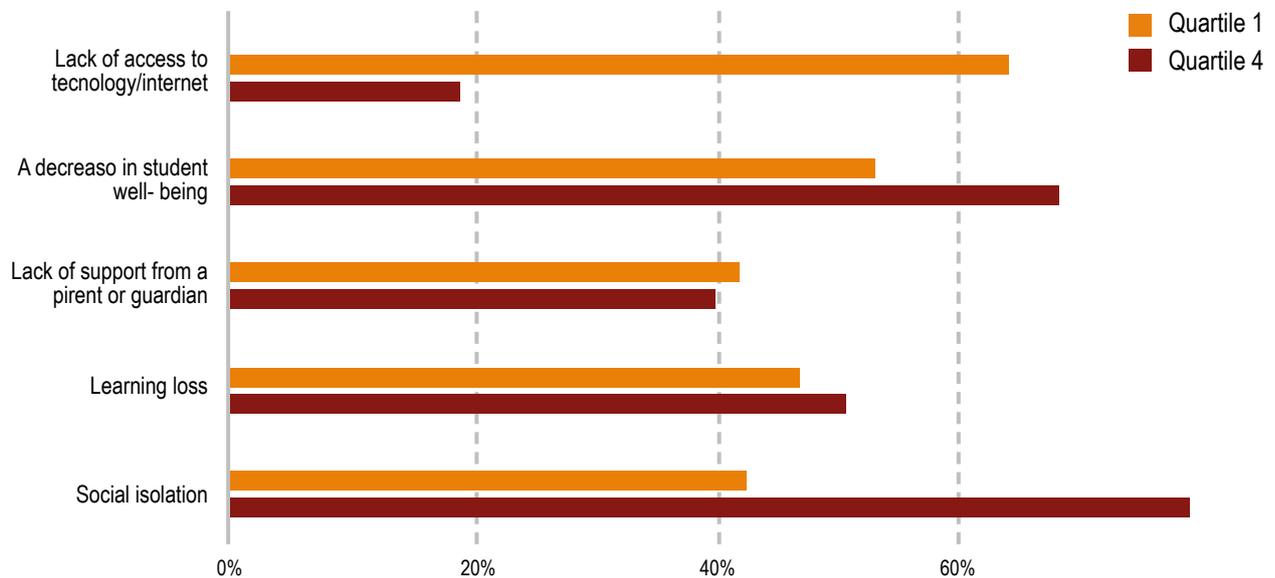
3. Ibid, page 13

**Table 3. Concerns about students by ICSEA quartile**

	Quartile 1	Quartile 2	Quartile 3	Quartile 4
A decrease in student well-being	%49.1	%53.3	%54.0	%63.0
Disruption in meeting learning targets (e.g., VCE, ATAR, etc.)	%25.0	%28.4	%35.0	%37.6
Lack of access to technology/internet	%59.1	%42.5	%28.6	%16.5
Lack of support from a parent or guardian	%43.6	%41.8	%34.8	%23.4
Lack of access to basic needs	%23.8	%12.9	%7.2	%4.6
Learning loss	%43.1	%44.7	%50.5	%46.6
Social isolation	%38.9	%51.9	%59.1	%72.7

**Note, Quartile 1 (n = 525), Quartile 2 (n = 503), Quartile 3 (n = 511), Quartile 4 (n = 521)**

**Figure 3. Top concerns about students, least versus most advantaged schools**



In summary, school closures during the COVID19- pandemic have laid bare structural inequities in Australia’s educational system that have persisted for decades (Baker, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, documented associations between socioeconomic status and student outcomes (Chester’s, 2019; Gonski et al., 2011; Kenway, 2013; Ludwig & Luke, 2014; Noble et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2011) were already a strong concern for stakeholders committed to realising educational equity in Australia. But, given the issues and concerns’ emerging from the impacts of the pandemic on our education system what can be done moving forward? The stated purpose of this paper is to focus on ‘The Impact of COVID19- on Indigenous Communities’ and so the following policy recommendations, suggested by the survey group currently being discussed, have been confined to the these relevant to our Australian indigenous communities.

It is pleasing to note that of the number of policy recommendations made (seven specifically) , were relevant to our Australian indigenous communities. In the preamble to the recommendations' the researchers' point out that

**'Given the socioeconomic disparities identified in our analysis, we believe it is imperative that policymakers turn their attention not only to strengthening schools' readiness for an uncertain future and teachers' preparedness to teach online, but also to addressing the basic needs of families in Australia's historically under-served and marginalised communities.'** <sup>1</sup>

The seven. recommendations are listed below with sections extracted which are pertinent to the continuing educational disadvantages of the indigenous communities.



**The seven. recommendations are listed below with sections extracted which are pertinent to the continuing educational disadvantages of the indigenous communities.**

	<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>Relevant Sections</b>
1	Prioritise equity by supporting students and families in low-income areas.	providing support for job seekers, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, given the disproportionate economic impact of the pandemic on their communities.
2	Address potential learning loss.	providing extra instructional support for the least advantaged students.
3	Implement initiatives to improve digital inclusion for lower-ICSEA schools and communities.	Digital inclusion is a framework that aims to close the digital divide, which is imperative for effective online learning.
4	Improve technology and Internet access for economically vulnerable communities	As stated,
5	Provide technology upskilling for students	We recommend that state and territory governments support technology training for students in economically vulnerable communities
6	Support the development of materials for culturally-responsive online teaching	Finally, closing the digital divide for Australian students requires equitable access not only to hardware, software and connectivity, but also to culturally-relevant content
7	Expand professional learning in distance and online teaching.	The disparities evident in our data indicate that the learning of teachers working in lowICSEA schools should be

1. Ibid, page 26

Briefly returning to the previous examination of 'The Economic and Labour Relations Review' the authors endorsed the reformations' made above when they pointed out that 'any consequent labour market reform initiated by the pandemic should ensure 'the inclusion of ..... First Nations people in meaningful and productive work ' <sup>1</sup>

It's all very well researching and presenting papers addressing such key determinants of pandemic management but

## what are the perspectives of indigenous Australians regarding these recommended public policies?

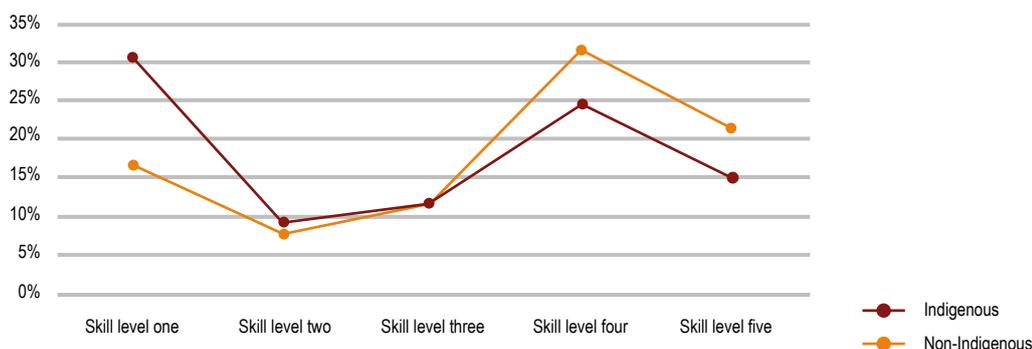
The 'Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR), Research School of Social Sciences, College of Arts & Social Sciences, at the Australian National University (ANU) addressed that very question in a paper entitled 'Indigenous Australians and the COVID19- crisis: Perspectives on public policy'. They begin by high-lighting the glaring discrepancies with regard to employment opportunities for indigenous Australians beginning with the observation that 'Indigenous workers will fare worse than other Australians during and following the COVID19- crisis given that their jobs are more concentrated in casual and low-skilled jobs. <sup>2</sup> Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the table and figure below:

**Table 1. Workforce distribution by broad occupation and Indigenous status, 2016**

	Indigenous %	Non-Indigenous %
Managers	7.3	13.2
Professionals	14.0	22.7
Technicians and Trades Workers	13.9	14.1
Community and Personal Service Workers	1.17	10.9
Clerical and Administrative Workers	13.5	13.7
Sales Workers	9.2	9.5
Machinery Operators and Drivers	9.3	6.4
Labourers	15.6	9.3

Source: 2016 Census TableBuilder (ABS. 2019a).

**Figure 1. Workforce distribution by occupational skill level, classified according to ANZSCO, 2016**



1. Op Cit page 49

2. Indigenous Australians and The Covid19- Crisis: Perspectives on Public Policy, Australian National University p 2

Our indigenous communities are further disadvantaged with the observation that, given pandemic related impositions such as 'social distancing', there is an increasing preference for automation. and, once again, the indigenous communities take a hit, as is pointed out: 'low-skill and routine jobs, which provide livelihoods to a significant share of the Indigenous workforce, are likely to be those which are automated out of existence'.<sup>1</sup>



## SO, IS THERE A WAY FORWARD?

The Economic and Labour Relations Review' suggests that there is. They maintain there is a need for a 'transformational policy agenda' which comprises two key policy drivers'. They are as follows: firstly, that all government jurisdictions re-engage in the examination and improvement of the indigenous labour markets. While acknowledging that improvement in education levels is a factor in the upwards mobility of the indigenous workforce the immediate issue is concerned with the creation and maintenance of employment opportunities within their own indigenous communities. As is so aptly stated by the writers 'any genuine attempt to increase Indigenous employment must also engage with the challenge of creating remunerated activities that Indigenous people are ready and able to undertake, in the places where they live'<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the writers further argue that the COVID19- incentives, such as job-seeker/job-keeper, should be integrated into the current social security system. They contend that this would especially benefit indigenous workers in that it would provide alternative pathways for work in aged care and cultural support programmes. The fact that, during a recession, such as that caused by the pandemic, 'indigenous people are among those who suffer the most'<sup>3</sup>. In conclusion the writers warn that 'without such a transformational policy agenda, the economic situation of Indigenous people is likely to languish for decades to come'<sup>4</sup>.

Let us now turn our attention to the plight of indigenous health staff, faced as they are with heavy workloads, poorly documented roles and responsibilities, and low salary. In the context of COVID19- the importance of having a strongly supported Indigenous health workforce is clear. More thinking needs to be done to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health professionals can continue to provide the best care for individuals and communities. One immediate risk is to the small staff numbers in remote communities: 'if staff become infected, entire communities may be without health services'<sup>5</sup>. Two further potential risks arising from the COVID19- response are beginning to be voiced by those working in the sector.

1. Ibid page 4
2. Ibid pages 9 & 8
3. Ibid page 9
4. Ibid, page 9
5. Finlay, 2020

The Commonwealth's COVID19- Operational Plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Populations (Commonwealth of Australia 2020) includes a stated focus on engagement with local Aboriginal Health Practitioners, Aboriginal Health Workers, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public health workforce and 'a directive that this workforce be provided access to online training offered by the Commonwealth.'<sup>1</sup>

## How has the pandemic impacted our remote indigenous communities, specifically within the education sector?

The table below, addressing the 'achievement of Year 3 students in reading, tabulated by Indigenous status; remoteness; and state and territory' was published in 2019, and illustrates the glaring discrepancy between remote and urbanised communities. For example, in the column registering reading performance at or above the national minimum standard, 'Major Cities' score nearly %90 compared to nearly %50 in remote indigenous communities and a very concerning %27 in very remote communities. It should also be noted that due to the closing of schools and deferment to home-based on-line learning 'educators are worried that they cannot facilitate the resources and capabilities for families to provide home schooling' with the concurrent observation that 'the capacity for parents and guardians to help deliver home schooling is also questionable.'<sup>2</sup>

**Table 2. Achievement of Year 3 students in reading, by Indigenous status, by remoteness, state and territory, 2019.**

Statal/ Territory	Remoteness	Mean scale score	Below national minimum standard %		At national minimum standard %	Above national minimum standard %				At or above national minimum standard %
			Exempt	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6 and above	
NT	Outer	336.2	5.8	19.8	24.1	20.1	16.9	9.2	4.0	74.4
	Regional									
NT	Remote	271.3	7.0	43.7	19.0	12.0	10.0	5.9	2.3	49.3
NT	Very Remote	211.5	0.7	72.0	17.0	6.0	2.7	1.1	0.5	27.2
Aust	Major Cities	377.9	2.8	7.5	19.3	21.1	21.6	17.0	10.6	89.6
Aust	Inner	372.6	3.0	8.0	20.7	22.2	20.8	16.3	9.0	89.0
	Regional									
Aust	Outer	355.9	2.9	11.7	24.0	23.4	19.9	12.2	6.0	85.5
	Regional									
Aust	Remote	315.1	3.2	25.9	29.1	18.7	11.8	7.6	3.7	70.9
Aust	Very Remote	261.5	1.6	49.9	27.0	12.0	5.8	2.5	1.2	48.4

Source: Reproduced from Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2019, p. 4)

1. Op.Cit. page 20

2. Ibid page 22

Michael Dillon, a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University, researched and presented a paper entitled 'Post-crisis reconstruction: The case for an Indigenous-specific policy response' and the conclusions and recommendations' in the body of the paper merit some detailed examination at this point. Dillon does not hold back when he emphasises two underpinning propositions. He introduces these propositions with a caveat, that 'policymakers have a duty to consider a range of scenarios for the immediate future, including scenarios where the health consequences and economic costs are deep and long lasting'.<sup>1</sup>

## THE TWO PROPOSITIONS ARE AS LISTED IN THE TABLE BELOW:

<b>Proposition 1</b>	First, while we may hope for the best, prudent public policymaking should plan for the worst.
<b>Proposition 2</b>	Second, in the current crisis, Indigenous citizens and communities are particularly vulnerable and have unique needs and aspirations

While it is acknowledged that there is an argument that the Australian Government should adopt a national approach and 'establish a mainstream post-crisis institutional mechanism'<sup>2</sup>, yet there is a strong case for establishing within, or alongside, the mainstream institution a separate Indigenous-oriented mechanism. The reason is that 'First Nations citizens are not only particularly vulnerable to the crisis, 'exacerbated by the ongoing impact of exclusionary institutions'<sup>3</sup> but that they will have unique needs and aspirations for post-crisis reconstruction.

*Consequently 'the pre-existing circumstances of First Nations citizens, and the likelihood that the impact of the crisis will fall more heavily, more deeply, and for longer on First Nations citizens, suggests that an Indigenous-specific policy initiative is justified.'*<sup>4</sup>

Now let's see what such a post-crisis indigenous focused institutional mechanism might look like. Dillon is adamant that the actual structure established should initially 'by administrative fiat, but ultimately by statute, with executive powers and capabilities). Furthermore, Dillon is committed to a majority Indigenous Board appointed for their expertise. He also reminds us that there may be some other government representatives' and public servants with specialised and relevant skills-sets. The key elements of this proposed indigenous institutional mechanism are as listed next page:



1. Post-crisis reconstruction: The case for an Indigenous-specific policy response Michael Dillon page 26

2. Ibid page 27

3. 'Westbury & Dillon 2019

4. Op Cit page 27

1	a majority Indigenous Board appointed for their expertise, but also some representatives of the Executive and possibly the Parliament;	2	strong transparency obligations;
3	a membership that is demonstrably bipartisan or apolitical;	4	a finite five-year plus five-year term (i.e. a legislated sunset after 10 years);
5	access to financial resources comparable to the level of need to be targeted (my provisional estimate would be 20\$ billion over 10 years)	6	a remit that ensures its focus is primarily on addressing tangible needs and consequences arising from the crisis, whether they be social determinants of health and wellbeing, economic opportunities, or cultural and environmental opportunities; an
7	powers designed to facilitate accessing private sector sources of cofinance where circumstances allow (e.g. housing finance);	8	an overarching objective to counter pre-existing exclusion and deliver greater inclusion to First Nations citizens.
9	an explicit remit to work with, and provide funding to, existing entities in the public sector at both Commonwealth, state and territory levels, as well as to existing Indigenous organisations;	10	report to the Parliament annually on the performance of the agency/corporation in addressing its legislated objectives;
11	statutorily guaranteed independence from the government of the day;	12	review the operation of the agency with a view to suggesting potential design changes to improve performance after two years; and
13	robust accountability to Parliament;	14	suggest (but not appoint) potential board members as required.

# SO, WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

Well, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID19- (Taskforce) was formed in March 2020 to develop and deliver a National Management Plan to protect communities. It is this plan which we will examine in terms of the overall theme of this paper, that is, 'The Impact of COVID19- on Indigenous Communities'. Although not a direct replica of Dillon's structural elements discussed earlier the Management Plan has adopted 'guiding principles, context, key issues and targeted action for planning, response and management for COVID19- that need to underpin all engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in tandem with a culturally-aware approach to both the design and development of the plan.<sup>1</sup> The first part of the two-part plan addresses *'the guiding principles, context, key issues and targeted action for planning, response and management for COVID19-'* that need to underpin all engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Moving on to the second part, this *'is directed at health care professionals working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander* communities and peoples to support the development and implementation of local operational plans.

1. Management Plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations

What is interesting to note is the plan’s engagement with other institutional structures They have ear-marked six key institutional structures as listed in the table below:

1. CDNA, which provides leadership in surveillance, the analysis of epidemiological information and strategies related to the management of communicable disease;	2. National Immunisation Committee, which provides leadership in guiding the implementation of immunisation measures;
3. Public Health Laboratory Network (PHLN), which provides leadership in guiding human health microbiology and laboratory practice	4. Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation, which provides technical advice on immunisation issues
5. National Surveillance Committee (standing committee under CDNA), which provides leadership in guiding the implementation of COVID19- surveillance activities and strategies;	6. Chief Human Biosecurity Officers who will provide advice to Australia’s Chief Medical Officer on human biosecurity matters at the international and state borders

# IN CONCLUSION,

therefore, it would be wise to heed the words of the Chair of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, when she warns the international community: ‘We urge Member States and the international community to include the specific needs and priorities of indigenous peoples in addressing the global outbreak of COVID 19.’<sup>1</sup> Consequently, we submit that the Australian Government, in partnership with the Australian indigenous communities, is certainly addressing such needs in a planned and systematic manner.



1. Department of Economic and Social Affairs Indigenous Peoples-United Nations

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

- The Australian Department of Health-Ministers Media Centre January 25th 2019
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 'The first year of COVID19- in Australia: direct and indirect health effects
- The Economic and Labour Relations Review 2020, Vol. 31
- Culture counts: the diverse effects of culture and society on mental health amidst COVID19- outbreak in Australia Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine, (2020)
- Flack, C. B., Walker, L., Bickerstaff, A., & Margetts, C. (2020). Socioeconomic disparities in Australian schooling during the COVID19- pandemic. Melbourne, Australia: Pivot Professional Learning
- Indigenous Australians and The Covid19- Crisis: Perspectives on Public Policy, Australian National University
- Post-crisis reconstruction: The case for an Indigenous-specific policy response Michael Dillon
- Management Plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations
- Department of Economic and Social Affairs Indigenous Peoples-United Nations