



# ***Common Roots, Common Futures: Different Paths to Self-Determination. An International Conversation***

**The University of Arizona Tucson, Arizona,**

## **Opening remarks – the overall focus of the Conference**

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Welcome everyone to our three-day conference and workshop on *Common Roots, Common Futures: Indigenous Pathways to Self-Determination*.

This event is a Harvard University Australian Studies Initiative in partnership with: The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, Harvard University; The Native Nations Institute, Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy, University of Arizona; and The National Centre for Indigenous Studies, The Australian National University.

In addition to the above organizers and sponsors, we'd also like to gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Morris K. Udall and Stewart L. Udall Foundation. Our thanks also go to the University of

Arizona's Office of Global Initiatives for its support. And thank you all for making your way here from various parts of the world.

The next three days will really be more of a conversation than a formal conference. We may be a small group of people, but between us we have a lot of experience; some of it good, some of it hard won – but that just means we have a lot to share and learn from each other.

The reason for having this conference is so we can talk together about three topics, and the relationships among them: *Indigenous self-determination, self-governance, and economic development*. We're particularly interested in focusing on the successes; on what works.

And by the end of the 3 days, we'd also like to see if you think it would be useful in continuing this kind of conversation amongst us, and if so, how we might do that and how it could be made practically useful to Indigenous nations and communities.

Much has been written about the concepts of self-determination, governance, and economic development, including their Indigenous forms. And we have in this room many of the people who have not only given much thought and consideration to these matters, but have also tried to give practical effect to their understandings. For the purposes of our conference discussions, we define these core terms in the following way:

*Self-determination* refers to genuine decision-making power and responsibility about what happens on Indigenous peoples' lands, in their affairs, in their governing systems, and in their development strategies. Mera Penehera et al. (2003) describe it as 'having meaningful control over one's own life and cultural well-being'. As decision-making power and responsibility moves from external authorities into the hands of Indigenous peoples, self-determination grows. It does not refer simply to self-administration or self-management of programs or processes that are controlled by outside authorities.

*Governance* refers to the principles, rules, and mechanisms by which the will of the nation, clan, group, or community is translated into sustained, organised action. It can range from the organisation of economic activity, to law-making and enforcement, to dispute resolution to building relationships with other governments. It is about the ability (as opposed to the right or authority) of nations and their organisations to govern: to

decide for themselves what they want for their future and to implement such decisions. And to decide for themselves who the 'self' is in their self-governance, and what *form* of governance will prove to be both practically effective and legitimate for their collective purposes.

*Economic development* refers to the ability of Indigenous nations to support themselves: to sustain self-governance and to provide their citizens with the opportunity to live productive, satisfying lives. Development is 'change or transformation that makes life better in ways that people want'. From this viewpoint, it can take a variety of forms, from growth in traditional subsistence activities to increased participation in market economies, from Indigenous-citizen entrepreneurship to joint ventures with non-Indigenous corporations, from collective nation, community and clan enterprises to small individual and family cottage industries.

Over 20 years ago, the World Commission on Environment and Development's *Brundtland* proposed that development is *sustainable* when it 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. Its 'a direction more than a place'; it is about 'innovation and opportunity' and it involves value judgments about the preferred direction and speed of change.

Not surprisingly then, what constitutes effective and legitimate governance or sustainable development for one group, may not be the case for another; and the factors influencing these are also often viewed differently.

For many Indigenous peoples, the internal 'test' of sustainability in their economic development initiatives, and of effectiveness and legitimacy in their governing systems, involves coming up with answers to a set of difficult questions, many of which call for future-thinking; for example:

What kind of nation or community are we trying to build, not only for ourselves but for future generations of our people?

What kinds of governance arrangements and innovations might be acceptable and consented to now, and acceptable to our people in the future?

What role should collective Indigenous culture play in governance arrangements and economic initiatives, and how might that change over time?

Who should benefit from economic development, and will the benefits of current development still be available for future generations?

How do we maximize self-determination over the long run and enhance the ability of future generations of our people both to maintain the strengths of the past and to determine for themselves the shape of their own lives?

Whatever Indigenous peoples' responses to these questions, it is clear that in all four countries we are paying an increasing amount of attention to governance, and to the link between institutions of governance on the one hand and development outcomes on the other.

Furthermore, the work of Indigenous people and research in all four countries also suggest that Indigenous self-determination and self-government are essential bases for making sustained improvements in the socioeconomic conditions of Indigenous peoples.

In terms of Indigenous issues, Canada, the United States of America, New Zealand and Australia form a distinctive set of countries, each with distinctive Indigenous cultures, and often with considerable internal diversity of cultures as well. And we will hear more about that diversity from our keynote speakers and panelists today.

But while our countries and cultures are different in some critical and obvious ways, we strongly suspect that our peoples also share some important commonalities; commonalities that bind us and could enable us to better support each other through similarly challenging situations. Sir Mason Durie (2011) recently commented that 'as we go into the future ... we will make progress much quicker if we unite in different ways' ... if 'we can convert the common ground into a path into the future'. Those comments have strong resonance for this conference.

One particular commonality we share, in all four cases, is the consistency and resilience of Indigenous demands for self-determination and self-government, and the persistence of our efforts to get sustainable economic development going.

This conference is therefore founded on the hope that what works in one country in strengthening Indigenous self-determination, governance and economic development, may hold valuable lessons for the rest of us and for the future. While stories of disadvantage, deficit, and despair still dominate far too many discussions of Indigenous issues, new stories of

resourcefulness, creativity, and success — as determined by Indigenous peoples themselves — are beginning to surface in all four countries. These are the stories that motivate this conference.

The following questions capture the heart of the issues we hope to consider through real-life examples from each country:

What is happening that is new, innovative, promising, or productive in self-determination, governance, and economic development, particularly on the part of Indigenous nations and communities?

Are there commonalities in the challenges we face and so are there also similarities cross-country in some of the solutions and breakthroughs which Indigenous people are designing in order to maximise their self-determination through governance and economic development arrangements.

Is there value in an international discussion that focuses on *what works*, instead of what doesn't in maximising Indigenous self-determination in all four countries?

Is there an action, research and communication agenda emerging from this discussion that could yield practical benefits and usable lessons for Indigenous communities?

The conference and workshop over the next three days affords us with the opportunity for a conversation about these issues; a time to share insights into what works in meeting the enormous challenges we face in advancing Indigenous self-determination, self-governance, and sustained development. Let's see if we can convert the common ground into a path into the future.