



FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

In New Mexico, one Tribal Nation has spent decades undoing the damage caused by outsiders' attempts to develop its reservation, notably the construction of a dam that flooded the community's farmlands and establishment of one of the largest non-Native residential developments ever built on tribal lands. Reclaiming control over its place and economy, it has rebuffed efforts to install a harmful hydroelectric power plant, assumed control over the residential development to minimize its non-Native occupants, invested heavily in repairing and reacquiring farmlands to rejuvenate its agricultural lifeways, and today pursues economic projects "consistent with [its] cultural values."²

Meanwhile, in Wisconsin, another Tribal Nation used a federal law to develop Business, Agricultural, and Residential leasing regulations for tribal trust and restricted lands on its reservation "to benefit all land uses of the Nation."³ These regulations have "dramatically reduced"⁴ the time it takes to acquire a lease, encouraging greater investment in food production and other economic activities through 25 Business and Agricultural leases.⁵

And in Arizona, a Tribal Nation, concerned about a new freeway and encroaching urban sprawl along its reservation's western edge, developed a comprehensive land use plan. In the plan, the Nation confined its commercial activities to a nine-mile corridor along the freeway to protect the rural feel of the rest of its reservation, striking a healthy balance between economic growth and the people's accustomed way of life.⁶

Determining where Tribal Nations should build thriving tribal economies, and for what greater purposes, is a complex task. They must wrestle with deep legacies of federal policies that confined them to reservations and compelled them to engage in only certain economic activities (natural resource extraction, allotment-based farming, large-scale cattle ranching, unsustainable timber harvesting, etc.). But a growing number are pushing the envelope of sovereignty to define the location, nature, and expanse of their economies, just as their ancestors once did. As *place-based* peoples, their building of thriving economies starts at home, but increasingly, it is transcending tribal borders in diverse, often innovative ways. Below are key components to address in a Tribal Nation's "inclusive and thorough"⁷ structuring of its distinct economic place:

- **On Tribal Lands:** Places suitable for development (including their readiness and legal status); places *not* suitable for

"Place has to be matched with the purpose of an economy – a tribal definition of economy should shape the geographic expanse of place...The tribe needs to control the benefits of place in a way that honors their values."

– Martin Jennings, Director, Northwest Indian Community Development Center¹

development (for cultural or environmental reasons); where certain types of businesses (nation-owned, citizen-owned, etc.) should locate; what natural resources are culturally appropriate to develop; the subsistence lifeways tribal citizens rely on; the ways outsiders (joint venture partners, investors, customers, employees) should participate and their impacts on community life; and codifying those choices in tribal law.⁸

- **Around Tribal Lands:** Protecting subsistence-critical places (hunting, fishing, wild food gathering, etc.) in ancestral territories; factoring tribal citizens who live/work in nearby communities into the nation's economy; determining the viability of tribal economic ventures in those communities and the relationships the nation must build with other governments to support them.

- **Beyond Tribal Lands:** Establishing businesses and/or active/passive investments regionally, nationally, and/or globally; engaging in commerce with other Tribal Nations; and supporting tribal citizen-entrepreneurs off-reservation.

- **Place-neutral:** Using technology and telework as an emerging business practice to support "place-neutral" economic activities that are not land/infrastructure intensive, don't need to be near major markets, and can employ local tribal citizens.⁹

Tribal Nations' economic objectives often differ from one area to the next. For example, many emphasize employment of tribal citizens on tribal lands but concentrate more on generating revenues beyond tribal lands where fewer tribal citizens live. But as Tribal Nations are demonstrating, the overall goal is to build economies that sustain tribal places and their peoples' connection to them. As one tribal leader explains, "We need development to empower the future of the land, not endanger it. We need to focus on place to strengthen our own sense of place."¹⁰

TRIBAL SNAPSHOTS



CITIZEN POTAWATOMI NATION (CPN)

Since the 1970s, CPN has built a robust economy based on "**vertical integration**": each new economic activity it pursues feeds off its existing ones and vice versa so it can repeatedly circulate dollars internally to maximize their economic impact.¹ Despite its success, CPN began to hit an economic ceiling, which it partly attributed to a key factor: it didn't fully control the physical foundations of the place where its economy is based, and the foundations it did control weren't capable of supporting its desired growth. In response, CPN started investing as much into capital improvement projects as it did into its businesses. Recognizing "if you control water, you control pretty much everything,"² it took over a failing rural water district from the state that had long provided CPN inadequate water, investing more than \$10 million in more than 400 miles of new water lines that now bring abundant, clean water to key CPN facilities – including the tribal government building, museum, and key economic drivers such as the casino and tribally-owned grocery store.³ CPN now supplies 30% of the county's water, serving more than 1,600 customers with much cheaper water than what nearby water districts provide⁴; it also recently built a sewage plant, which led to contracts with four local municipalities (primarily inhabited by non-Natives) to serve their water and sewage needs. Advancing its "vertical integration" philosophy, CPN has since made similar investments in related capital improvement projects – including electric power, road and bridge improvements, emergency response, and a railroad – and the industries supporting them. For example, it launched Sovereign Pipe Technologies, a manufacturer supplying plastic pipe to the water, natural gas, and cable industries – including to its water district and geothermal energy operation that supplies heat to CPN's industrial park and other businesses.⁵ As CPN explains, these investments "give us security and revenue that become a foundation for other things we want to do. It's also crucial in lowering the costs of our business operations."⁶

LEARNING LINK: <http://www.ncai.org/resources/econtoolkit/PLACE>

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OSAGE NATION

Hampered for centuries by federal policies that caused catastrophic losses of land and wealth and a rapid disconnection "from the traditional Osage food system that had long sustained them physically and culturally,"¹ Osage took charge in the 2000s. Ratifying an inclusive new constitution and governance system designed by its own people, the Nation developed a "citizen-driven" 25-year strategic plan featuring ambitious goals for economic diversification and security.² Osage made significant headway on these goals until 2020, when the pandemic brought things to a halt and revealed a hard truth: its place, the Osage Reservation, was a food desert; its people were reliant on expensive, unhealthy foods from the outside; and access to those foods could be disrupted at any moment by forces beyond its control.³ Recognizing its economic self-sufficiency hinged on becoming food independent, Osage took action.⁴ Building on its "once-in-a-generation" purchase of the 43,000-acre Osage Nation Ranch on the reservation, Osage spent nearly half of its CARES Act funding to upgrade the Ranch to dramatically expand its commercial cattle and bison operations; build greenhouses, an aquaponics bay, and food processing facility at its Harvest Land farm; and construct its meat processing plant.⁵ To maximize their economic and health benefits to the Nation, Osage has the capacity to provide meat and produce to its Elder Nutrition Program, elementary school, and needy citizens, selling the surplus through its local markets; meanwhile, Harvest Land launched an online store to increase access to affordable, healthy foods for Osage citizens and other local residents.⁶ The Nation is also partnering with Oklahoma State University to launch an Indigenous Supported Agriculture program that provides Harvest Land produce to Osages at below market prices, reducing their cost of living.⁷ The program tracks participants' improved health outcomes and reduced long-term healthcare costs, which will free up the Nation to direct more of its resources to strategic priorities like continued economic diversification and growth.⁸

LEARNING LINK: <http://www.ncai.org/resources/econtoolkit/PLACE>

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ASK YOURSELF

1. **On Tribal Lands:** Does our nation maintain a community-informed economic map of tribal lands that prioritizes certain areas that are culturally appropriate for development and what it will take (legally, financially, environmentally, infrastructurally) to develop them?
2. **On Tribal Lands:** What legal and regulatory obstacles does our nation face in developing those areas? How can it overcome them?
3. **On Tribal Lands:** In what ways will our nation attract outsiders to tribal lands to participate in your economy (ex: tourism) and for what reasons (commerce, employment, etc.)? How can we ensure that this dynamic does not negatively impact community life?
4. **Around Tribal Lands:** How will our nation's economy consciously strengthen the health of – and the people's connection to – its ancestral territory and traditional subsistence areas? How should it incorporate neighboring communities and tribal citizens who live there?
5. **Beyond Tribal Lands:** Should our nation do business with other Tribal Nations (and their citizen-entrepreneurs), in what ways, and for what purposes? If your answer is yes, how can our nation lay that groundwork?
6. **Overall:** How can our nation grow its economy's reach over the long run? What kind of investments must it make and what kind of capacity must it build to do so?

POLICY TIPS

1. **On Tribal Lands:** Develop a community-informed comprehensive land-use plan that identifies your nation's economic opportunity zones, its clear goals for developing those areas and how, and those areas that are deemed off-limits for development.
2. **On Tribal Lands:** Create a long-range land reacquisition and consolidation program that enables your nation to expand the geographic reach of its economy and scale up economic projects in tribally designated areas.
3. **On Tribal Lands:** Develop and update a reservation economic profile to inform strategic decision-making that inventories (among other things) the location, diversity, and growth of nation-owned and citizen-owned businesses; your nation's economic assets; and the state of the local tribal workforce.
4. **Around Tribal Lands:** Conduct a landscape scan of your nation's surrounding communities to determine where tribal citizens reside in large numbers and whether those areas have economic development potential for the nation.
5. **Beyond Tribal Lands:** Aligning with your nation's "purpose" (see pages 18-19), determine how far its economy should extend beyond its geographic boundaries, in what ways (passive investments, 8(a) contracting, etc.), and to advance which tribal priorities.
6. **Place-Neutral:** Assess your nation's technological capability and how to strengthen it to support the creation of local, "place-neutral" businesses to keep/bring tribal citizens home and employ them.