



FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Tribal societies thrived traditionally because Tribal Nations freely designed and governed economies dedicated to maintaining the cultural, social, and political life of tribal communities, and the health of the places in which those communities resided. Economic decisions were made each day based not just on how they supported the community that day, but how they ensured the vibrancy of the community over the long run. In essence, tribal economies consciously featured and advanced a set of greater “purposes” that transcended the immediate benefits that any single economic activity generated that day, season, and year.

As discussed on pages 4-7, colonial policies aimed to sever tribal economies from tribal purposes, instituting systems of external control designed to ensure that tribal economic resources and the *limited* economic activities in which Tribal Nations were allowed to engage produced benefits for someone other than themselves.

As Tribal Nations work to reclaim control of their economies, an increasing number are expending considerable time and energy to define, once again, the greater purposes they want their economies to serve, and actively work to reconnect the economic activities they choose to engage in and support with those greater purposes. According to one Native scholar, this growing movement involves shedding the federal government’s “patronizing oversight” of tribal economic development so that Tribal Nations can “chart a different course...consistent with our dream of what we want to be.”² And when Tribal Nations “are able to exercise their authority over their resources under a well-supported governmental policy of self-determination...their chances for sustained economic development greatly improve.”³

The greater purposes that Tribal Nations identify and advance through their economy-building efforts may vary in nature, form, and number from one nation to the next, but they typically include the following:

- strengthening tribal cultures, languages, and lifeways⁴
- reclaiming and reviving tribal institutions of self-governance⁵
- enhancing the nation’s capacity to exercise tribal sovereignty effectively⁶
- reacquiring tribal lands and sustainably managing and preserving tribal lands and natural resources for the benefit of future generations⁷
- mitigating the “harsh effects” of longstanding poverty and related social ills⁸

“Economic development is about freedom – about American Indian and Alaska Native nations gaining the freedom to shape their communities and futures in their own ways. It is about making self-determination not only a right but a practical reality.”

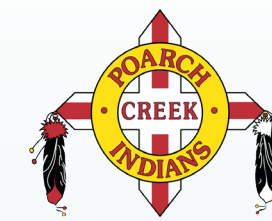
– Native Nations Institute, University of Arizona¹

- addressing urgent needs such as education, healthcare, housing, and elder and youth services⁹
- providing career opportunities that keep tribal citizens on the reservation, and promoting tribal community self-sufficiency¹⁰
- diversifying tribal economic activities to avoid over-reliance on large-scale enterprises the nation owns and operates¹¹
- recreating tribal systems of commerce and preparing tribal citizens to contribute to those systems in different ways¹²
- improving the quality of life for all local residents – tribal and non-tribal.¹³

Endowing economy-building approaches with an inclusively defined, clear and widely understood, and achievable set of purposes is no easy task. Equally challenging is developing the Tribal Nation’s capacity and commitment to advance these purposes, assessing its progress over time, and refining its approach accordingly to ensure ongoing and lasting success. These fundamental endeavors require what sustained tribal societies for millennia – taking charge, and planning strategically for the long haul. As one Native scholar explains, “An intergenerational aim requires an intergenerationally aligned economy.”¹⁴

Endowed with such purpose, a Tribal Nation’s economy-building approach fosters a whole far greater than the sum of the various economic development activities in which it chooses to invest its people, resources, ingenuity, and time. It also provides tribal leaders, staff, and citizens with a critical lens through which they can collectively decide and act: Will the economic choices and opportunities before us today move us closer to achieving our ultimate goals, or will they move us further away?

TRIBAL SNAPSHOTS



POARCH BAND OF CREEK INDIANS (PCI)

Seeking to endow its economic development and other governmental activities with a holistic sense of purpose, in 2007 PCI began work on its Tribal Master Plan, titled “A Place Called Poarch.”¹ With the help of technical experts from nearby Auburn University, the Band solicited input from a broad cross-section of its members – through one-on-one interviews, focus groups, educational forums, and surveys administered at Poarch’s annual powwow and other community events – to identify and integrate into the Master Plan the people’s shared priorities for “what is going to build our nation” over the long haul.² Emerging from this

deep community engagement and planning process were overarching tribal vision and mission statements, a tribal constitutional amendment codifying the values that PCI’s elected leadership must practice, step-by-step action plans detailing the types of economic activities PCI should undertake (and where and how they should take place), and “decision-making standards and criteria to guide future decisions.”³ Among the Plan’s many economy-building goals were annually increasing the standard of living of tribal families, growing the percentage of non-gaming revenue as part of Poarch’s total revenue by diversifying into new industries and emerging sectors, and investing those revenues into community priorities such as culture and heritage preservation and the reservation’s physical infrastructure.⁴ Having made significant progress on its original goals, in 2017 PCI updated its Tribal Master Plan to set forth next-stage priorities advancing its “Prosperity Vision,” including decreasing its fiscal reliance on its Alabama-based gaming operations, providing opportunities to PCI youth to learn about and eventually start small businesses, and targeting the development of the tribal workforce to grow PCI’s capacity to be successful in its new business ventures.⁵ Through sustained community input that continues to inform targeted, purpose-driven action, PCI is turning its vision of “A Place Called Poarch” into a reality.

LEARNING LINK: <http://www.ncai.org/resources/econ toolkit/PURPOSE>

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YSLETA DEL SUR PUEBLO (YDSP)

In 2002, a federal court ordered YDSP’s casino to close, leaving the Pueblo (also known as Tigua) without its main source of jobs and revenue, an unemployment rate that skyrocketed to 30 percent within months, and the reality it soon would run out of money if it didn’t forge a new path forward. Realizing its “short-term and unfocused approach to planning, political influence over business dealings, and ineffective business systems”¹ had made it economically fragile, YDSP launched a community-driven planning process to identify and advance through its economy-building and related efforts “what it means to be self-determined, what it means to support community growth, and what it means to be Tigua.”² Called “Project Pueblo,” this effort resulted in a “balanced development” model that works to enable YDSP to “become a self-sufficient Pueblo [with the] power to thrive in a modern world while preserving our cultural foundations.”³ To advance this model, YDSP invested heavily in its governance infrastructure, including: overhauling its tax code to increase tribal revenue, creating other codes to foster local commerce, forging a 100-year land-use plan prioritizing land reacquisition, and developing a comprehensive socio-economic assessment of the Pueblo to inform its decision-making.⁴ By “listening to individuals at all levels and incorporating culture in everything [we] do,”⁵ YDSP has cultivated a robust, resilient economy featuring businesses owned by the Pueblo and its members and an annual budget surplus.⁶ Building on its “Tigua-fied” approach, YDSP recently used the New Markets Tax Credit Program to construct a medical clinic that will offer improved services to YDSP members and eventually non-members as well, create 91 full-time jobs, and provide YDSP with a “sustainable, diversified revenue stream.”⁷ YDSP’s fiscal stability also allowed it to use some of its CARES Act funding to provide grants to 70 Pueblo member-owned businesses to help them stay afloat during the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic.⁸

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ASK YOURSELF

1. What does our nation want to look like in five years? Twenty-five years? Two-hundred and fifty years? Is our tribal economy as currently constructed capable of realizing that vision?
2. Does our nation currently have a clearly defined set of overarching purposes that its economic development activities are designed to advance? If so, what are they? If not, why not?
3. Are these purposes widely understood by tribal leaders, staff, and citizens? And what role did they play – and should they play – in forging these purposes?
4. How can our nation better connect its current economic activities with these overarching purposes, or are there other economic pursuits it should undertake to achieve these purposes? And are there economic pursuits it should actively avoid?
5. Does our nation possess the institutional and human capacity necessary to build an economy that can advance these purposes?
6. What obstacles stand in the way of our nation creating an economy to achieve these purposes, and how can it overcome them?
7. To what degree do outside governments and actors influence our nation’s economic activities and the ultimate goals those activities are designed to achieve? How can we lessen their influence or leverage their assets to exert greater tribal control?

POLICY TIPS

1. Develop an inclusive process for determining the long-range priorities your nation’s economy building efforts will advance, and identify the distinct roles of your nation’s leaders, staff, and citizens in contributing to that process – and the priorities that emerge.
2. Conduct a systematic assessment of your nation’s current economic activities to determine whether and how they directly advance your nation’s long-range nation-rebuilding priorities.
3. Create a tribal-wide master plan for your nation’s future that codifies these long-range priorities and explains how the nation’s economic development initiatives will advance them.
4. Engage in a comprehensive process to map the assets – human, institutional, etc. – your nation currently has to execute this plan, and identify where and how it needs to grow its assets to achieve lasting success.
5. Create a system for identifying and evaluating new economic development opportunities that uses these long-range priorities as a primary basis for tribal decision-making.
6. Develop standing mechanisms for community education and engagement that continually: (1) seek input from tribal citizens about the overarching direction that your nation’s economy should take and the ultimate goals it should pursue, and (2) educate them about the progress the nation has made and the obstacles it is encountering.