



FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Setting your Tribal Nation firmly on the path towards building a self-determined, thriving tribal economy takes a tremendous amount of hard, deliberate, and complex work. But that is just the first step, as the nation must also embark on an unrelenting effort to grow its economy-building approach over the long haul. As Tribal Nations across the country forge track records of economic success through various ventures, activities, and investments of their own choosing, more and more are now tackling the challenge of how to *systematically* grow that success to benefit their peoples and homelands not just today, but well into the future. As one scholar framed it, a tribal economy “has a multigenerational time horizon and thus a fundamentally different requirement from its capital. It must produce wealth over the long term and not just for the generation in which it finds itself.”²

As these nations create unique recipes for economic growth, some common ingredients are emerging that can shorten the learning curve for other nations following in their footsteps. Below are explanations of five key ones.

Accountability: Economic success – and the ability to grow it – hinges on the accountability mechanisms a nation establishes to ensure *everyone* with formal roles to play in the nation’s economy-building approach continuously fulfill their specific ends of the bargain. These mechanisms take many forms, such as: processes to assess whether economic activities are effectively advancing the nation’s long-range goals; clearly defined divisions of responsibility between political and non-political leaders enforced by tribal law and policy; standardized, comprehensive economic performance reporting by tribal enterprises to tribal government; detailed position descriptions that identify particular responsibilities and limits on authority; and regular, accessible reporting by the nation to its citizens about its economic progress (see “Transparency” section below).

Transparency: A Tribal Nation’s economy will grow only so far as its people understand and trust it. Deploying effective mechanisms for continuous communication between its political and business leaders and community members fosters a common, well-informed understanding of – and support for – the nation’s economic approach, how it works, how it’s evolving and expanding to better serve the people, how it advances the nation’s long-range goals, and how the people can contribute in the many important ways that the nation needs to drive long-term economic growth.³

“For growth, we need transparency, engagement, education, and communication. We need to educate the youth and adults about how our process works. We need a baseline understanding of where our people are and will be, and a process for how we use that information.”

– Larry Wright, Jr., Former Chairman, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska¹

Adaptability: A nation’s economy-building approach must be capable of adapting in real time to respond to – and capitalize on – changing economic conditions, new information and data, emerging threats and opportunities, and the evolving needs and priorities of its people. It must continually assess and grow its governance institutions and human capacity in targeted ways to support that adaptability.⁴ For example, if it is considering a joint venture partnership in a new economic sector, it must create the laws and legal infrastructure needed to effectively support its success with that particular venture and sector.

Institutionalizing innovation (and success): No Tribal Nation gets it exactly right out of the gate with its new approach. A bedrock institutional commitment to innovation enables a nation to take ambitious yet calculated risks, determine what’s not working, and design better ways forward. Cultivating and retaining top-notch business and programmatic leaders and staff equipped with the technical expertise, institutional knowledge, and confidence from *learned* experience to achieve, sustain, and grow economic success across the nation through ongoing innovation is vital.⁵

Legacy-building leadership: Tribal leaders need to think and act well beyond their tenures in office to foster a robust foundation for their peoples’ long-term prosperity. This means, among other things, leaders focusing not on their short-term political interests, but rather on fulfilling their critical roles in developing the “long-game” components mentioned above so their tribal economies possess true staying power.⁶

TRIBAL SNAPSHOTS



MISSISSIPPI BAND OF CHOCTAW INDIANS (MBCI)

In the 1960s, MBCI’s economic state was dire, with an unemployment rate over 80 percent and no tribal economic activity to speak of.¹ Resolved to “determine its own fate,”² the Band overhauled its **IRA** constitution to improve its governance structure (through longer, staggered terms for elected leadership) and remove the **BIA** as the final authority on MBCI’s biggest decisions. With a stable government able to support long-range economic planning and execution, MBCI launched several successful manufacturing ventures supplying the automotive and other industries, but grew concerned about over-relying on a sector vulnerable to market downturns.³ In response, it developed a comprehensive economic diversification approach featuring profitable enterprises in the retail, service, technology, and, eventually, gaming sectors. To structure and regulate its wide-ranging economic activities, MBCI expanded its court system in the 1990s to fairly and efficiently adjudicate commercial disputes, demonstrating that it is a secure and worthwhile place to work, do business, and invest.⁴ Today, MBCI remains the largest job-provider in east central Mississippi, employing 2,500 MBCI members and area non-Native residents across eight enterprises, while more than 2,000 others work in MBCI’s government, health center, schools, and housing authority.⁵ Responding to the economic impacts of the pandemic, the Band created a five-year growth strategy to foster continued business diversification and a more resilient workforce, headlined by its new Center for Advanced Workforce Training and Development.⁶ The strategy promotes entrepreneurship through FAST Start classes for aspiring MBCI entrepreneurs, financing and one-on-one coaching for new businesses, and a business incubator.⁷ It also includes deployment of broadband to every home on tribal lands, which is expected to be completed in fall 2023. Leveraging its role as an economic “powerhouse,” MBCI launched an award-winning website that educates prospective partners about the proven benefits of doing business with the Band.⁸

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

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ROSEBUD SIOUX TRIBE (RST)

In 2012, RST’s economic development corporation REDCO struggled with debt, several unprofitable enterprises, and difficulty recruiting and retaining skilled employees, particularly RST members.¹ To “honor” an RST constitutional provision directing the Tribe to “consider the impact of [its] decisions on the next seven generations,”² REDCO shifted its focus to achieving RST’s vision of an “economically self-reliant tribe able to take care of itself.”³ Transforming this into a practical strategy, RST created its “7 Generation Plan,” a 175-year prosperity initiative rooted in Sicangu prophecy and values, guided by a decision-making framework prioritizing the best interests of the whole and future generations, and emphasizing Indigenous complex-systems thinking over Western knowledge.⁴ Lacking the data necessary to design the Plan, REDCO commissioned: a 100-year demographic study projecting RST’s population growth⁵; a household consumer demand report pinpointing key sectors RST should develop to reach its goals of full employment and a resilient economy⁶; and a “State of the Future Workforce” report, which found a “high need” to strengthen basic math, writing, and communication skills among RST members to make them workforce ready.⁷ Using this data, REDCO created the Research and Policy Division (RPD), Sicangu CDC, and Tatanka Funds CDFI to systematically build RST’s economy, community, and the human capacity to realize RST’s definition of a prosperous Nation.⁸ REDCO anchors this “Ecosystem of Organizations,” generating revenue for Plan implementation and housing the Ecosystem’s leadership and back office. The CDC obtains grant funding for key Plan initiatives, and the CDFI issues loans to REDCO, Sicangu CDC, and RST members, also helping to build their financial capability.⁹ The RPD, meanwhile, develops policies the RST Council can enact to advance the Plan, and advocates for federal policies to do the same.¹⁰ The “Ecosystem” – rebranded in 2022 as Sicangu Co¹¹ – is seeding RST’s economic growth, notably through development of the nation’s largest Native-managed bison herd.¹²

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ASK YOURSELF

1. Does our nation have a multi-generational plan for economic and community prosperity? If not, what should it include and how do we use it to inform the decisions we make every day?
2. Does our nation deal with economy-building failures and successes in a healthy way? Does it keep our people well-informed about our economic progress, how it advances our nation’s long-term goals, and how it benefits them individually and collectively?
3. Succession planning: How do we currently prepare incoming tribal leaders to take over our nation’s economic reins? Is it effective?
4. Do we have effective accountability mechanisms in place to ensure: (1) our economic activities maintain alignment with our nation’s long-term priorities, and (2) key players such as tribal leaders, enterprise CEOs and staff, economic development board members, and programmatic leaders live up to the specific, high standards we require for economic growth?
5. Do we have an informed understanding of how our nation’s population is growing, and what that means for how we should grow our tribal economy to keep pace?
6. How is our nation ensuring the ways we choose to grow our economy over time revitalize and strengthen our people’s connections to our tribal homelands and their ability to practice their cultural lifeways?⁷

POLICY TIPS

1. Develop economic growth processes that: (1) regularly assess through data collection and analysis your nation’s current initiatives and refine them accordingly, (2) launch new initiatives designed to build on established successes, (3) prioritize learning from mistakes and pushing the innovation envelope, and (4) build its institutional and human capacity to expand your economy over time.
2. Create a tribal civics education program for tribal government, local schools, and TCUs to teach tribal employees and citizens about your nation’s governance system and economy-building approach.⁸
3. Codify in tribal law a leadership transition process requiring outgoing political leaders to brief their successors about your nation’s economic initiatives and how it intends to grow them.
4. Develop a “mentor-apprentice” program requiring senior programmatic and business leaders in your nation’s government and enterprises to groom their designated successors so it can retain and grow its economy-building knowledge and expertise.
5. Do a study of your nation’s regional economic impact; share findings with other governments to enhance support for your efforts.
6. Conduct and regularly update a study to project and track your nation’s long-term population growth; use the data for strategic decision-making for how to grow your nation’s economy and human capacity.
7. Invest tribal revenues in a **socially responsible investing** program to grow tribal assets in keeping with your values and priorities.⁹