



## FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Traditionally and today, Tribal Nations can't go it alone if they are to realize their visions of thriving, resilient economies and, in turn, flourishing communities.<sup>2</sup> With tribal self-determination and self-sufficiency as their ultimate goals, they must exercise their inherent rights as sovereigns to forge partnerships "of varying scale and composition with key players" within their nations and communities and outside of them to secure the resources, expertise, and other forms of support they need to build economies on their own terms in accordance with their core values.<sup>3</sup> With tribal governments serving as their partnership hubs, successful Tribal Nations are cultivating and sustaining formal relationships with an array of partners to advance specific economy-building objectives, such as:

- **TCUs:** to offer degree and certification programs (ideally using nation-informed curricula) aligned with the nation's capacity-building priorities, assist it with tribal data collection and analysis, and help build its data capacity.
- **Native CDFIs:** to coordinate workforce education and training efforts in the nation's priority areas; provide targeted training, start-up and growth capital, and ongoing support for citizen-entrepreneurs; and strengthen financial management skills of employed citizens and those seeking work.
- **Lending institutions:** such as Native-owned credit unions, banks, and non-Native lending institutions to provide tribal enterprises and citizen-entrepreneurs with start-up and growth capital and enable citizens to grow their assets.
- **Local non-profits:** such as grassroots organizations and chambers of commerce to supplement the nation's efforts to provide targeted social services enhancing workforce readiness, provide workforce education and training, and seed local commerce.
- **Other Native organizations:** such as Indian Business Alliances, Urban Indian Organizations, and Native cooperatives to track off-reservation citizens and support their participation in the tribal economy; foster citizen-owned small business development; and offer citizens skills development, mentoring, and jobs in places the nation can't easily reach.<sup>4</sup>
- **Other Tribal Nations:** to form intertribal business ventures, do business with other nations' enterprises and citizen-owned businesses, share qualified labor and relevant data, and consolidate workforce education and training services.<sup>5</sup>
- **Area non-tribal employers:** to "inform them about tribal

**"Economies don't exist in a vacuum, which is why partnerships are critical to any tribal economy-building efforts."**

– **Rebecca Naragon, Economic Development Director, United South and Eastern Tribes<sup>1</sup>**

citizens who have skills they need, and align workforce education/training curricula to cultivate the skills they require."<sup>6</sup>

- **Local and state governments:** formal agreements to increase citizens' access to area workforce education and training services and non-tribal employment, pool resources for regional infrastructure and business development projects, gain eligibility for federal and other dollars to support those projects, and increase the nation's overall political influence.<sup>7</sup>
- **Corporate partnerships:** joint ventures on tribal terms and other formal arrangements that supply capital for nation-owned enterprise start-ups and growth and technical expertise that reduces operational costs.<sup>8</sup>
- **Coalition partnerships:** involving tribally determined combinations of partners across different sectors to "create comprehensive support systems for citizens and holistic solutions tailored" to the nation's economy-building goals.<sup>9</sup>

When strategically chosen and properly stewarded, these partnerships: provide Tribal Nations with greater policy and decision-making control over their economic futures; increase and enhance education, training, and job opportunities; better leverage limited financial resources and open doors to more resources; expand market access; enhance their institutional and human capacity; and strengthen their ability to advance their long-term economy-building priorities.<sup>10</sup> To do partnerships right and maximize their many benefits, Tribal Nations must ensure the partnerships they choose to create: (1) directly align with their long-range economic priorities; (2) formally define the roles and enforce the accountability of all parties; (3) feature mechanisms driving "continuous, transparent communication"<sup>11</sup>; (4) are supported by strong tribal institutional ecosystems (see pages 24-25)<sup>12</sup>; and (5) are sustained by dedicated tribal staff and resources that carry the partnerships beyond any single group of tribal leaders.<sup>13</sup>

## TRIBAL SNAPSHOTS



### COEUR D'ALENE TRIBE (CDA)

In the late 1980s, healthcare at Coeur d'Alene was marginal at best. Tribal members' only option was a run-down IHS clinic offering bare-boned care, which forced them to travel long distances off-reservation to access "more comprehensive" services that proved difficult for many to afford.<sup>1</sup> In response, CDA leaders made a strategic commitment to provide quality healthcare to everyone on the reservation, including non-Natives who comprised the majority of its population.<sup>2</sup> To do so, CDA partnered with the adjacent City of Plummer in 1990 to establish the Benewah Medical Center (renamed Marimn Health in 2017) – the country's first joint venture of its kind between a Tribal Nation and municipality.<sup>3</sup> The partnership enabled CDA to secure federal funding to build and operate it as a Community Health Center/FQHC in collaboration with IHS and its parent agency HHS.<sup>4</sup> Together, these factors have allowed Marimn Health to see any patient who needs care, generating considerable revenue through a healthy combination of third-party billing reimbursements.<sup>5</sup> This "unique funding model" has given Marimn the ability to provide "an array of progressive and innovative programs" focused on "primary care, holistic healing, preventive care, and wellness promotion to all members of the community as intended by the Creator."<sup>6</sup> It also has given Marimn the financial flexibility to recruit, retain, and grow top-notch medical professionals and staff (including 126 Native employees) who provide award-winning service.<sup>7</sup> Since its launch three decades ago, Marimn has expanded several times, building the Wellness Center in 1998, a 50,000-square-foot medical facility in 2012, and the Coeur Center in 2020 that helps at-risk youth "reach their full potential."<sup>8</sup> Marimn has paid for these additions through outside grants, CDA funding, and contributions from Marimn's own financial reserves.<sup>9</sup> Serving more than 8,700 patients each year, Marimn has become a model for integrated healthcare, and is demonstrating the value of incorporating healthcare as a key driver for tribal economy building.<sup>10</sup>

**LEARNING LINK:** <http://www.ncai.org/resources/econ toolkit/PARTNERSHIPS>  
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### SAINT REGIS MOHAWK TRIBE (SRMT)

The Mohawks of Akwesasne are a sovereign nation crossed by the international border between New York, Quebec, and Ontario, with SRMT serving Akwesasne Mohawks living in the U.S. and the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne (MCA) serving those residing in Canada.<sup>1</sup> To address the challenges the border poses to their tourism-based economy and the limited resources Mohawk entrepreneurs have to start and grow their businesses, SRMT, MCA, and several other Mohawk entities formed the Akwesasne Tourism Working Group (ATWG) in 2014.<sup>2</sup> Through extensive community consultation, ATWG created the Akwesasne Tourism Strategic Action Plan, which seeks to "develop sustainable tourism through mutually beneficial partnerships" by sharing "world-class tourism experiences that celebrate our environment, heritage, and language" as "One Community."<sup>3</sup> ATWG's growing number of partners have effectively pooled funding from public and private sources in the U.S. and Canada, including critical dollars to assess and build the infrastructure needed to handle the influx of "cultural heritage" tourists the Plan works to attract.<sup>4</sup> Key to the Plan is the partnership between SRMT, local and regional stakeholders, and Mohawk entrepreneurs to bring more national and international tourists to their doorstep and prepare them to capitalize on this growing market.<sup>5</sup> For example, with ANA funding, ATWG launched the Tourism Business Incubator, which provides TA, marketing, and budgeting services to local small business owners.<sup>6</sup> In addition, ATWG established Akwesasne Travel, a destination marketing and management organization that markets guided cultural tours of Akwesasne artisans and educators in community-sanctioned areas; Akwesasne Travel takes a commission on each tour booking, while the small businesses pocket the sales of their wares and services.<sup>7</sup> This approach is producing a significant increase in visitorship and local spending by those who travel to Akwesasne; it also fosters greater opportunities for Mohawk artisans and other entrepreneurs to "remain in the community and pursue their chosen profession."<sup>8</sup>

**LEARNING LINK:** <http://www.ncai.org/resources/econ toolkit/PARTNERSHIPS>  
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## ASK YOURSELF

1. Reviewing the partnership types mentioned above, what economy-building partnerships does our nation have? Do they meet the five criteria listed in the final sentence above? How must we strengthen them?
2. What new partnerships must we cultivate to take our tribal economy to the next level? Where and how must the relationship building with those new partners start?
3. Do we have a "due diligence" process that vets partnership opportunities to determine whether: (1) they are in our best interests, and (2) we have the institutions, people, and resources in place to make them work long-term?<sup>14</sup>
4. How must we build the capacity of our institutional ecosystem to support the partnerships we have prioritized?
5. How is our nation working with local K-12 education systems, vocational education centers, colleges, and universities to support our citizens' continuing academic success and develop their skills and expertise in the fields we need most for economy building?
6. How could joint business development and intertribal commerce with other Tribal Nations empower our economic efforts?
7. Are long-running jurisdictional clashes with state and local governments inhibiting our economic growth? In what ways could strategic partnership building with these governments resolve these clashes and empower our economic initiatives in key areas?

## POLICY TIPS

1. Conduct a "partnership audit" to identify: (1) where you have informal and formal partnerships, (2) how they could be formalized/strengthened and for what reasons, and (3) where you need new ones and why.<sup>15</sup>
2. Establish intertribal trade agreements with culturally and economically aligned Tribal Nations to scale up and expand your nation's business ventures and enable it and citizen-entrepreneurs greater access to regional, national, and international markets.<sup>16</sup>
3. Consider forging tribal-state and tribal-corporate tax agreements that increase tribal discretionary revenues, create market advantages, reduce tribal citizens' tax burden<sup>17</sup>, and affirm and protect your nation's sovereignty and jurisdiction.
4. Develop a "coalition partnership" involving tribal government, Native CDFIs, non-profits, academic institutions, small business development centers, state agencies, lending institutions, and others to provide a "holistic" support system for existing and aspiring citizen-entrepreneurs.<sup>18</sup>
5. Create data partnerships with area Native CDFIs, non-profits, and/or academic institutions to generate useful economic and related data, build your nation's data capacity, and defray economic research costs.
6. Establish, staff, and fund a tribal "state department" to steward your nation's formal partnerships with outside entities and educate existing and potential partners about the benefits of partnering and doing business with the nation.