



FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

As the introduction explores, the fundamental tasks facing Tribal Nations are to return tribal self-determination to its rightful place as the sole driver of economy building, develop their own vision of a vibrant, healthy economy, and then forge pathways to achieve that vision.² The question is: *how*? Given how tribal economies were colonized by federal policies designed to benefit others, how can Tribal Nations “decolonize”³ the *process* they use to define the economy that is best for *them* and then create it? How can they bring forward those Indigenous economic institutions and principles that once enabled them to flourish? And how can they return valued roles to all of those in the community upon which that flourishing depended, and prepare them for those roles?

In this regard, the process a Tribal Nation uses to design and build its self-determined economy is more important than the particular economic activities it ultimately pursues. Across Indian Country, Tribal Nations can tell many stories about well-intentioned economic solutions that failed because the people those solutions were meant to benefit were *not* meaningfully involved in their development and implementation. Simply put, if a Tribal Nation is to realize its own definition of “inclusive prosperity,”⁴ it must include its own people every step of the way.

Many Tribal Nations are recognizing this fact – and acting on it. They are moving from a rushed, “crisis mode” approach to economic development to a deliberate approach to economy building that embraces and enacts a critical Indigenous principle: planning.⁵ In so doing, they are developing processes to elicit, understand, and enact the collective will of the people – not just once or every five or 10 years, but in an ongoing, structured fashion. Among these nations, there exist common keys to a *successful* process and the transformative outcomes that process produces. These include:

- a continuous cycle of engagement between tribal government, tribal citizens, and other key stakeholders rooted in consulting, analyzing, acting, and informing;
- an “**assets-based**” **mindset** that prioritizes solutions for prosperity (versus a “**deficits-based**” **mindset** fixated on problems and poverty);
- a working understanding of the nation’s economic history (its traditional system and past successes and failures);
- a comprehensive picture of its current economy (what’s working and not, who is involved, who isn’t, and who should be);
- a standard, community-informed process for determining

“Development comes from within. It cannot be done to people, or for people, but must come from people... It is about leadership, vision, and a dignified livelihood for all...”

– Sherry Salway Black, Founding Team, Lakota Funds¹

whether new economic opportunities serve the nation’s best interests;

- a dynamic communications system to continuously inform tribal citizens and others about the nation’s economic choices and how they will advance the nation’s long-term priorities;
- mechanisms (surveys, focus groups, planning retreats, etc.) for regularly consulting with tribal citizens about how to refine and grow the economy-building approach over the long run⁶;
- regular evaluations of the citizen engagement process to determine how to improve it;
- committing to “reflection, deliberation, patience, and respect.”⁷

Once such processes are in place, they can produce benefits that transcend conventional economic indicators, such as:

- informed tribal decision-making processes that are stable, strategic, and infused with the people’s highest priorities⁸;
- “a sense of greater responsibility for the decisions that are made and an increased incentive to make decisions that have positive effects on the community” (i.e., accountability)⁹;
- increased **transparency** (through intentional, accessible education of tribal citizens and other key stakeholders);
- broad community ownership in and support for the nation’s economy-building efforts;
- a thorough understanding among tribal leaders and key decision-makers about the community’s readiness for economy building – and how to strengthen it¹⁰;
- growing confidence among citizens in the government’s ability to achieve the people’s aspirations for the future; and
- deeper understanding among all that it is not tribal government’s job alone to build the economy and that everyone has important contributions to make.

TRIBAL SNAPSHOTS



FOND DU LAC BAND OF LAKE SUPERIOR CHIPPEWA (FDL)

Though FDL had engaged in various planning processes for decades, in 2019 it began looking for a more meaningful way to ensure its people’s values and visions for the future drove its actions. In response, the FDL government engaged in a community development planning and strategic decision-making process focused on what the 4,200 FDL members wanted for the Band’s future. The result was the Fond du Lac Reservation Comprehensive Plan, which incorporated significant community input gathered amid the pandemic via online surveys and reviews “to highlight and determine priorities for the reservation.”¹ The Reservation Business Committee (RBC), FDL’s governing body, approved the Plan in January 2021. Employing a “catch up” and “look ahead” strategy, the 20-year plan works to plug identified gaps in services to FDL members while simultaneously pursuing economic growth opportunities outlined by the Band.² The Comprehensive Plan expresses the community’s “strong entrepreneurial spirit” through its focus on private sector development through the cultivation of Band member-owned small businesses, and dictates any future modifications to the document must undergo public review before they may be approved by the RBC.³ The Band employs several strategies to ensure the community’s codified vision is followed, including relying on its Economic Development Committee (EDC) – composed of a cross-section of tribal government staff and community leaders – to act as an objective “first filter” for economic development proposals.⁴ The EDC reviews potential projects holistically, evaluating their costs, required resources, economic feasibility, alignment with community values, overall impacts on the Band, and the human capacity needed to ensure their success. While the Comprehensive Plan was only recently ratified, the EDC already has taken key steps to advance it by vetting land purchases for hotels, conducting research on potential future housing developments, and establishing FDL’s Agricultural Division to oversee the Band’s expanding food sovereignty efforts – all steps explicitly designed to help FDL realize its people’s vision for *their* future.⁵

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

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LUMMI NATION

In 2004, the Lummi Indian Business Council (LIBC) embarked on a 12-year process to develop and implement its “Ventures Promoting Prosperity Plan,” which included forging its long-term economic development vision.¹ Ventures began with a two-year “conversation” designed to learn from the Lummi people what “should be done to address poverty and... promote prosperity, individual self-reliance, and long-term community stability and well-being.”² This unique opportunity to “guide” LIBC involved 1,500 Lummi members through community surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews, producing a consensus definition of prosperity: “living our lives according to Lummi values.”³ Ventures’ ensuing Strategies for Prosperity notably featured a targeted emphasis on cultivating not only Nation-owned businesses but Lummi member-owned small businesses, which Lummi recognizes “reduces poverty by creating income, building assets and contributing to local employment creation.”⁴ This emphasis soon took key forms, including LIBC’s launch of Lummi CDFI (which provides business loans and TA to Lummi entrepreneurs⁵) and the Te’Ti’Sen Center, the first small business incubator and commercial retail center of its kind in Indian Country.⁶ These steps – along with the creation of the Lummi Cultural Arts Association, which helps Lummi artists market their products⁷ – have helped to significantly increase the number of Lummi member-owned businesses at “different stages of development.”⁸ Ventures also prompted LIBC to establish the Office of Economic Policy, which analyzes, plans, and administers economic policies and actions to increase Lummi members’ standard of living and enhance their ability to live their “Schelangen (way of life).”⁹ While it formally ended in 2016, Ventures “continues to guide Lummi,”¹⁰ providing the foundation for its **CEDS** and 2022 Lummi Nation Community Plan, which relied on the “broad and inclusive public outreach process” developed by Ventures.¹¹

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ASK YOURSELF

1. Does our nation have a clear vision of our self-determined tribal economy, and how to achieve it? If so, were our people meaningfully involved in forging that vision, and how are they contributing to achieving it?
2. Do we currently have a structured process for ongoing citizen engagement that connects our economic decision-making with the collective will of our people? If not, how do we create one? If so, how can we strengthen it?
3. What key groups and individuals in our nation are not currently part of the process who should be? How can we best engage them?
4. Is our process primarily governed by an “assets-based” or a “deficits-based” mindset? How can we fully embrace the former?
5. Do our leaders, key decision-makers, and citizens have a working knowledge of our traditional economy, and why our ancestors designed it that way? How can we build and leverage that understanding?
6. Do we have processes in place to comprehensively assess the current state of our economy and its strengths and weaknesses, and if so, how are we using that knowledge to inform our economic decision-making?
7. To what degree do our people trust the process we currently use to make and implement major decisions about how to grow our economy? How can we change our process to grow that trust?

POLICY TIPS

1. Create and regularly update a “community map” that identifies key demographics and individuals (elders, youth, entrepreneurs, clan/family leaders, etc.) and the best ways to engage them on a regular basis in your economy-building process.
2. Challenge tribal leaders, key decision-makers, and citizens to embrace an “assets-based” approach to economic decision-making (one focused on solutions, prosperity, and actively learning from our previous mistakes).
3. Dedicate tribal staff and resources to develop and periodically update a living history of your nation’s economy that can continuously inform its community-driven process for economic decision-making and implementation.
4. Conduct an assessment to evaluate the **community’s readiness** to contribute in various ways to the economy your nation seeks to build. Dedicate staff and resources to regularly update the assessment to track how efforts to enhance that readiness are working.
5. Create and adequately resource a multi-faceted communications system that continuously educates community members about your nation’s economic choices, activities, and progress.
6. Tie your nation’s economic activities to the advancement of the community’s long-range goals at every opportunity.
7. Establish a process for regularly assessing the nation’s economic direction and how to strengthen and grow it. Ensure this process elicits extensive input from community members.