



FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

In the 1950s, one Tribal Nation in the Southwest entered into an agreement with an outside company that created the world's largest open-pit uranium mine on its land. Over three decades, the mine employed many tribal citizens and generated significant royalties, much of which the nation used to reacquire ancestral lands and invest in tribal members' education. But it came at an incredible cost to what its members valued most – the health of their land and waters, their time-honored subsistence lifeways, the sanctity of their sacred places, their physical wellbeing, and their sense of control over their individual and collective destinies. Acting on that recognition, the nation moved on from the mining venture, and has since worked to methodically build a tribally driven, diversified economy that protects and strengthens those things and fosters the confidence and ability of tribal members to achieve self-sufficiency for themselves and their families.²

Meanwhile, in the 1990s, another Tribal Nation in the Southwest, confronting a host of social welfare needs, decided to invest a substantial portion of its gaming revenue into a deeply-held community priority – caring for tribal elders. It built a 60-bed skilled nursing facility and a ten-bed assisted living annex strategically located at the center of the nation's vast reservation for easy access by all reservation residents. The award-winning venture now supports more than 100 good-paying jobs, almost all held by tribal citizens. More importantly, however, it enables tribal elders to get the culturally appropriate care (such as eating traditional tribal foods and conversing with staff who speak their Native language) they couldn't receive when staying at off-reservation facilities. It also allows them to remain close to – and see much more of – their families during their final stages of life.³

These Tribal Nations and others are once again recognizing the fundamental truth their ancestors intimately understood – that for Native peoples, culture and economy are inseparable. They are two symbiotic components of a single human ecosystem: one cannot thrive without the other. As mentioned, federal policies worked to sever the two, removing core Indigenous values and institutions from the economic equation, and imposing Western economic models that systematically ignored those values and institutions and suppressed the tribal cultures and lifeways they have sustained since time immemorial. However, through what one expert calls an honest, “self-realization process,”⁴ many Tribal Nations are shedding those Western models and “reclaiming the way they managed their economies long ago.”⁵

“In all of the decisions we make, we need to ask, ‘How are the decisions we’re making today strengthening our core values or taking us further away from them?’ When we abide by and live our core values, fulfilling the tenets and covenants gifted to us by our Creator, we will never perish. We will endure, and we will flourish.”

– Regis Pecos, Former Governor, Pueblo de Cochiti¹

Critical to this process is Tribal Nations' careful reconnection of their economy-building approaches to the core values that make them culturally and social distinct from non-tribal peoples, notably: **reciprocity**, balance, reverence for and stewardship of the natural world, “being good relatives” (kinship)⁶, **self-efficacy**⁷, spirituality, and preparing the youth and future generations to flourish as tribal people. Three decades of research on tribal economy building demonstrates that when Tribal Nations commit fully to this process (not just at one point in time, but over time), it works. When they consciously “match” their economic decision-making processes, strategies, policies, activities, and investments with their most precious core values – and when those things closely align with the people's enduring sensibilities about what kind of economy is appropriate and how to build it – it empowers long-term, sustainable economic progress.⁸

This requires that Tribal Nations move beyond a focus dominated by dollars and cents and picking “winning” economic development projects that can turn quick profits, and instead define their tribal bottom line – governed by their core values – that promotes healthy, thoughtful choices about what kinds of enterprises they should operate (and not), where they should do business, how business should be conducted, what other economic activities it will foster (citizen-owned small businesses, etc.), how they will live their core values through their economies every day, and how they will grow their economies for future generations.⁹

TRIBAL SNAPSHOTS



NAVAJO NATION

In the early 2000s, Navajo (Diné) citizens suffered from epidemic rates of diabetes and other chronic health conditions associated with poor nutrition, in part because the “food desert”¹ encompassing Navajo's vast reservation offered few affordable healthy food options across its convenience stores, trading posts, and handful of conventional grocery stores.² Committed to fostering the people's ability to achieve the Diné value of *hózhó* (“holistic health and wellness”)³ through a traditional lifestyle “characterized by physical activity and consumption of healthy, traditional foods,”⁴ grassroots advocates and local healthcare entities launched a legislative campaign culminating in Navajo Nation's passage of the Healthy Diné Nation Act (HDNA) in 2014.⁵ The first “junk food tax” levied by any government in the U.S., the HDNA imposed a 2% surtax on unhealthy foods including sugar-sweetened beverages, baked goods, and candy, and waived Navajo's standing sales tax (6%) on healthy foods like fresh produce, nuts, and water at all reservation stores (combined difference: 8%).⁶ Administered by the Office of the Navajo Nation Tax Commission⁷, the HDNA mandates 80 percent of the tax revenue be allocated to Navajo's 110 local chapters for self-determined community wellness projects such as walking trails, playgrounds, skate parks, basketball courts, and food sovereignty initiatives.⁸ Permanently reauthorized in 2020, the HDNA generated \$7.58 million in tax revenue in its first five years, funding more than 1,300 chapter projects with over \$6 million – projects Navajo otherwise wouldn't have funding to support.⁹ Growing data reveals the law is having its desired effects: incentivizing healthy eating (seen in increases in local stocking and purchasing of products like water and healthy snacks¹⁰) and discouraging unhealthy eating, evident in the gradual decline of HDNA revenue, attributed to a decrease in “unhealthy food purchased relative to total goods bought” at Navajo.¹¹ The HDNA also promises to gradually decrease the costs of poor health for the Nation and its citizens over the long haul.

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

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SEALASKA

In 2013, Sealaska, an ANC serving 23,000 shareholders “with a common bond to southeast Alaska,”¹ reached a crossroads. Long pursuing an approach aimed at quickly generating substantial revenue, Sealaska had grown disconnected from the values of the communities it serves regarding the types of enterprises it owned and where and how it did business. This approach also had proven unprofitable, leaving Sealaska \$35 million in the red.² In response, Sealaska partnered with the Sealaska Heritage Institute to identify the cultural values that exemplify the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian people and restructure the company to live, strengthen, and advance those values.³ These include: *Haa Aaní* (our homelands), *Haa Shuká* (our past, present, and future, including honoring our ancestors and responsibilities to the future generations), *Haa Latseen* (our strength, resilience, and responsibility to grow our abilities), and *Wooch.Yax* (balance and respect in our relationships, including with the natural world).⁴ Embarking on its “Values In Action” journey, Sealaska sold off “its grab bag of far-flung businesses”⁵ located where few Sealaska shareholders lived, and exited industries that conflicted with those values. Emphasizing incremental progress that “builds on itself,”⁶ Sealaska now selects and grows businesses based on their ability to sustain land, water, and food for future generations.⁷ As a result, it has scaled back its industrial logging operations; decreased its carbon footprint; concentrated its business activities in sustainable foods, restoring ocean and groundwater health, and low-impact tourism; and located its businesses primarily in Alaska and Washington where it can be better positioned to hire its own people.⁸ Sealaska practices its core values each day through concrete strategies, including “working together, curiosity, [fixing] what hurts us, decision-making derived from experience, and understanding guided by data and information.”⁹ Today, it generates increasing annual profits to address stakeholder priorities such as higher education and language revitalization, proving that “tying traditional values to business practices was the right call.”¹⁰

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ASK YOURSELF

1. What core cultural values should we practice/advance as we build an economy that enables our people to flourish on our terms?
2. Is there a consensus among our people about what those core values are, and how we should integrate them into our economic decision-making and actions? If not, what can we do to achieve and maintain that consensus?
3. Are our economy-building efforts strengthening or weakening our core values? If the latter, what changes must we make?
4. Do we have a common language/vocabulary that express our values through our economic decisions and actions that everyone understands? Does that language/vocabulary reflect who we are as *tribal* people?
5. Are our core cultural values reflected in the ways our nation's government currently does business (how it runs its enterprises, how it honors its obligations to commercial partners, etc.)?
6. Was entrepreneurship a value our nation traditionally embraced? Is it something we embrace today? If not, why not, and what steps must we take to embrace that value again?
7. Is our nation working to ensure our youth and future generations understand our core values and how we use them to grow our economy? What more could we be doing?¹⁰

POLICY TIPS

1. Working with key tribal stakeholders, define the values that will guide your nation's economic decision-making and implementation.
2. Conduct a thorough assessment of your nation's current economy (its active economic sectors, its nation-owned enterprises, its support of tribal citizen-entrepreneurs, etc.) to determine to what extent it “honors” the core cultural values of your people.¹¹
3. Working with your community, define your nation's “tribal bottom line” – the culturally-rooted principles and indicators it will use to drive and measure economic progress (this should include the nation's definition of “wealth” based on its core values).¹²
4. Create for your nation its own distinct **cost-benefit analysis** tool to evaluate whether existing and potential economic endeavors advance the nation's tribal bottom line.¹³
5. Thinking about “Process” (pages 14-15), evaluate your nation's current process for making and implementing its big-picture economic decisions to determine whether it is driven primarily by outsiders' value systems, or your own tribal value systems.
6. Develop a common language for your nation's economy-building approach that your people will readily identify with and embrace (where possible, express key core values and goals in your Native language).
7. Assess your nation's traditional economy and how it valued entrepreneurial activities by its people and trade with other tribal and non-tribal peoples. Determine how to integrate those principles into your current economy-building approach.