PART THREE BIGGER, BOLDER

Next-Level Opportunities to Support Native Communities

Part of *The Impact and Opportunity of Investing in Native Communities* from The Bridgespan Group and Native Americans in Philanthropy

> "Philanthropy can invest in outside-the-box initiatives and thinking."
>
> JANEEN COMENOTE (QUINAULT INDIAN NATION), FOUNDING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL URBAN INDIAN FAMILY COALITION

Since its founding in 2003, the National Urban Indian Family Coalition has been a leading voice in building awareness of and advocating for urban Native communities. Its network of more than 40 Native-led, Native-serving organizations across 22 states has built a movement for integrating urban Native issues—like education reform and civic engagement—into national policy discussions.

Fundamentally, the National Urban Indian Family Coalition is a power-building organization. Janeen Comenote (Quinault Indian Nation[1]), its founding executive director, believes funders are critical to that mission. "Invest in our Tribes, our organizations, and our individuals so that we can also live our best lives within our communities and have the organized power to make those things happen within the larger American culture that we live in," says Comenote.

For ambitious funders with an appetite for greater complexity and longer time horizons, our conversations with Native leaders surfaced some bolder investment opportunities—systemic solutions that could be transformative for Native and non-Native communities alike.

Giving Boldly

There is an abundance of opportunities with great impact potential for funders interested in investing in Native communities. Based on our discussions with Native leaders, here is a small sample of existing and emerging options for those funders hoping to increase their level of commitment.

CHANGE THE NARRATIVE

To foster a greater understanding of Native communities, harmful narratives about Native people must be addressed. There is an opportunity for philanthropy to make long-term investments in storytelling and narrative-change initiatives that work to end endemic misconceptions and bias against Native communities.

"To shift narratives, you have to really understand your audience; do opinion polling, focus groups, and research about what people think [in order] to understand the stories that are in an audience's brain and uncover those not just within the individual but in the systemic narratives," says Betsy Richards (Cherokee Nation), executive director of the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine, and

LISTEN: Corrina Gould (Lisjan Ohlone) of the Confederated Villages of Lisjan Nation and the Sogorea Te' Land Trust on Native-led nonprofits with resources to dream

Previous page: Nichole June Maher (Tlingit, Haida), president and CEO of Inatai Foundation, talks to community/grantee leaders at an event in Pasco, WA. (Photo: Ulysses Curry)

in Acadia National Park, which advances greater understanding of and support for Wabanaki Nations' heritage, living cultures, and homelands. "Then we can construct new narratives built on that information."

For the past seven years, IllumiNative has worked tirelessly to increase the visibility of—and challenge narratives about—Native Peoples. They did this through amplifying contemporary Native voices and stories to mobilize support for key Native issues. IllumiNative recently announced it will be sunsetting. The loss will leave a hole in Native-led narrative efforts as IllumiNative's work found great success on the national level. For instance, the organization was critical in successfully getting the racist name of the Washington National Football League team changed. The sunsetting emphasizes the need for philanthropy to support Native-led narrative-change organizations and to build up this much-needed infrastructure.

PARTNER WITH TRIBAL NATIONS

Tribal Nations provide essential programs and services in their communities, many of which are rural and lack access to other providers. While Tribal Nations receive some funding from the federal government, it typically is insufficient to meet community needs. Unlike state or local governments, Tribes cannot levy income taxes or property taxes on their citizens. There's an obvious gap here that provides an opportunity for philanthropy.

An increasing number of foundations are deepening their partnerships with Tribal leaders by making unrestricted grants directly to Tribal Nations for broad nation-building work. First Nations Development Institute's Charitable and Sovereign resource provides helpful guidance on how funders can make charitable contributions directly to Tribal governments.[2] The Bush Foundation, for instance, supports Tribal governance strengthening in the 23 Native Nations in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota, an effort that started in 2008 and culminated in the creation of the independent, Native-led nonprofit Native Governance Center.

Tribal Nations themselves are also making efforts to connect with philanthropists. The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) is the oldest and largest American Indian and Alaska Native organization in the United States.[3] It essentially serves as an embassy of Native Peoples in Washington, DC. Beyond its strong orientation toward engaging the federal government, NCAI has also embraced the role of philanthropy. The recently launched NCAI Foundation drives philanthropic resources toward four areas: upholding Tribal sovereignty, empowering Tribal leadership, cultivating youth leadership, and fortifying Tribal Nations. Native leaders also urged philanthropy to support the geographically diverse array of regional inter-Tribal organizations.

ELEVATE NATIVE INDIGENUITY

Indigenuity, as described by Native scholar Dr. Daniel Wildcat[4] and others, refers to the application of Indigenous knowledge and wisdom to solve contemporary problems, emphasizing

LISTEN: Betsy Richards (Cherokee Nation) of Abbe Museum on narrative-change work

a deep connection to land, air, and water, and respectful kinship with the world. At a time of multiple overlapping crises in the United States and globally, Native indigenuity can be a powerful source of innovative solutions. For example, as wildfires become more frequent and ferocious across arid parts of Western states, there is increased interest in the traditional ecological knowledge that Native people employed successfully for millennia to manage fire risk. In 2023, the State of California announced $19 million in grant funding to support Tribal government–led wildfire-resilience efforts.[5]

"We come from communities of genius since time immemorial," says Anpao Duta Flying Earth (Lakota, Dakota, Ojibwe, and Akimel O'odham), executive director of the NACA Inspired Schools Network, a Native-led network of schools. "It's up to us to push the edge of what we know to be true and possible."

There is a tremendous opportunity for philanthropy to help resource an ecosystem where Native indigenuity can thrive and where non-Native communities can learn from both traditional practices and the emerging innovations borne from those practices.

In Oregon's Columbia River Basin, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation undertook an ambitious project that illustrates indigenuity in action: Čáw Pawá Láakni (They Are Not Forgotten). "As an act of sovereignty, the Tribe brought every living person that had ever done research there back to the reservation to reclaim that knowledge," shares Megan Minoka Hill (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin), senior director of the Project on Indigenous Governance and Development and director of the Honoring Nations program at the Harvard Kennedy School. In one instance, a non-Native anthropologist, who had spent 30 years with elders researching the region, shared the firsthand accounts he had collected, including more than 1,000 traditional place names. So began a 12-year process to record Native place names to create an ethnographic atlas from historical documents and interviews with elders about their homeland, with linked coordinates in the Tribes' geographic information system mapping database.

The Confederated Tribes rely on the wealth of knowledge captured in Čáw Pawá Láakni to set priorities, develop environmental policy, and manage resources. "They're using it to reinforce treaty rights, for language learning, to develop strategies for climate-change mitigation, and transmission of traditional knowledge," says Hill. "With this one act of sovereignty, they reclaimed what's theirs to strengthen and build their Nation in a multitude of ways."

RESOURCE INDIGENUITY

"We come from communities of genius since time immemorial. It's up to us to push the edge of what we know to be true and possible."

ANPAO DUTA FLYING EARTH (LAKOTA, DAKOTA, OJIBWE, AND AKIMEL O'ODHAM), EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NACA INSPIRED SCHOOLS NETWORK

UNLOCK PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FUNDING

Philanthropy is uniquely positioned to leverage federal resources and reshape private market capital to foster sustainable economic and community development in Indian Country.[6] Through grants, program-related investments, and mission-related investments, private capital can be incentivized to invest in Native communities. Existing federal funding will provide additional resources while supporting capacity building and replicable models for Tribes across the country.

Two newly launched initiatives illustrate what's possible when philanthropy engages in this work. The Indigenous Futures Fund, announced in February 2024, hopes to raise $2 million in grants and over $25 million in credit to mobilize private investment capital to accelerate the flow of federal and private funds to Native entrepreneurs and Tribal enterprises, and increase the capacity of Native community development financial institutions (CDFIs). The Tribal Community Vision Partnership seeks to change how capital flows into Indian Country. The partnership centers the role of philanthropy as a catalyst for leveraging existing federal funds and reassuring capital markets to build community and develop economies. "We are excited to introduce this innovative approach to Tribal self-determination and philanthropy engagement," says Erik Stegman (Carry the Kettle First Nation—Nakoda) CEO of Native Americans in Philanthropy.

"There's a lot of Native-led nonprofits that are essentially doing this integral community development work," says Chrystel Cornelius (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians), president and CEO of Oweesta Corporation, the longest-standing national Native CDFI intermediary, which often offers loans when conventional lenders will not. Cornelius sees a similar role for philanthropy: "I think philanthropy can show up to provide bridge capital. If you can get more equity into a project, you're able to leverage more investment."

SUPPORT LAND RETURN INITIATIVES

Philanthropy can provide the capital needed for land return transactions, which restore ownership or stewardship of land to ancestral inhabitants. Land is fundamental to sovereignty, cultural preservation, and nation building—critical to thriving Native communities. These land transactions often emerge with a tight timeline and require nimble support.

"Land title is somewhat like the ring of power in *The Lord of the Rings*," says Jodi Archambault (Hunkpapa, Oglala Lakota), president and CEO of Anpo. With that in mind, her hope is that in the next 10 years, "a million acres [will be] returned to Indigenous people."

Although traditionally philanthropy has been reluctant to fund land return efforts, there are some signs of philanthropic engagement. Regional funders, especially, are recognizing the needs of Native communities in their geographical areas, including the interconnectedness of land to thriving Native communities.

"In 2020, there weren't a lot of examples of Land Back, but now we've seen so many different ways foundations are supporting Land Back here in California," says Dr. Dana Arviso (Diné), director of Indigenous programs at the Decolonizing Wealth Project, which made its first round of grants under the California Tribal Land Return initiative.

INDIGENIZE EDUCATION

> "Imagine if we were able to fully define higher education for ourselves and not have it framed through a Western dominant, colonial lens."
>
> SKA-XJEING-GA VICKY STOTT (HO-CHUNK NATION), SENIOR PROGRAM OFFICER, W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION

For instance, the Sogorea Te' Land Trust and its allies launched a campaign in 2015 to engage Bay Area foundations in a unique means of support: the Shuumi Land Tax. Eight foundations signed on during the first year, and it has grown steadily since; in March 2024, the Kataly Foundation contributed $20 million.[7]

In April 2024, the Yurok Tribe entered into an agreement with the Save the Redwoods League, the National Park Service, and California State Parks to return 125 acres to the Tribe—ancestral land taken by white settlers during the Gold Rush.[8] The Yurok Tribe will comanage the parcel with the National Park Service and California State Parks as a gateway to Redwood National and State Parks. The following month, the Wilton Rancheria Tribe regained control of a 77-acre parcel of its ancestral land near Sacramento.[9]

INDIGENIZE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Investing in accredited Native-led educational institutions and structures that reflect Indigenous values, culture, and language can break harmful cycles and misperceptions. "Imagine if we were able to fully define higher education for ourselves and not have it framed through a Western dominant, colonial lens," says Ska-xjeing-ga Vicky Stott (Ho-Chunk Nation), a senior program officer at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. "That could go a long way to break through cycles of colonialism that have continued to hold Tribes and Native communities back in terms of how we define our own sense of agency, how we even perceive our own sense of wisdom, expertise, and goodness that every single one of our communities brings forward."

In May 2024, Oklahoma State University celebrated a historic first—the inaugural graduating class in a physician training program on a Native American reservation, in affiliation with a Tribal government. The College of Osteopathic Medicine at the Cherokee Nation education is a blend of Western medicine and traditional Native healing practices—a model for a new approach that indigenizes education. It's worth noting that osteopathic medicine—as well as the 42 osteopathic medical schools now accrediting physicians in the United States—is heavily influenced by Indigenous knowledge.[10]

Another example is the growing NACA Inspired Schools Network—now 13 schools in five states, each designed by Native communities, rooted in their values and connection to the land. Each school has a rigorous college prep curriculum that promotes Native culture, identity, and community investment.

PROMOTE THRIVING NATIVE LANGUAGES

When we asked Native leaders what they envisioned in the future, the resurgence of Native languages came up time and time again. "If we lose our language, we lose our culture," says Lori Pourier (Oglala Lakota), founder and senior fellow of First Peoples Fund. "There's this amazing resurgence right now. Philanthropy has an opportunity here to really step up."

Northwest Area Foundation President and CEO Kevin Walker (center) talks to school staff at Maȟpíya Lúta, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization located on the Pine Ridge Reservation, home to the Oglala Lakȟóta (Sioux) Tribe. Its comprehensive Lakȟóta language curriculum gives K-12 youth an opportunity to "learn and embrace their language." (Photo: Steve Wewerka)

Despite systematic efforts by the federal government to erase Native languages, fluency is on the rise among Native youth. Still, of the 167 Indigenous languages spoken in the United States today, the Bureau of Indian Affairs estimates that only 20 may remain by 2050.[11] The language education and immersion programs that fuel rebirth and renewal are severely underfunded as they too often fall outside of conventional philanthropy's siloed issue-based approach.

First Nations Development Institute's Native Language Immersion Initiative supports new generations of Native American language speakers and helps Native communities establish infrastructure and models for replicable Native language immersion programs. The Lakota Language Consortium, which supports the revitalization and preservation of the Lakȟótiyapi language by developing curricula and training teachers, reaches over 20,000 students in more than 60 schools.

BOLSTER DATA INFRASTRUCTURE

Inaccuracy of grantmaking data related to Native communities remains a challenge. Philanthropy can support Native-led data projects that track needs and impact in Native communities and hold philanthropy accountable to their commitments. While some datasets do not track Native-related activity at all, others track it with loose definitions of what is "Native-led" and "Native-serving." Although this issue over what defines an organization led by people of color can affect any community (e.g., it could lead to overestimation of the amounts of funding an organization receives), the issue can be particularly pronounced for Native communities. Added complexities include recognized and unrecognized Tribes, Tribally governed nonprofits and US-recognized nongovernmental organizations and Indigenous people from other parts of the world, along with the general lack of data for Native communities.

LISTEN: Jodi Archambault (Hunkpapa, Oglala Lakota) of Anpo on revitalizing Native language

"We don't yet have all the tools or accountability that we need," says Nichole June Maher (Tlingit, Haida), president and CEO of Inatai Foundation. "A grant that should be counted to an Indigenous community needs to be led by and for Native people, and assets purchased are retained under Indigenous control."

For instance, Maher explains, grants to construct buildings on a university campus should not be considered an investment in Native communities just because Native students may use the facility. "It is not a grant that creates an asset, an ownership in an Indigenous community," she says.

In 2017, when the Bush Foundation decided to review its Native-focused work across all its program areas, it found notable discrepancies in how data were collected and coded over decades.[12] The foundation reviewed its archives as far back as 1970 to meticulously clean data to provide an accurate picture of the foundation's Native-focused funding over time and found surprising fluctuations. These findings helped improve its process for coding grants and tracking demographic information—for all groups—thus ensuring that the foundation is more intentional in its approach to reaching Native communities.

FOSTER NON-NATIVE FUNDER LEARNING AND COLLABORATION

Philanthropy can continue to deepen investment in Native-led foundations and intermediaries to help them develop their capacity for responsible grantmaking within Native communities. Their decades of collective experience could help attract and educate foundations and program officers new to funding in Native communities. "When learning how to engage with an Indigenous Tribe, there's no manual, there's no playbook," says AlexAnna Salmon (Yup'ik and Aleut), president of the Igiugig Village Council.

FOSTER LEARNING

"When learning how to engage with an Indigenous Tribe, there's no manual, there's no playbook."

ALEXANNA SALMON (YUP'IK AND ALEUT), PRESIDENT, IGIUGIG VILLAGE COUNCIL

In the summer of 2024, Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP) partnered with Alaska Venture Fund and brought a group of 10 peer funders to Igiugig Village in Alaska to explore how their support could be transformative for Native communities. "It was the best experience of my life," one of the funders told President Salmon. (See Erik Stegman's recent article on the value of such funder trips and the importance of human-centered impact measurement.[13])

Native Voices Rising, a collaborative grantmaking initiative created by Common Counsel Foundation and NAP, prioritizes funder organizing and funder education. In the spring of 2024, its inaugural Funder Learning Fellowship convened 10 foundation program officers to begin to build a community of practice. The hope is that "they can understand what it means to build power in Native communities through examples of some of our grant partners," explains Arviso, who was Native Voices Rising's program strategist at the time but now leads Indigenous programs at the Decolonizing Wealth Project. "Whether that's around creating clean energy initiatives in Tribal communities, building the next generation of Native political leaders, or doing language revitalization work."

On Sept. 25, 2019, Winnemem Wintu tribe members and allies held a protest at the Shasta Dam Visitor Center, to demand a display that would educate the public about the destruction to the land, salmon, and Indigenous people brought on by Shasta Dam. Chief Caleen Sisk photographed a topographic map of Shasta Dam and its tributaries, including the McCloud River, homeland of the Winnemem Wintu people. (Photo: ©Tom Levy/www.tomlevy.net)

Expanding What's Possible for Shared Abundance

Many Native leaders we spoke with suggested that truly transformative change begins when philanthropy embraces Indigenous values and ways in its own work.

Over a century ago, the US Bureau of Reclamation, which oversees water resources in the Western states, built Shasta Dam in Northern California—an infrastructure project so large it required the construction of the world's largest cement plant and nearly 5,000 around-the clock laborers.[14] It became integral to the entire economy of California—which now, if a nation, would be the fifth largest in the world.

It also devastated the Winnemem Wintu, a Tribe that for over a millennium had made their home on the banks of the McCloud River.[15] The dam project flooded 30,000 acres,[16] including 90 percent of their ancestral territory.[17] Cultural sites, burial grounds, and whole villages vanished in the wake of a state-directed economic development undertaking that treated local Native people as invisible and expendable. By 2023, the Tribe held just 42 acres.[18]

Back in the spring of 2023, Donna Bransford (non-Native), senior program officer at the Kataly Foundation, met Chief Caleen Sisk, the spiritual leader and Tribal chief of the Winnemem Wintu, who at the time was working to reclaim over 1,000 acres of ancestral land from a willing seller. "Our ancestors have told me we will be successful," Bransford remembers Sisk telling her. Says Bransford: "She made it very clear that she was not asking for my help. She was inviting me to join her—to be part of something bigger than myself or any foundation."

That's quite a different balance of power and motivation than what is commonly seen in conventional philanthropy. Bransford eagerly embraced Sisk's mutual-benefit framing as she rallied her peer funders to also support the effort to reclaim the land. "Who wouldn't want to be part of that?" asks Bransford.

On Indigenous Peoples' Day in 2023, the Winnemem Wintu regained control[19] of a substantial tract of 1,080 acres of their ancestral homelands. "They're now once again the rightful stewards of this land," says Bransford. "That will mean people living in California are in a different relationship with this land. That will mean the salmon will once again have a chance to thrive in these rivers. That's incredibly important for Chief Caleen's grandchildren and her future generations, but I also believe it's important for my 10-year-old son and for my future grandchildren. What will these shifts mean for all of us? I want to live in the world she is creating."

Imagine the impact of a philanthropic model that joins—not "helps"—Native people in that ongoing project of creating a world shaped by the Five Rs: respect, reciprocity, responsibility, redistribution, and relationships.

Endnotes

1 Throughout this report, we share the Tribal identities of interviewees.
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6 US law recognizes various types of "Indian Country": reservations, informal reservations, dependent Indian communities, allotments, and special designations. To be recognized as Indian Country, the land must either be within an Indian reservation or be federal trust land (land owned by the federal government but held in trust for a Tribe or Tribal member). Source: "What Is Indian Country?" Indian Country Criminal Jurisdiction - by Native.law, accessed April 4, 2025.
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19 Ibid.

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