PART ONE ASSETS AND ATTRIBUTES

Understanding the Strengths of Native Communities

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

> **"You can look at Native communities as dire, whether from extraction or isolation, but flip that script and we're emerging economies. We have viable workforces. When we look at climate, more and more people are coming to where we're living. We need to build up the infrastructure, not only for us—we are the future of America."**
>
> CHRYSTEL CORNELIUS (ONEIDA NATION OF WISCONSIN, TURTLE MOUNTAIN BAND OF CHIPPEWA INDIANS), PRESIDENT AND CEO, OWEESTA CORPORATION

Among the constant hurdles that Native-led nonprofits and Tribal Nations face are the general lack of knowledge about Native communities and the widespread stereotypes that persist. "The myths and misperceptions held by philanthropy [are] almost one-to-one correlated with the general public, and the general public's perceptions are really awful," says Michael Roberts (Tlingit Tribe)[1], president and CEO of First Nations Development Institute, which collaborated on studies of foundation program officers' attitudes toward Native issues.

The truth is, when it comes to Native communities, there is an abundance of strengths and opportunities.

There are Native communities and Tribal Nations[2] all across the United States. Today, nearly 7.4 million people living in the United States identify as Native,[3] a subset of which are formally enrolled in "an identifiable group of American Indians by the Department of the Interior, Court of Claims, the Indian Claims Commission, or a State."[4] Native people live and thrive in Tribal communities, rural communities, and urban areas, each with their own particular contexts and stories of identity, migration, and resource distribution.

The federal government recognizes 574 Tribal Nations,[5] but there are approximately 400 additional Tribes that it fails to recognize.[6] Native people and their communities have kept alive 167 Native languages and control approximately 56 million acres.[7,8] The Navajo Nation alone is bigger than Maryland and Massachusetts combined.

"These are living, contemporary cultures with a future, not just with a traumatic past," says Kevin Walker (non-Native), president and CEO of the Northwest Area Foundation (NWAF), a funder with a growing portfolio of grants to Native communities and Native-led organizations. For Walker, as well as for many non-Native people, that means: "You have to relearn what country we're in. You've got to get through the pervasive ignorance and avoidance. You have to want to go there."

LISTEN: Tayshu Bommelyn (Tolowa Dee-ni', Karuk, Wintu) of Native Cultures Fund on abundance and assets

Previous page: Tawney Brunsch (Oglala Sioux), executive director of Lakota Funds and South Dakota Homeownership Coalition secretary, Kyle, SD. (Photo: Uzoma Obasi)

Many Tribal Nations have strong and growing economies.[9] Tribal Nations and their affiliated entities employ almost 350,000 workers and indirectly support an additional 600,000 jobs. These jobs generate $40 billion per year in wages and benefits along with an additional $9 billion spillover impact in state and regional economies.

In some cases, the burgeoning economy on a reservation becomes the economic driver of the entire region. 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, works with many Tribal Nations, including the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, and sees a similar pattern. "At 8 a.m., there is a traffic jam going onto the reservation from people going to work, from every background you can imagine," she says. "It's because the Tribal Nations are often the economic engines of their regions and are able to provide all these jobs."

Getting Smart as You Engage

In the process of our research, we often heard frustration with the pervasive lack of understanding about Native America by philanthropic funders. "There are a lot of smart people who work in philanthropy, and yet so many of them have little to no understanding for how Native people have come to be in our current society," says Dr. Dana Arviso (Diné), director of Indigenous programs at the Decolonizing Wealth Project. "I think that non-Native people equate Native people and poverty as synonymous without interrogating the history of the United States, without understanding that settler colonialism, land theft, and extraction of natural resources are what caused poverty."

Our interviewees urge funders to do their homework and not burden Native Peoples with that work. Many Native leaders shared that constantly being expected to serve as educators is exhausting and retraumatizing. A wealth of helpful resources exist—including many written by Native-led, Native-serving organizations—for funders ready to lean in. (See for example, NAP's Five Rs of Indigenous Philanthropy and our short list of Get Smart Resources, both at the end of this section.)

Several themes emerged in our interviews around some essential, baseline understandings about Native communities for non-Native philanthropy to embrace. Our non-exhaustive starter list of these understandings includes the following.

Sovereignty, self-determination, and nation building are central to understanding and engaging with Native communities. Federally recognized Tribes are sovereign nations that have jurisdiction over their citizens regarding laws and regulations, taxes, and legal processes.

LISTEN: Kevin Walker (non-Native) of the Northwest Area Foundation on funders reckoning with the history

According to the National Congress of American Indians: "The essence of tribal sovereignty is the ability to govern and to protect and enhance the health, safety, and welfare of tribal citizens within tribal territory."[10]

The idea of sovereignty extends beyond intergovernmental affairs to cultural and economic spheres such as managing food systems and data about Native Peoples. Sovereignty is not something that can be granted, revoked, or reclaimed. It is inherent to Tribal Nations and their Peoples. However, even today many Tribes continue to fight for their sovereignty to be recognized by public authorities and/or defend their sovereignty from encroachment by others, including public and private interests.

"Everything should be seen through the lens of sovereignty, whether you're engaging directly with a Tribal community or through an intermediary," says AlexAnna Salmon (Yup'ik, Aleut), president of the Igiugig Village Council, explaining that workforce development programs can be seen as a means of economic sovereignty or language programs as a form of nation building. "[Sovereignty] will center the goals of our Tribal Nation—to sustain and thrive in place. It hits on everything. It hits on well-being, succession planning, and intergenerational leadership. It's holding that asset for the community to have in perpetuity."

Deeply intertwined with the concept of sovereignty is the principle of self-determination, which extends to all Native people whether enrolled in a Tribe or not. Rooted in the imperatives of Tribal sovereignty, Native self-determination means that Native Peoples can and should make their own choices about their well-being, their lifeways, and their assets. As such, self-determination is both an end and a means to an end.

In the context of the contemporary US legal system, for Tribes to embrace their sovereignty and advance the interests of their citizens, they must undertake a wide and complex array of activities related to politics, economics, and culture to maintain vibrant societies for their Peoples. They must build enduring nations that can survive and self-sustain generations into the future. The holistic, long-term Nations-building work required in Tribal communities is fundamentally different from programmatic investments that a non-Native funder might make outside of Native communities. Nations-building work might call for investments in physical infrastructure, cultural preservation, and Tribal government capacity—all work that is rarely, if ever, embraced by philanthropic funders.

Heterogeneity and diversity. There is no monolithic Native community. Each Tribe and community has a distinct history, culture, belief system, language, and system of government as well as land holdings and access to resources and power. Unique characteristics constitute substantive differences between Native communities and from non-Native communities. "There's no such thing as Native American life—there's only Native American lives," said the Ojibwe writer David Treuer, who referred to this as "radical diversity." He added, "We had diversity before Europeans came here. We kept it."[11]

LISTEN: AlexAnna Salmon (Yup'ik, Aleut) of the Igiugig Village Council on sovereignty

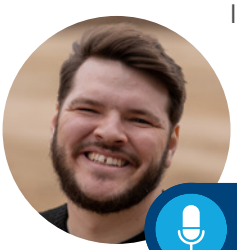
"INDIGENUITY"

"We're very creative, very innovative, because of the circumstances in which we live. We call it 'indigenuity.'"

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

Federal funding has long been insufficient to meet the needs of the diverse array of recognized Tribal Nations. This federal funding is tied to historical treaty obligations the US government has made with Tribal Nations for their land—a government-to-government relationship unique from other racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Importantly, the federal government, in its failure to recognize approximately 400 Tribes—the full diversity of Native America—cuts those communities off from federal resources.[12]

Indigenous innovation. Tribal Nations each constitute holistic ecosystems in which Native people for millennia have developed innovative, resourceful ways to solve universal challenges, ranging from conservation and sustainable, regenerative food systems to economic development and governance. "We're very creative, very innovative, because of the circumstances in which we live. We call it 'indigenuity,'" says Salmon of the Igiugig Village Council.



Hill of the Project on Indigenous Governance and Development and the Honoring Nations program points to a recent example around innovations in governance in Tribal communities that could be broadly transferable. "There is a renaissance in Indian Country[13] having to do with constitutional reform," she says, explaining that Tribal Nations are reclaiming their forms of government in contemporary ways to meet the needs of their citizens. "You see around the world, particularly with countries where a government failed and left a power vacuum, people come together to restore systems. We get calls from the World Bank and other institutions saying, 'Hey, we're working with this community. What can we learn from what Indian Country is doing in that regard?'"

Resilience and healing. Despite centuries of colonization, genocide, and incursions on their sovereignty, Native communities endure and flourish. Dominant narratives about Native Peoples in the United States often subvert and divert attention from this resilience with wrong-headed tropes of tragedy, powerlessness, and even extinction. Native leaders we interviewed inspire with a different framing: we are still here; we have always been here; we will continue to be here.

To funders, the advice that comes from that framing can be direct. "We don't need your sympathy—we need understanding," says RJ Martinez (Santa Clara Pueblo), early childhood director of partnerships at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) Foundation. "We want you to understand our resilience, what we still have, [and] how we still hold on to it."

LISTEN: Brian Barlow (Cherokee Nation) of Native Americans in Philanthropy on the role of philanthropy in healing

National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC

Get Smart Resources

There are a variety of helpful resources for funders to learn more about Native communities, including many written by Native-led, Native-serving organizations. Here are just a few:

- **Native Americans in Philanthropy and Candid's "Native 101" timeline**: A chronological timeline written by Dr. Karina Walters, showing historically traumatic events, settler colonial policies, and Native resistance movements.[14]
- *Decolonizing Wealth:* Edgar Villanueva's book analyzing the colonialist dynamics at play in non-Native philanthropy and presenting seven steps to healing and decolonizing.[15]
- The **National Congress of American Indians'** Tribal Nations primer: A basic overview of the history and underlying principles of Tribal governance.[16]
- **The National Museum of the American Indian's** Native Knowledge 360° Essential Understandings about American Indians: A framework to create new student learning experiences on the diverse cultures, histories, and contemporary lives of Native Peoples.[17]

Edgar Villanueva, founder and CEO of the Decolonizing Wealth Project, argues that philanthropic relationships, power sharing, and funding can serve as medicine to heal the intergenerational trauma inflicted on people of color and specifically Native and Black communities. It is a forceful argument for land return, reparations, and power building.

"It's important for us as we're doing this work, and as funders are doing this work, to collect the data, advance the research, work with communities," says Emily Edenshaw (Yup'ik, Iñupiaq), president and CEO of the Alaska Native Heritage Center. "[But] we also have to normalize the healing."

• • •

While Native leaders underscored the importance of funders doing their homework and deepening their understanding of the history and context of Native communities, they also urged funders not to linger in a prolonged learning journey that gets in the way of action. ***Part Two*** *presents a set of ready entry points for funders to act now.*

Endnotes

1 Throughout this report, we share the Tribal identities of interviewees.

2 Native Nations are independent nations within a nation. The term "Nation" shows respect for sovereignty and the fact that Native Nations each have their own systems of government. Source: Twyla Baker, Wizipan Little Elk, Bryan Pollard, and Margaret Yellow Bird, "How to Talk About Native Nations: A Guide," Native Governance Center, May 27, 2021. In this report, we also refer directly to Tribal governments.

3 "Facts for Features: National Native American Heritage Month: November 2024," United States Census Bureau, October 25, 2024.

4 *Constitution, By-Laws & Standing Rules of Order*, National Congress of American Indians, October 2019.

5 "Federally Recognized Indian Tribes and Resources for Native Americans," USAGov, accessed March 31, 2025.

6 *Indian Issues: Federal Funding for Non-Federally Recognized Tribes*, US Government Accountability Office, April 2012.

7 *Native Language Revitalization: Literature Review*, Bureau of Indian Affairs, August 2023.

8 "Native American Ownership and Governance of Natural Resources," US Department of the Interior Office of Natural Resources Revenue, accessed March 31, 2025.

9 Patrice H. Kunesh, "The Power of Self-Determination in Building Sustainable Economies in Indian Country," Advancing Anti-Racist Economic Research and Policy, Economic Policy Institute, June 15, 2022.

10 *Tribal Nations and the United States: An Introduction*, National Congress of American Indians, February 2020.

11 David Treuer, "Author David Treuer on Rewriting the Native American Narrative," interview by Jeffrey Brown, *PBS News Hour*, PBS, May 2, 2019.

12 Eilis O'Neill, "Unrecognized Tribes Struggle Without Federal Aid During Pandemic," NPR, April 17, 2021.

13 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.

14 Karina Walters, "History Through a Native Lens," Investing in Native Communities, accessed April 4, 2025.

15 Edgar Villanueva, *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*, 2nd ed., (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2021).

16 *Tribal Nations and the United States: An Introduction*, National Congress of American Indians.

17 *Essential Understandings about American Indians*, National Museum of the American Indian's Native Knowledge 360°, accessed April 4, 2025.

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