

## Native Nation Building through Economic Development



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### What is nation building?

Historically, Indigenous nations had sophisticated and self-sustaining societies. European colonization and subsequent federal policies often eroded the Indigenous nations' societal systems. Since the 1970's, Indigenous nations and peoples have sought to re-build and strengthen their nations. This movement to increase Indigenous nations' capacities for self-rule and self-determination is called *Native nation building*.

The Native Nations Institute's understanding of Indigenous nation building emerges from 30 years of research by the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development (Harvard Project, founded in 1986) and Native Nations Institute (NNI, founded in 2001). In NNI's usage, nation building refers to the enhanced capacity of Indigenous nations to realize their own economic, educational, cultural, and political objectives through foundations of their own design.

The Harvard Project and NNI asked, "why do some Indigenous nations

experience greater success in community and economic development than others?" The Harvard Project and NNI found that Indigenous nations face two challenges to community and economic development: 1) how do you provide your citizens with opportunities to live productive, satisfying lives and support their families? Most nations want their citizens to be self-sustaining individuals. 2) Where do you find the financial means to support capable and effective tribal governments? Non-Indigenous governments utilize taxes to support their governmental functions, but that is not the norm for Indigenous nations.

In instance after instance, the Harvard Project and NNI found that successful economic and community development didn't depend on whether Indigenous nations had natural resource assets, a good location with access to a population base, a capable labor force, or other common economic characteristics. The Harvard Project and NNI uncovered that economic development is first and foremost a *political* problem. Successful community and economic development relies on a solid foundation of *governance*. Governance is the fundamental rules, written or oral, that nations depend on to coordinate actions and achieve goals. Once you have your "political house" in order, then the economic assets and opportunities can begin to pay off.

**Governance is the critical factor for successfully rebuilding Indigenous nations.** Nation building involves building institutions of self-government that are culturally appropriate to the nation and that are effective in addressing the nation's challenges. It involves developing the nation's capacity to make timely, strategically informed decisions about its affairs and to implement those decisions. It involves a comprehensive effort to rebuild societies that work.

The five core principles of Native nation building are:

1. Sovereignty *in practice* – the nation "calls the shots"
2. Capable governing institutions – the nation backs up authority with competence
3. Cultural match – the nation's governing institutions match community beliefs about how authority should be organized and exercised

4. Strategic orientation – governance decisions are made with long-term priorities in mind
5. Public-spirited leadership – instead of politics as a boxing ring where factions fight to control the goodies.

In practical terms for economic development, this might mean:

1. The nation adopting laws, codes and policies to regulate business within its jurisdiction, e.g., a corporation or business activity code requiring all entities to register their business activities; a uniform commercial code that governs commercial transactions to protect assets; a land use plan that identifies how can land be utilized.
2. The nation enforces its own laws and has neutral dispute resolutions mechanisms.
3. Everyone – leaders and citizens alike - knows the "rules" and knows their roles in helping the nation achieve its goals.
4. The nation has a commonly shared vision that includes a sustainable economy AND makes a commitment to supporting a private sector. The private sector in the United States is responsible for 80% of all new jobs and generating taxes but is often a very small portion of the Native economic base. Citizen entrepreneurs can assist the nation by helping to remind/instill traditional values, build pride, and reverse a sense of helplessness. Public-spirited leadership allows everyone to contribute to building and strengthening the economy.

This is by no means an exhaustive list. As the Harvard Project and NNI's research continues to find, the five core principles apply to *all* facets of government. The government is a tool for achieving the nation's goals. If it going to be effective, then the government will need: *clear goals, clear rules, and clear roles*.

As a tribal leader stated: "The best defense of sovereignty is to exercise it effectively."

Each of us has a role to play in the health of our communities. What will be your legacy?

Readers are encouraged to visit the Native Nations Institute website for more information and resources at [nni.arizona.edu](http://nni.arizona.edu).

