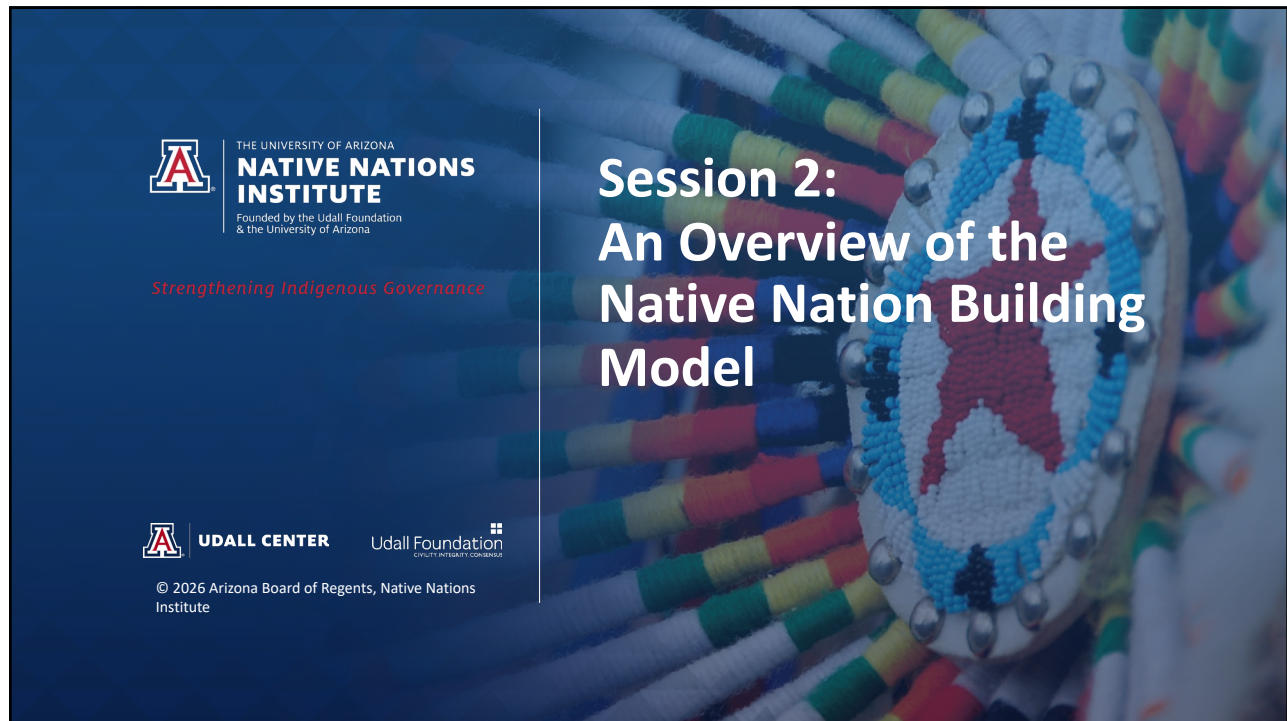


Remaking Tribal Constitutions Seminar
Session 2: An Overview of the Native Nation Building Model
July 15-16, 2026 | Tucson, AZ



 THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
NATIVE NATIONS INSTITUTE
Founded by the Udall Foundation & the University of Arizona

Strengthening Indigenous Governance

Session 2: An Overview of the Native Nation Building Model

 **UDALL CENTER**  Udall Foundation
CIVILITY INTEGRITY COURAGE

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The Research Findings – the Native Nation Building Approach

1987: A research project:

*Why are some Native nations more
successful than others at achieving
their goals?*



Strengthening Indigenous Governance



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Two Approaches to Community and Economic Development on Reservations

Standard Approach

Pretty much what we've had for years

Nation-Building Approach

Being invented by Indigenous nations today

How do these approaches differ, and why does one work so much better than the other?

The Standard Approach

Survive To Succeed as a Native Nation

- Defines “success” as getting the next grant
- Short-term, not strategic
- Views economic development as an economic problem
- Looks for “home runs,” instead of building the nation step-by-step
- Others with money and resources set the agenda
- Views Indigenous cultures as obstacles to success

Non-Indian Governments under the Standard Approach:

- Fund tribal government as annual “programs”
- Fund economic development as “projects”
- Hold tribal government responsible to the funder
- Retain ultimate veto power over tribal decisions
- Retain control at all costs
- Seek credit and avoid embarrassment



The Six-Step Planning Process under the Standard Approach

1. Find a good grant writer
2. Call in the grant writer and the planners and tell them to go find some grants
3. Start whatever can be funded
4. Appoint your political supporters or relatives to run projects
5. Micromanage the projects
6. Pray the projects survive, or that they die after you're out of office



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What Usually Happens Under the Standard Approach?

- Failed enterprises
- A politics of spoils & factions
- A brain drain
- Outside perceptions of incompetence and chaos that undermine the defense of sovereignty
- Inside perceptions of incompetence and chaos that undermine the confidence of the community
- Continuing dependence and poverty
- Real sovereignty hangs by a thread

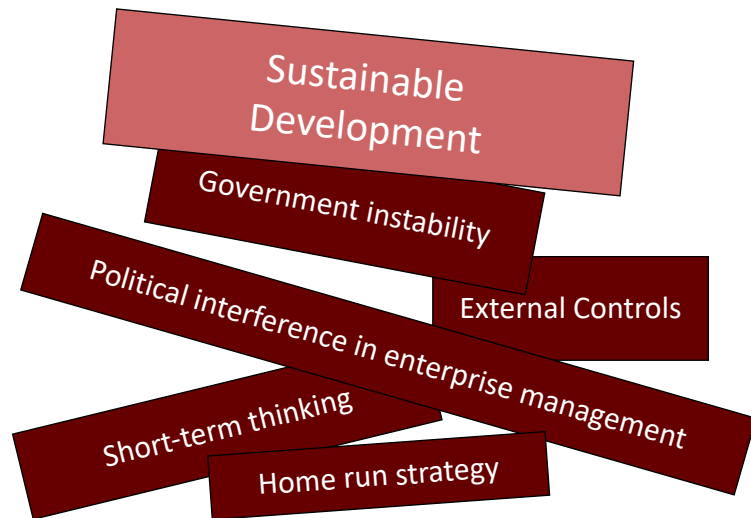


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In short, the standard approach produces a poor foundation for sustainable development...



Is there an alternative?

Our work in this context focuses entirely on “Native Nation Building”

Our definition:

Nation building refers to the processes by which a Native nation enhances its own foundational capacity for effective self-governance and self-determined community and economic development.



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Our research findings ...

points to **5 key drivers** of economic and community development success – the **Nation Building Approach**.



1. Practical self-rule (or practical self-determination)

The nation or community makes the major decisions



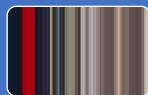
2. Capable Governing Institutions

The nation or community backs up authority with competence in their government (laws and neutral dispute resolution)



3. Cultural Match

Governing institutions match community beliefs about how authority should be organized and exercised



4. Strategic Orientation

The nation's strategic approach is one where decisions are made with long-term priorities in mind



5. Public-spirited Leadership

Individuals who recognize the need for fundamental change and can engage with community to make that change happen



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1. Practical self-rule

Practical self-determination or self-rule
(the nation or community makes the major decisions)

Native nations that have been willing and able to assert self-governing power have significantly increased their chances of sustainable community development – and meeting their other collective goals.



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1. Practical self-rule

Who's calling the shots?

Practical self-rule (self-determination, self-government) means the nation or community makes the major decisions in its affairs and over its lands—and it takes responsibility for what happens.

Examples: White Mountain Apache Tribe, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation



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2. Capable Governing Institutions

Capable government (the nation or community backs up authority with competence)

The chances of sustainable development rise as Indigenous nations create “legal infrastructure” (that is, make laws and regulations), build capable bureaucracies, and put in place effective, non-politicized dispute-resolution mechanisms.

“If you’re not in the constitution-fixing business, you’re not in economic development; you’re not in self-governance; you’re not sovereign.”

Chairman John A. (Rocky) Barrett (mid-1980s)



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2. Capable Governing Institutions

- A constitution (written or not) that establishes the rules by which the nation governs its affairs
- Stability in government (the rules don't change, or change only through established protocols)
- Clear separation of powers (or allocations of responsibility)
- Careful management of the politics-business connection
- Effective and non-politicized resolution of disputes
- The ability to make timely, binding decisions and get things done



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3. Cultural Match

Cultural match (governing institutions match community beliefs about how authority should be organized and exercised)

Institutions that build and innovate upon Indigenous conceptions of governing responsibilities fare better than those whose form departs from such conceptions.



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3. Cultural Match

Two successful nations that govern very differently:

**Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the
Flathead Reservation**

Cochiti Pueblo

Key point: In each case, the nation's government has the support of its people (**legitimacy**) and can get the job done (**effectiveness**).

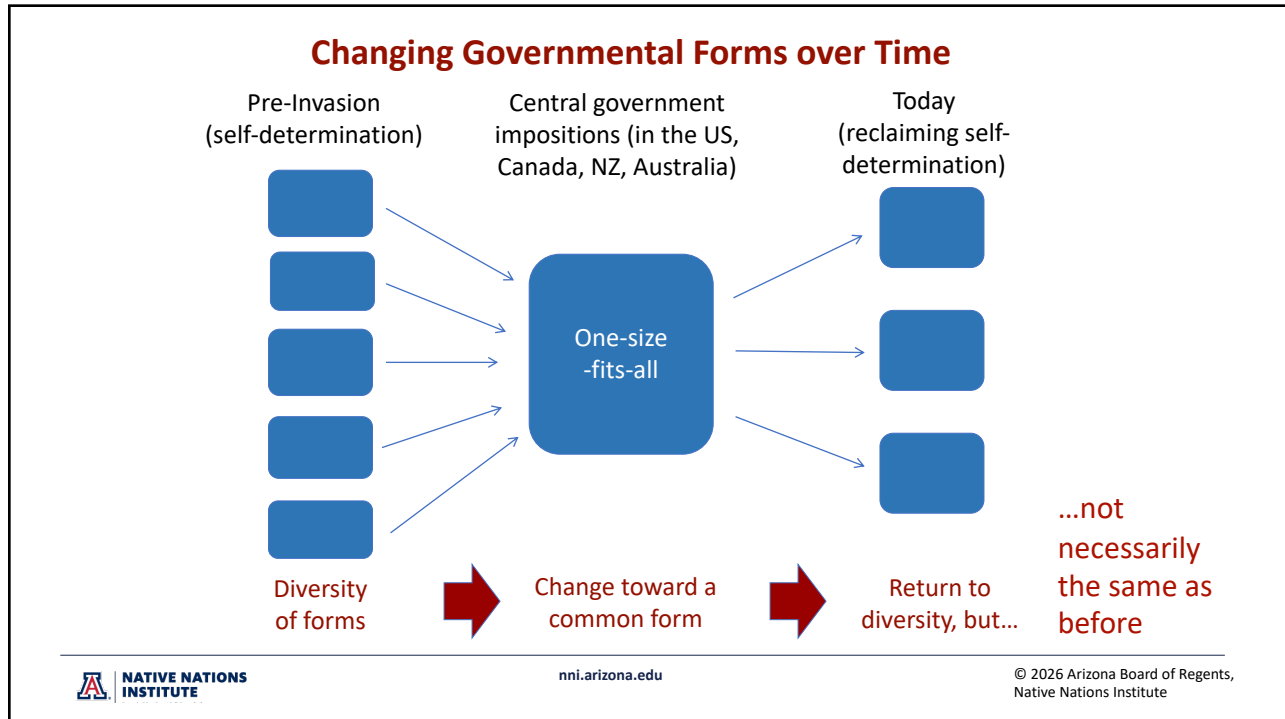
Both are crucial elements in successful government.



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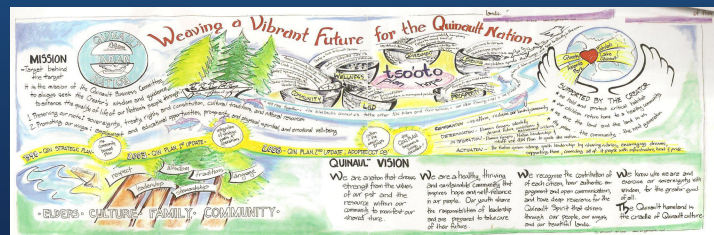
4. Strategic Orientation

A strategic approach
(decisions are made with long-term priorities in mind)

Q-Munity Roadmap
(Quinault Indian Nation)



Successful Native nations tend to approach development not as a quick fix for poverty but as a means of building a society that works.



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4. Strategic Orientation

Maori leader Sir Tipene O'Regan, elder of the Ngai Tahu iwi (tribe) in Aotearoa (New Zealand):

“Do we just want to be rich
pakehas [white people] with a
sun tan?”

Or is our purpose “the
intergenerational transmission
of identity and heritage?”



5. Public-spirited Leadership

Individuals who recognize the need
for fundamental change and can
engage with community to make that
change happen.

In successful Indian nations, there is
typically a group of individuals who
recognize the need for fundamental change
in the way things are done and can bring the
community along with them in building that
future.



5. Public-spirited Leadership

Individuals or groups who...

- ... are willing to break away from the standard approach
- ... can present a vision of a different future
- ... can promote the foundational changes that such visions require
- ... and can demonstrate themselves the behavior the nation or community needs (not only talk the talk but walk the walk)



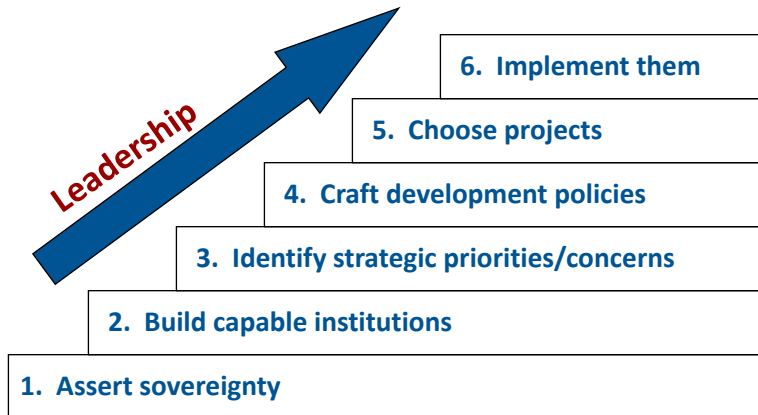
5. Public-spirited Leadership

Where are such leaders found?

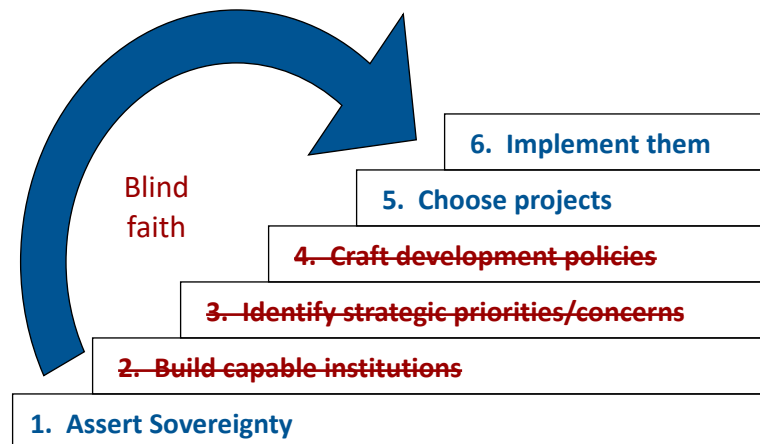
- ▶ Sometimes they are elected leaders, who inspire change and then live that change as an example to the community.
- ▶ They may also exist throughout the community; one example is the WMAT suicide prevention program.
 - Social workers, health care staff, teachers, elders lead
 - Tribal council creates supportive policy



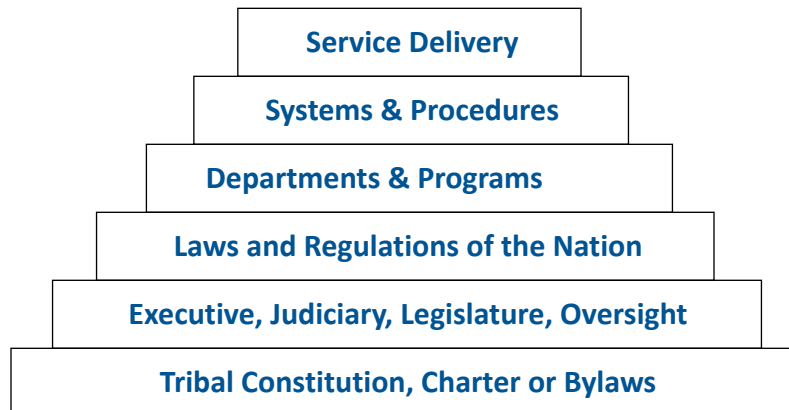
The Nation-Building Approach to Economic & Community Development



What Kills Success in Nation Building?



It all rests on the Institutions of Tribal Self-Government



Results of the Nation- Building Approach



- More effective access to and use of resources
- Increased chances of sustained and self-determined economic development
- A more effective defense of sovereignty
- *Communities* – not just economies – that work

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None of the characteristics of the Nation-Building approach is something we usually describe as “economic.”

In the Nation-Building approach, economic development is first and foremost a *political* problem.

They are all political.

Once the political problem is solved, then economic assets begin to pay off.

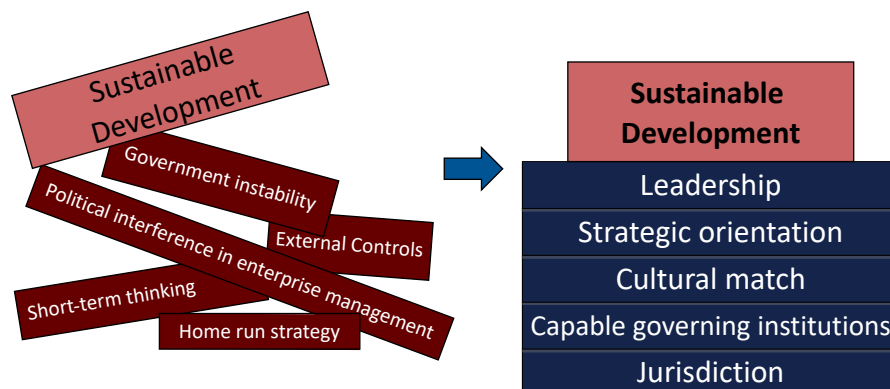


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In short, the nation building approach provides a more solid foundation for sustainable development...



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