



**NATIVE GOVERNANCE  
CENTER**

# **NATIVE NATIONS LISTENING TOUR 2019-2020**

**EVALUATION REPORT SUMMARY  
Spring 2021**

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**Acknowledgements**

Native Governance Center expresses our deep gratitude to the elected Tribal leaders, Tribal employees, and community members from the 19 Native nations who participated in the Native Nations Listening Tour. Your time and support made this project possible. Your contributions are informing important initiatives and opportunities to strengthen Tribal governance. The future of our Native nations is bright due to your tremendous work.

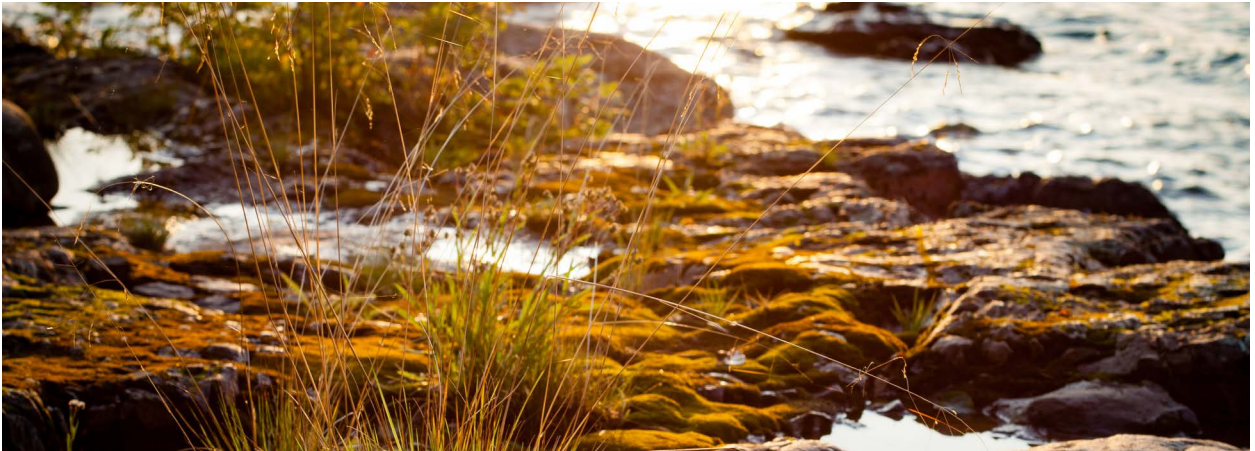
In addition, it is important to acknowledge the efforts and dedication of the Native Governance Center staff who assisted with data analysis and the writing, editing, and designing of this report. Thank you for your contributions to this project.



# WHO WE ARE

## Supporting Indigenous Changemakers and Nations

Native Governance Center is a Native-led nonprofit supporting Indigenous changemakers and nations in Mni Sota Makoce, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Our programs deliver leadership development and Tribal governance support services grounded in Indigenous knowledge. Our work helps Native nations strengthen their sovereignty so they can secure a vibrant path forward for their citizens. For more about our work, visit [www.nativegov.org](http://www.nativegov.org).



## CONTEXT

Prior to reporting our evaluation findings, it's important to note the impact that colonization and forced assimilation have had and continue to have on Native nations. The United States government intentionally committed genocide against Indigenous people with the explicit intention of causing trauma to every facet of Indigenous existence: societies, relations, cultural practices, etc. This includes dismantling governance structures. The findings below reflect some of the long-term impacts of colonization. Native nations had their own systems of governance, structures, and processes prior to colonization. Although colonization has had a significant impact, Native nations continue working diligently to rebuild and strengthen Tribal governance while also maintaining their cultural practices and languages.

# BACKGROUND & DESIGN

## PROJECT

In 2019, we launched our Native Nations Listening Tour, with a goal of further centering the needs of Native nations and their elected leaders in our region. Our data identifies Tribal governance priorities, needs, challenges, and successes. A report aggregating this information on a regional scale is valuable to our Tribal leaders and the Native nations they serve. We've also used the stories collected on our listening tour to clarify our role in supporting Native nations and further define our Tribal governance support offerings. Relationships are central to the work we do, and we valued the chance to continue building connections with elected leaders and their staff.

## EVALUATION DESIGN

### Key Questions

We focused our evaluation on the following key questions:

- What initiatives are Native nations working on that are going well?
- What types of Tribal governance support services do nations in our region need?
- What are the barriers and/or gaps that are limiting effective Tribal governance?

### Participants and Stakeholders

We set a goal to meet with all 23 Native nations' elected Tribal leaders within our service region. Due to scheduling conflicts and the onset of COVID-19, we were only able to visit with 19 out of the 23 Native nations. We met with a total of 98 participants (76 elected Tribal leaders, 19 Tribal employees, and three community members).

We believe our evaluation has the potential to benefit a wide range of stakeholders. We designed this evaluation with Tribal leaders and nations in mind, but grassroots activists, practitioners working in Indian Country, academics, and members of the general public may also find this information valuable.

# RESULTS

The following results and findings provide an overview of the data collected and analyzed from the 19 Native nations who participated in the NNLT visits. Due to the significant amount of data, we've highlighted and explained the top themes in response to our three evaluation questions.

## Tribal Governance Support

**Key Question:** What types of Tribal governance support services do nations in our region need?

### Orientation and Onboarding Processes

Newly elected Tribal leaders need formal orientation and onboarding programs customized to their nation. Elected Tribal leaders also need educational training that covers topics such as effective leadership, communication, tips for supervising employees, Tribal-state relations, Tribal sovereignty, facilitation skills, conflict management, and roles and responsibilities.

### Strengthen Policies and Procedures

Tribal leaders mentioned the need to develop and/or update policies and procedures, such as financial policies, business codes, education codes, etc., as well as to create and/or improve their legislative processes. Several Native nations also mentioned the need to revise their Tribal constitutions.

### Strengthen Civic Engagement

A significant number of Tribal leaders expressed the need to increase civic engagement. They are seeking support with engaging more youth in the governance process, educating constituents about how their Tribal government operates, and addressing transparency issues.

## Factors Limiting Effective Governance

**Key Question:** What are the barriers or gaps that are limiting effective Tribal governance?

### Balancing Multiple Roles

Native nations' elected leaders often serve on the Tribal council and also play one or more additional roles, such as acting as direct supervisors to staff and/or serving on a board. When leaders have multiple roles, it is difficult for them to focus on critical areas of developing effective governance and can create challenges around the separation of powers.

### Outdated Organizational Structure

Tribal leaders shared the impact of outdated organizational structures on effective administration. For example, organizational charts that have not been updated in a decade or more do not reflect the current needs and operations of a Tribal council and its administration.

### Need for Constitutional Reform or Updated Tribal Policies

Tribal leaders shared that their constitutions need more clarity in order to help them better understand their roles, responsibilities, and processes. In addition, several nations reported that Tribal leaders' short term lengths impact progress.

### Infrastructure and Workforce Development Challenges

NNLT participants reported challenges with recruiting and training personnel and accessing resources for establishing or improving Tribal systems and infrastructure like Tribal businesses, healthcare services, and judicial processes.

### Lack of Continuity Between Administrations

A lack of succession planning and continuous crisis mode have a negative impact on effective Tribal governance. It's not uncommon for a Tribal council to completely turn over after an election, creating instability and a lack of continuity. This makes it difficult to do long-term planning.

## Success Stories and Initiatives

**Key Question:** What initiatives are Native nations working on that are going well?

### Civic Engagement

A number of Tribal councils have made concerted efforts to strengthen transparency and accountability. Here are a few communication strategies that Native nations are using to strengthen civic engagement:

- Using Tribal websites, social media, newsletters, radio, or text messaging systems to share information
- Hosting an annual state of the nation address to share updates and future plans
- Streaming council meetings online via YouTube or Facebook Live

Additional civic engagement initiatives include establishing youth councils, distributing surveys to gather citizen input, hosting community gatherings, and providing educational opportunities such as Tribal civics courses and workshops.

### Infrastructure and Economic Development

Leaders shared progress around economic development and new Tribally-owned businesses and facilities. Here are a few examples:

- Convenience store
- Multi-purpose building
- Long-term care facilities
- Upgrading and renovating established businesses i.e. casinos
- Tribally-run police department and judicial system
- Treatment Center
- Funeral home

In addition, many Native nations reported the need to diversify their economies beyond gaming. Leaders are brainstorming and planning for additional revenue making projects that align with their cultural values and practices. Several Tribal leaders mentioned sustainability projects that generate revenue, such as the making and selling of traditional foods, processing buffalo meat, and implementing solar power and other green energy options.

## Success Stories and Initiatives (continued)

### Community Wellness and Culture

Native nations' initiatives related to community wellness and culture give us hope for the future. A significant number of nations reported on their efforts to revitalize and center language and culture. Below are a few examples:

- Integrating language and culture learning into schools' curricula, afterschool programs, or partnering with local nonprofit organizations.
- Providing educational opportunities to learn about cultural practices, such as ricing, birch bark harvesting, etc.
- Establishing a dedicated space, such as a heritage center, for educating their citizens and the public about their people's history, culture, language, and current events.
- Incorporating elements of their culture into their governance initiatives, such as strategic plans and advocacy work at the local, city and state level.



In addition, Tribal leaders often allocate resources to promote language and cultural learning for their citizens. These initiatives ensure the future existence of their nations' cultural touchstones.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations	Program Considerations
<b>Center Indigenous Culture, Language, Values, and Practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intentionally center Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in programs, projects, etc.</li> <li>• Identify strategies to integrate culture and language in governance</li> </ul>
<b>Integrate and Leverage Tribal Assets and Strengths</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide virtual spaces for Tribal leaders to gather and share about their initiatives</li> <li>• Identify strategies for leveraging Native nations' strengths and assets</li> </ul>
<b>Strengthen Knowledge and Skills of Tribal Leaders to Promote Effective Leadership and Governance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a customized Tribal leader orientation and onboarding program</li> <li>• Provide strategies for succession planning</li> </ul>
<b>Increase Civic Engagement and Education Opportunities for Tribal Citizens</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop resources to support active civic engagement</li> <li>• Share examples of effective civic engagement practices</li> </ul>
<b>Support Native Nations with Strengthening Infrastructure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide materials and training on financial management</li> <li>• Research and share best practices for diversifying economies and strengthening workforce development in Indian Country</li> <li>• Identify resources to help fund infrastructure projects</li> </ul>
<b>Provide Guidance with Creating and Updating Tribal Policy &amp; Procedures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support nations with developing or improving their legislative process</li> <li>• Further develop constitution reform support services</li> </ul>



Native Governance Center is a Native-led nonprofit organization serving Native nations in Mni Sota Makoce, North Dakota, and South Dakota. We support Native leaders through our leadership development and Tribal governance support programs. We believe that strengthening governance is a direct pathway toward improving quality of life for Native people.



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*Supporting Tribes. Empowering Leaders.*

[www.nativegov.org](http://www.nativegov.org)