



A GUIDE TO INDIGENOUS WEALTH BUILDING

Native Governance Center held a virtual event on Indigenous wealth building, “Healing Our Future: Indigenous Wealth Building for Seven Generations,” in October 2021. The event featured Jennifer Irving (Red Cloud Indian School), Dallas Nelson (Thunder Valley CDC), Dani Pieratos (Harvest Nation), and Tasha Peltier (Mni Wichoni Health Circle). This guide is based on our event content; we are grateful to our presenters for sharing their insight with us.

HOW DOES INDIGENOUS WEALTH COMPARE TO THE WESTERN, CAPITALISTIC VERSION?

Indigenous wealth is about decolonizing and revitalizing what it means to be healthy and live in abundance. Most Indigenous languages do not have a word for “wealth.” Instead, they have words that convey living reciprocally, focusing on health, and being a good relative. Indigenous wealth is shared: when we have access to shared wealth, we can restore the health of our communities and nations.

In contrast, the western version of wealth exists within capitalism, an economic system that harms BIPOC communities. Western wealth is not usually shared and can look like individual monetary gains, profit benefiting a single group, and the extraction of public resources for short-term boosts. In essence, western wealth is individualized, focused on profit, and usually fails to consider the long-term impacts that decisions can have on people and/or the planet.

WHY DOES INDIGENOUS WEALTH MATTER?

Indigenous wealth matters because it’s our future. Indigenous wealth building creates spaces where Indigenous people have access to their language, lifeways, spirituality, and ceremonies. These spaces help community members thrive and truly feel like themselves. Colonization has created unhealthy patterns and separated many Indigenous people from their teachings. Building Indigenous wealth is a form of community care that helps us reconnect and heal. It also prompts participants to consider what matters most to their communities and take steps to prioritize these needs and goals.





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WHAT DOES INDIGENOUS WEALTH LOOK LIKE IN REAL LIFE?

LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION:

Dallas Nelson, Director of the Lakota Language Education Initiative at Thunder Valley CDC, explains how language revitalization is wealth: “Indigenous wealth is our language and our lifeways. Through our language comes our self identity, reconnecting to our history, and reconnecting to our land. It means that we revitalize, reclaim, restore, and ultimately heal. To hear our children speak our language, to hear our grandmothers speak our language, to hear ourselves speak our language, is, for me, liberation.”

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY:

Dani Pieratos, President of Harvest Nation, is passionate about the connection between food sovereignty and wealth: “Indigenous wealth really starts here in our hearts. We’re all entrepreneurs. It means that we are producers and consumers of our own cycles again. I see it as us rising up to take care of our community and each other. Our Tribal governments have taken on so much weight and responsibility for our communities. They have brought us so far. It’s really time that we get back into having more self-determination at the family level. We need local access to food, services, and health.”

COMMUNITY WELLNESS:

Tasha Peltier, Co-Executive Director of the Mni Wichoni Health Circle, believes that centering health in Native culture and values is wealth: “Indigenous wealth is making sure that our communities are healthy and making sure that we’re in control of our bodies. It’s taking that health, taking that community wellness, and centering it around our own perspectives and our own ways of thinking and being.”

WHAT ARE SOME TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES FOR BUILDING INDIGENOUS WEALTH?

WEALTH MODELS SHOULD REFLECT INDIGENOUS VALUES AND LIFEWAYS.

When our systems reflect our culture and values, it’s easier to get community buy-in and create lasting change. And if the goal is to build wealth that’s truly Indigenous, we need Indigenized models to help us get there.





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WHAT ARE SOME TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES FOR BUILDING INDIGENOUS WEALTH (CONTINUED)?

MODELS SHOULD ALSO BE STRATEGIC, FUTURE-ORIENTED, AND SUSTAINABLE.

Indigenous wealth is our future. When we create our models, we should plan for the next seven generations and include strategies for sustaining our efforts.

WEALTH BUILDERS SHOULD EDUCATE COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND NON-COMMUNITY MEMBERS ON HOW MODELS WORK.

Transparency is key for community uptake of Indigenous wealth models. Explain to your community why you chose a particular model and how you envision the model being successful. If you can, speak to those outside of your community, too. You never know when you might find a possible collaborative partnership or funding opportunity.

WEALTH BUILDERS SHOULD PRACTICE SELF-CARE WHEN THEY EXPERIENCE LATERAL VIOLENCE.

Lateral violence is tough. Practice self-affirmation and self-care when it happens. And, if you feel up for it, try strategies for diffusing it like using humor and reframing the conversation to focus on the work itself.

HOW CAN NATIVE PEOPLE SUPPORT INDIGENOUS WEALTH BUILDING?

Look for ways to support Indigenous wealth building at all levels: throughout your nation, within your specific community, and as an individual. The best way to support Indigenous wealth building at the nation level is to support your fellow citizens. If you're an elected leader, ask yourself: how are you supporting the people you serve in building wealth?

At the community level, identify Indigenous entrepreneurs and programs actively working to build wealth. Support your local language nest, immersion school, food sovereignty program, or wellness center. Encourage people you know to join and support them, too.





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HOW CAN NATIVE PEOPLE SUPPORT INDIGENOUS WEALTH BUILDING (CONTINUED)?

Individually, learn your language. Even if it's just one word per week, it's a start. Work to uplift your culture and values in everything you do.

And finally, control your own narrative. As Dallas Nelson explains, “Our narrative is always controlled by outsiders. We aren't a poor, pitiful, sad, broken people. We are a powerful, strong, happy, vibrant beautiful Indigenous people across the United States. Control that narrative, and hold onto it. And come from a place of happiness and love when you're doing it.”

HOW CAN NON-NATIVE PEOPLE SUPPORT INDIGENOUS WEALTH BUILDING?

If you're interested in supporting Indigenous wealth building, a self-assessment is a great place to start. Analyze what you're already doing. Dani Pieratos notes, “Ask yourself, are you serving Indigenous people in a meaningful way?” (Check out our handy self-assessment guide [here](#).)

Do the work to educate yourself on Indigenous wealth and wealth building efforts happening in your own community.

Next, take action. Create meaningful ways to bring Indigenous people to the decision making table. Can you advocate for the prioritization of Indigenous voices in your workplace? Speaking of the workplace, it's a good idea to reframe your ideas about professionalism and credibility, too, so you don't exclude important voices. Dani Pieratos explains, “Looking professional and business-like isn't required for good leadership.”

Make regular donations to Indigenous wealth building organizations. (The organizations listed at the top of this guide are good examples.) Even though these organizations are working to move beyond colonized wealth structures, they still need financial support to operate. Aside from donations, seek out local people in your community doing Indigenous health work. Buy their teas and medicines. Help them continue to sustain their practice and lifeways.

