

# Tribal nations are essential to 'Build Back Better'

The unique attributes of tribal nations provide an opportunity to rebuild while advancing inclusive economics, restorative justice, and tribal self-determination

[Hilary C. Tompkins](#) Jul 26, 2021

*Hilary C. Tompkins*

As we emerge from the dark days of the pandemic, I hope that America's rebuilding efforts include the wisdom and resilience of tribal nations.

For the first time in our modern history, America is talking about its Indigenous citizens. During the shutdown, I received messages from colleagues and friends expressing shock and outrage that at least 40 percent of Navajo residents living on the reservation lack running water.

There was excitement and joy with the appointment of the first Indigenous Cabinet Secretary to the U.S. Department of the Interior—Deb Haaland, a member of the Laguna Pueblo from my birth state of New Mexico.

There has been unprecedented media coverage about the harmful effects of mascots, the erasure of Native Americans from our history, the disproportionate, adverse effects of climate change on tribal communities, and the horrific loss of our children at the hands of federally-run and sanctioned boarding schools.

It is good that our stories are finally being heard. We also have a chance to build new stories with more triumphs than trauma.

The Biden Administration's "Build Back Better" agenda provides a means to this end.

While it has been met with fits and starts, the Biden Administration and Congress may reach a bipartisan deal on infrastructure. The Administration is also pursuing a companion budget reconciliation package that will provide much needed funding and programs to address health care, education, and climate impacts.

The Administration is pursuing a progressive trade policy, promoting manufacturing capacity at home, worker protection, and sustainable and resilient supply chains. The Administration's climate policy and clean energy targets have set the course for a dramatic transition to renewables.

Environmental justice serves as a guiding principle for all these initiatives.

Tribal nations know something about rebuilding and the need for justice. There are 574 federally-recognized Indian tribes that govern their territories, manage their resources, and provide services for their citizens, despite facing incredible odds. The dire statistics in Indian Country call out for a national solution—according to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Broken Promises Report in 2018, unemployment on some reservations exceeds 40 percent, educational attainment is the lowest of any racial or ethnic minority in the country, and violence against Indigenous women is three and a half times the national average.

A recent U.S. Census American Community Survey reports a 23 percent poverty rate among American Indians and Alaska Natives, nearly twice the national rate of 12.3 percent.

These grave conditions have not deterred or defeated tribal leaders, who work on a daily basis to deliver hope and opportunity to its citizens, often in rural America. Tribal nations have survived in the face of centuries of federal policies seeking to terminate, assimilate, and disenfranchise them.

This intergenerational track record of rebuilding in the aftermath of epidemic, war, displacement, and discrimination makes tribal nations uniquely qualified to “Build Back Better.”

They are also located in regions of the country that are ripe for rebuilding. Tribes possess lands in prime locations for wind

and solar energy development. They have skilled workforces —many who wish to return to their homelands instead of fleeing to urban areas for jobs.

Tribal lands are available to support manufacturing, outdoor recreation, sustainable farming, and tourism ventures. Many interstate systems traverse Indian Country, such as highways, railways, and transmission lines, providing opportunities to expand and deliver renewable power, transportation, broadband, and e-vehicle charging stations, for the benefit of tribal communities and beyond.

Tribes also hold the key to managing water systems in the drought-ridden west and restoring river ecosystems, given their senior water rights that can be stored, marketed, and leased more easily than other rights.

Tribal communities also are in need of significant infrastructure upgrades.

These unique attributes of tribal nations provide an opportunity to rebuild while at the same time advance inclusive economics, restorative justice, and tribal self-determination.

### **A few principles must guide the inclusion of tribes in these initiatives:**

- Under the principle of self-determination, tribal nations

should determine what their priorities are and what kinds of projects they would welcome on their homelands.

- The United States should approach engagement with the tribes as a trustee and not a regulator, overseer, or land manager.

**The United States should utilize the changing times to think outside the box by:**

- Enacting tribal-specific economic or tax incentives to spur renewables, domestic production, and research and development ventures in Indian Country.
- Providing tribal co-management of public lands, forests, and parks to foster sustainable practices based on traditional knowledge, outdoor recreation, and tourism economies.
- Building tribal drinking water supply systems with baseline recognition of tribal water rights essential for basic human needs.
- Working with tribal agricultural organizations and enterprises to explore the expansion of sustainable and dry farming techniques.
- Consider a campaign of "Made in Native America" as part of policy goals to support domestic economic

growth and worker opportunities.

The Biden Administration should aim high as it has within its reach the opportunity to usher in a new era of tribal-federal relations. The 1930s was such a time, when Congress enacted the Indian Reorganization Act to promote tribal self-governance after learning of the devastating conditions on Indian reservations from failed federal policies.

Nothing could be more American than having the First Americans leading the charge in the dawn of a new, post-pandemic era.

The Biden Administration can restore and reinvigorate America's relationship with tribal nations by including them in every facet of its broader agenda to "Build Back Better."

It is time to write a new chapter in American history, where the United States learns from tribal nations about rebuilding and fosters triumph instead of trauma in Indian Country.