



Indigenous Perspectives on Equitable Development

HISTORY, HEALING & COMMUNITY POWER

At our 2022 Equitable Development Symposium, we underscored the wisdom that “land is a way to hold political, social and economic power” – but failed to reckon with what that means in the context of a nation built on stolen lands and enslaved labor. At our 2023 Fall Gathering of the Scorecard Enthusiasts, we discussed the complexity and responsibility of wealth building and placemaking / keeping on Native lands with Darek DeLille (Bad River Ojibwe) and John Williams (Cheyenne River Lakota) from Native American Community Development Institute (NACDI) and Tatewin Means (Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota/Oglala Lakota) from Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation.



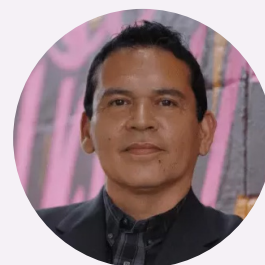
**DAREK
DELILLE**
NACDI

“ When you go to Japan, you get off the plane and what do you see? Who are you gonna meet? You’re gonna meet Japanese people. If you go over to Africa you’re gonna see a lot of African people. Now, when you come to the United States, what are you seeing? I want that to be something you think about. Because we should be everywhere. Native Americans should be the largest population in New York, Los Angeles, you name it. We should outnumber everybody. So I always leave this as an open-ended question: What happened here? Because those were my relatives. Those were my people.”



**TATEWIN
MEANS**
Thunder Valley
CDC

“ In spaces where I’m invited to speak, there always has to be some intro to Indigenous history. And it’s frustrating. As the original occupants of this land for many generations, our’s is the first history that everybody should learn. The onus shouldn’t always be on Indigenous people to educate others but, to understand the magnitude and scope of work in Indigenous communities by Indigenous organizations particularly, you have to have some foundational understanding of the US government’s history when it comes to federal Indian policy. Our vision is liberation– and the first step has to be collective healing, in our families, as well as non-Indigenous folks healing from colonization, as well.” **Watch Tatewin’s overview of Indian Policy Eras, from Colonial to Allotment to Self-Determination.**



**JOHN
WILLIAMS**
NACDI

“ There’s nothing that’s pan-Indian. Learn about your local tribes first, not the most famous ones. Learn about whose land you’re walking on. And know that when we talk about these issues, they are fraught with emotions. In the contracts we write for [Indigenous] artists with white-blood institutions, we include an emotional labor clause. Because many of our artists are misunderstood by those institutions and have to talk about traumatic things – and that has a real emotional cost to it... And, right now, less than 0.4% of philanthropic dollars are directed to American Indians or our organizations. We can’t enter into discussions about how to heal harms and provide equity to Native communities until we look at the facts of today, too.”

Suggested reading: An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States, by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

LAND:

Stewardship and Sovereignty

LAND AS RELATIVE

Tatewin Means emphasized that colonization of Turtle Island forced nomadic Indigenous peoples onto reservations and, with laws like the Dawes Act, subdivided communal landholdings into allotments for Native American heads of families and individuals.

“This idea of Western property law and individual land ownership was really foreign to Indigenous people. We didn’t consider land property to be owned or controlled in that way. Having that type of framework of viewing the land as something to leverage for this concept of power and control is really harmful and it continues to contravene Indigenous ideology around what it means to care for the land. Healing from colonization is also rethinking these bodies of law that have been in place for hundreds of years that do a lot of harm.”

“We’re in relation to the land. We are

interdependent with the land,” Williams said.

“What we’re trying to do is build more assets for the community in a community-minded Indigenous way.”

SOVEREIGNTY IN SYSTEMS AND SELF

Means also underscored the violent and paternalistic relationship between Native nations and the U.S. government, which still holds in trust many lands in reservation communities.

“The fact that there’s a Bureau of Indian Affairs or federal department that has to manage the affairs of individual Indians just shows you how inherently racist the system is. No other race of people has a bureau or federal department to manage their affairs for them... So sovereignty means a multitude of things. It means we have our own governance systems, and bodies of law. It means we’re able to educate our own children.”

But self liberation is also a crucial component of collective sovereignty. ***“I think of sovereignty as our ability to live in the way that creator intended us to live,*** as the ability to sing my song,” DeLille said.

DEVELOPMENT:

Approaches from NACDI & Thunder Valley

DEVELOPMENT AS HEALING

“Part of healing from colonization is changing the physical spaces in our community,” Means said. ***“For so many decades, how our communities look, feel, smell, everything has been dictated by an external force.*** So part of our regenerative community development initiative is how do we heal those spaces by giving our community members a voice?”

DEVELOPMENT AS COMMUNITY POWER

“We take an asset-based approach to all of our work and we’re deeply embedded in our community,” Williams said. “All of our programs were born out of community saying, ‘Can NACDI help us do this?’ And ***decisions are made at Indigenous tables—not for the individual good, but for the community good.*** We do everything by consensus.”

DEVELOPMENT AS THRIVING

“In 2012, we were deficient 4,000 homes for our population,” Means said. “So the first development for this 34 acres was end-to-end housing. And we took that back to the community and ***they said, “No, that’s not what we want. Yes, we’re short on housing, but we also want other things in our community.*** We want places to shop, places to eat and play and grow food and have ceremony. We want these places because that’s what a thriving community looks like.”

DEVELOPMENT AS CULTURE

When Thunder Valley was developing a culturally competent playground, the designer initially proposed a concept integrating a star quilt and the four directions symbol: surface-level iconography often associated with Indigenous peoples. ***“We said, you have to do better,”*** Means said. “It definitely delayed the process but we wanted to hold them accountable to our community members. And now we have a playground where, through being on the physical structures, people can learn about two important stories of our people.”

At NACDI, urban development and creative expression are not silo-ed into distinct programs. ***“We don’t separate our arts and culture work from our other work,”*** Williams said. “It’s deeply embedded and cross pollinating.”