

FUNDER PERSPECTIVES



Why We Work in Indian Country: An Affinity Group's Perspective

By Virginia Clarke, Executive Director, Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders

At Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders ([SAFSF](#)), we have been working for many years to help whittle down the disparity in philanthropic giving to Indian Country by focusing on opportunities to strengthen connections, foster collaborations and build relationships between funders and nonprofits offering food systems solutions in Native communities. We are listening to and partnering with Native-led organizations, consistently and intentionally including conversations around funding in Indian Country in our programming, and challenging our members to get past their perceived barriers to engagement with tribal nations and organizations.

For instance, a site visit at our 2014 Annual Forum in Denver was an eye-opening experience for many funders who were completely unaware of the hunger and related health problems faced by Native populations, particularly in the urban center of Colorado which was, at the time, considered to be one of the “healthiest” states in the nation. Partners at The Denver Indian Center, Inc. ([DICI](#)) and the Denver Indian Family Resource Center ([DIFRC](#)), which both provide a wide array of collaborative programs and services aimed at empowering youth, families and communities through self-determination, cultural identity and education, offered us the use of their facilities to host a “Chopped”-style event we called the “Cheese Grater Cook-Off.” Teams were given the same tools the families served by these nonprofits might have to work with at home – hot plates, microwaves, a USDA commodity food box, and a limited amount of time to prepare lunch. (For those who may not know, commodity foods are essentially food rations provided to low-income Native American households through the USDA Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, or [FDPIR](#).) Native chefs were on hand to offer advice, serve as judges, and educate us about the need to reintegrate and revitalize traditional Native foods in an effort to improve health outcomes. To this day, we keep a can of USDA commodity beef on a prominent bookcase in our office, a constant reminder of what too many families rely on for sustenance, and the need for us as a philanthropic community to show up and do more.

When Native Americans shared their knowledge of food and the natural environment with the earliest European colonizers, they unwittingly set the stage for the marginalization of the very knowledge without which those Europeans would not have survived. The stage was set for a systematic attempt by colonizers through the centuries to erase Native identities, influence and presence in America. This erasure manifests itself today in the isolation and poverty that has led to systemic health, economic and social problems in tribal communities. Remarkably, the extent of philanthropic giving to Native Americans is in inverse proportion to the need in these communities. This is a sad reflection on our country in general and on philanthropy in particular.

The isolation of Native Americans on remote and marginal lands, created by systemic discrimination and land expropriation, has made it too easy for most of us to pretend that we don't see the problems they face or that there isn't a way for us to engage. In spite of all the injustices that have been heaped upon these communities, Native Americans have fought to maintain their cultural traditions and identities. In our area of work, food continues to embody millennia of agricultural traditions and land stewardship as well as

expressions of culture in daily and ceremonial life for Native Americans, even as many families struggle with higher food prices, food insecurity and diet-related diseases such as obesity and diabetes.

Since our early forays into programming around tribal food issues, we have learned that tribal partners have the expertise, local knowledge and lived experience to ensure successful projects. But, like others working in low-income communities, they may have limited access to technology resources and skills for managing proposal processes that are often taken for granted by the community of funders. Too often deep cultural capital has been left on the table by funders and affinity groups declining to engage with tribal communities and others that may have been operating in ways outside the dominant cultural norm.

For nearly 15 years, SAFSF has presented programs with the guidance and counsel of funders and nonprofits working in Indian Country. For the first many years these conversations were small and sparsely attended, but we knew the idea of raising awareness of the disparity between need and investment in this area was critically important, and we were determined to continue to highlight the issues, the people and the communities. Through the power of repetition we feel like we are making headway in having funders include Native Americans when they talk about diversity, inclusion and equity in their funding and investment priorities and within their organizational structures.

Here are a few other examples of major programming we've offered in this area:

- A panel at our 2015 Forum featured speakers from the [Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community](#), the largest philanthropic benefactor to Indian Country nationally, and two non-Native grantmakers – [Northwest Area Foundation](#) and [HRK Foundation](#) – sharing their reasons for making significant investments in Indian Country, lessons learned, and examples of their partners' work.
- In 2016, we co-hosted a workshop on "Native American Health: Forging Unexpected Partnerships for Holistic Change in Indian Country" with First Nations Development Institute, a Native-led foundation whose president and CEO, Mike Roberts, sits on our Board of Directors, where his presence and perspective has helped to embed awareness of tribal issues into our organizational DNA.
- Our 2018 Forum in Spokane, a city named for one of the tribal nations that have stewarded that land for millennia, allowed us to ground the agenda in multiple conversations about tribal communities today and the role funders have to play in balancing inequities in community resources around food and agriculture.

The reactions of funders to our Native-centric sessions at the 2018 Forum revealed moving and personal internalized learning experiences, like this comment from one participant: *"This was really powerful for me on several levels - both what they [the Native American presenters] said and also having them in the position of power informing everyone else was a very poignant moment for me. It challenged my own assumptions on where and how I get knowledge."*

Working with Native communities also has helped to challenge my own assumptions about how I share knowledge. Following an event in New Mexico where I presented at a multi-nation tribal gathering, I offered a ride to two attendees from Wisconsin who were looking to get to the airport. They asked if I minded a detour to Cochiti Pueblo so they could visit with friends. Not in a rush, I agreed. Not only was I welcomed by their friends, but I was allowed the unexpected pleasure of experiencing a special harvest celebration going on. Mid-afternoon, one of the two people with me confessed that he had initially dreaded spending the day with me based on how he had experienced my PowerPoint presentation to the group earlier in the week. My straight-to-the-point delivery, which I intended and perceived as informative and professional, had come off as stiff and humorless dominant culture lecturing. He was glad to discover that I did have a sense of humor

and we laughed mightily about my initial missteps. He encouraged me to “just tell your stories and ditch the PowerPoint!,” reminding me that storytelling has been a centerpiece of communication among many cultures for eons and that it is still an excellent way, even a preferred way of teaching and learning in Native communities.

At SAFSF, we are proud of the progress we’ve made in bringing attention to the incredible work happening in Native communities. And, we know we can and must do much more. We actively reach out and secure participation in our programs from Native-led or Native-serving funders. We are learning about the landscape of food and agriculture policies in tribal nations, alongside our local, state and national policy work. We also are working on an initiative to catalyze investment in Indian Country through a series of intensive learning workshops and interactions with other groups in order to fast-track funders’ ability to move resources intentionally and have a greater impact on these issues.

Native Communities receive only about a one-quarter of one percent of all philanthropic giving, and the total dollar amount of grantmaking by large philanthropic foundations actually declined by 29 percent (\$35 million) from 2006-2014, according to a [report by First Nations Development Institute](#). Additionally, only a small portion of those grant dollars go to Native-controlled organizations. There is so much room for innovation and collaboration in this grossly underfunded sector of our society. Philanthropy serving organizations – whether regionally or issue-based – can create opportunities to learn from and alongside Native communities and from those funders who are currently investing in Indian Country.

We must do this work with intention, taking people, their experiences and their messages seriously. We must dig into the issues in ways that can help leverage the resources needed to implement real solutions. Superficial efforts such as inviting tribal elders to perform a ritual blessing to open a meeting or a youth dance troupe to entertain at a plenary, risk devolving into lip service, stereotypes and tokenism. Native communities are not asking to be told how to produce or eat healthy food. They are asking for philanthropic support, investment capital and government funding to repair the damage to their food systems created by colonization and discrimination, and to rebuild healthy food systems that are both grounded in traditional foodways and responsive to modern ways of living.

The definition of “philanthropy” is love for humanity. I challenge those of us leading national philanthropic support organizations to really think through how we ourselves, our staff, our members and our partners can embrace and demonstrate this love for humanity through our work. We sell ourselves short if we close ourselves off to the many potential partners and allies who, like us, are working for change. As leaders, it’s our role to make sure those most impacted are at our tables, part of our conversations, deliberations and decision-making, and part of our communities. And, as we do so, we need to remember that our questions can be a gift, especially if we stop to listen to the answers. We have seen that affinity groups like SAFSF can play an important role in facilitating conversation and providing the learning support that will enable and encourage grantmakers and investors to step up to the opportunities of funding in a truly philanthropic and transformative way in Indian Country.

Virginia Clarke is the executive director of Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders (SAFSF) a dynamic, rapidly evolving organization whose mission is to amplify the impact of philanthropic and investment communities in support of just and sustainable food and agriculture systems. Nationally recognized for her drive, creativity and knitting while in meetings, don’t miss her 2014 TedxManhattan presentation [Changing the Way We Give](#).