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## Respectful Tribal Partnership: What Philanthropy Can Learn From the Navajo Nation's Collaborative Response to the COVID-19 Crisis

Nancy Petersen  
*University of Arizona*

Karletta Chief  
*University of Arizona*

Toni M. Massaro  
*University of Arizona*

Nikki Tulley  
*University of Arizona*

Crystal Tulley-Cordova  
*Navajo Nation Department of Water Resources*

*See next page for additional authors*

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### Authors

Nancy Petersen, Karletta Chief, Toni M. Massaro, Nikki Tulley, Crystal Tulley-Cordova, and Jonelle Vold

# Respectful Tribal Partnership: What Philanthropy Can Learn From the Navajo Nation’s Collaborative Response to the COVID-19 Crisis

Nancy Petersen, M.S., Karletta Chief, Ph.D., Toni M. Massaro, J.D., and Nikki Tulley, M.S., University of Arizona; Crystal Tulley-Cordova, Ph.D., Navajo Nation Department of Water Resources, and Jonelle Vold, J.D., University of Arizona Foundation

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## Introduction

The gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic and its disparately harsh impact on Indigenous peoples, including the stark reality of a historical lack of access to essential services and health care, are now well known. COVID-19 death rates, aggregated through May 4, 2022, and normalized by population, show there have been far more Native American than white American deaths: 454 per 100,000 versus 327 per 100,000, respectively (APM Research Lab, 2022).

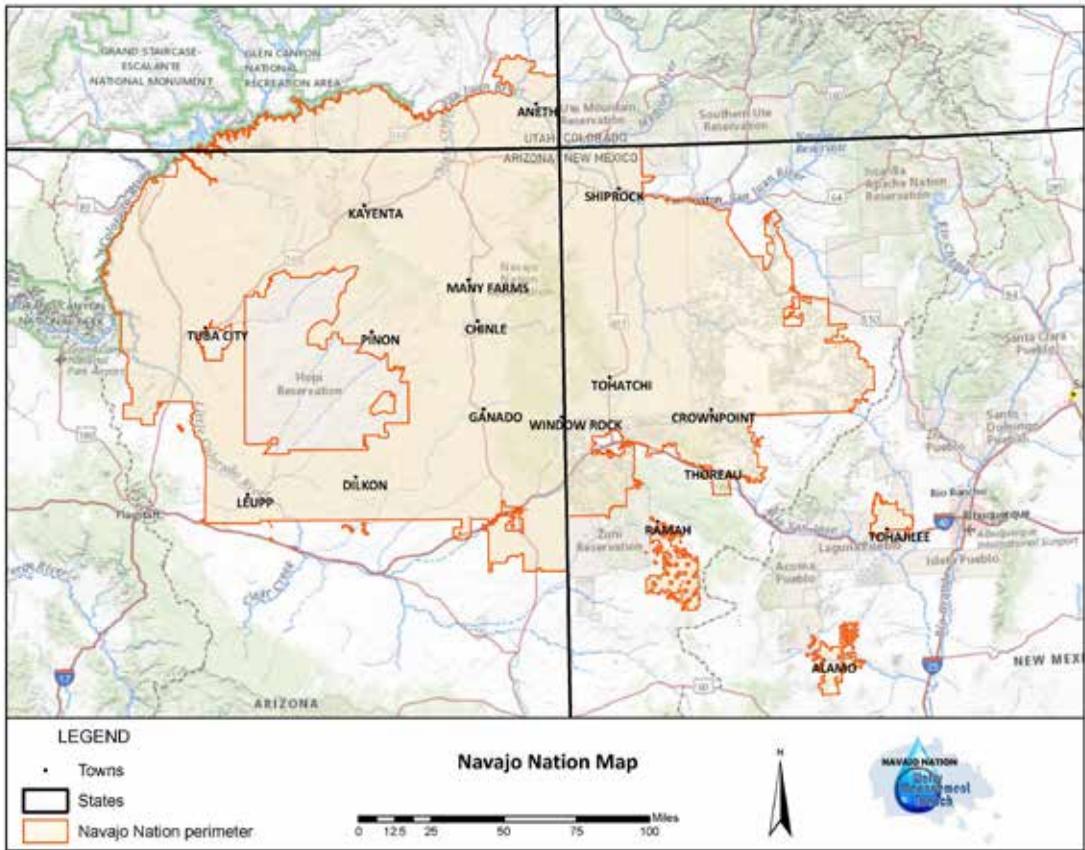
Many funders have seen the shocking realities, and responded to the crisis with new grant calls focused on Native Americans and administered through less cumbersome grant procedures. They realize that many Native American and Indigenous communities face numerous barriers to accessing basic human services, such as ready access to clean water, that most of the developed world take for granted. This desire to act is laudable. But in the zeal to immediately “fix the problems,” our Native American co-authors note, many funders fail to grasp the complexities and necessity of applying trust-based collaborative principles that respect tribes as sovereign nations with laws and norms that govern their lands and people.

This article describes a successful model for collaboration among a tribal nation, funders, and subject matter experts to address a critical problem — in this case, access to clean water for Navajo families. The collaboration was based on respecting the leadership and values of the

## Key Points

- The gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic and its disparately harsh impact on Indigenous peoples are now well known. U.S. death rates normalized by population, for example, have been far higher for Native Americans than for the white population in the United States. Many funders, realizing that basic human services are lacking for many Native American and Indigenous communities, have responded to the crisis. While this desire to act is laudable, many fail to grasp the complexities and necessity of applying trust-based collaborative principles that respect tribes as sovereign nations.
- This article describes a successful model for collaboration among a tribal nation, funders, and subject-matter experts to address a critical problem — access to clean water for Navajo families — based on respecting the leadership and values of the Navajo Nation and born from the pandemic crisis taking place there. Collaborating partners were drawn from dozens of state and federal agencies, nonprofits, universities, and philanthropies. All were connected by honor and respect for the Diné — “The People,” as the Navajo call themselves.
- This model can be replicated by funders working with multiple experts, agencies, and governments to continue to meet community resilience challenges that do not retreat with the pandemic and to promote equity and justice in any philanthropic venture.

**FIGURE 1** Navajo Nation Map



Source: Water Access Coordination Group (2022)

Navajo Nation and born from the pandemic crisis taking place there. Collaborating partners were drawn from dozens of state and federal agencies, along with nonprofits, universities, and philanthropies. All were connected by honor and respect for the Diné — “The People,” as the Navajo call themselves. This model is one that can be replicated by funders working with multiple experts, agencies, and governments elsewhere, as well as for future water sustainability projects on the Navajo Nation.

### COVID-19 and the Navajo Nation

Of the 22 federally recognized tribes in Arizona, the largest is the Navajo Nation, which also extends into New Mexico and Utah. (See Figure 1.) The COVID-19 pandemic hit the Navajo Nation exceptionally hard. One reason for this is that water access on the sprawling Nation is

variable: the Indian Health Service (IHS) estimated at the start of the outbreak that well over 20% of Navajo Nation residents lacked access to clean running water and were forced to drive several hours to haul water for consumption, domestic use, crops, livestock, and other basic needs (Water Access Coordination Group [WACG], 2022a). The Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, working to address the absence of utilities, reported that 30% of Navajo Nation homes lack piped water (WACG, 2022a).

This sustainability threat to the Navajo Nation existed long before the pandemic, and if unaddressed will continue to threaten all who live there long after the crisis ends. But in a pandemic, where primary advice is to “wash your hands often,” gaps in access to clean water and other water-quality challenges posed an emergency peril for Navajo elders and endangered

all Nation residents. Funders must realize that these water-resilience challenges, made so vivid during the pandemic, will end only when structural water quality and access problems finally are addressed (Lane, 2020).

Funders also must realize that these problems can be solved. Indeed, for those who care about human rights and environmental and social justice, they must be solved. In this article, we explain how to achieve this urgent goal in a manner that will better fortify the Navajo Nation into the future, not just in the short run. The Navajo Nation model also shows how to advance similar water sustainability goals around the world.

### **The Authors' Relationship to Navajo Nation Partnership**

The authors of this article have been working on tribal water issues in various capacities, although we had little to no interaction with each other prior to this work. A major success of this process was to identify each other's roles and respectfully coordinate activities across broad organizations. The perspectives of the authors ranged from Navajo water scientists working for the agencies on the Nation to the University of Arizona Foundation and Navajo water researchers at the university.

Each participant had a unique perspective. Navajo scientists on and off the reservation could expertly evaluate the proposed solutions through the lens of cultural values and practical acceptance of the solutions. In addition, they had direct knowledge of the multiple means to communicate with the dispersed population on the Nation, including translation of key information into Navajo. The foundation's perspective was to identify the critical funding gaps in federal dollars and provide funding to those needs. To respect tribal sovereignty, the foundation acted by request from the Nation's president and not independently in the provision of those funds.

The foundation work could only occur by consistently showing up, intently listening and learning, and then consulting with tribe members for their direction prior to any action.

*Before initiating a collaboration with tribes, foundations should critically consider their mission, assess their role in the partnership, and be able to make a long-term commitment.*

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Before initiating a collaboration with tribes, foundations should critically consider their mission, assess their role in the partnership, and be able to make a long-term commitment. Regrettably, funders before them may have been involved only fleetingly, pushed solutions with no awareness of the unique circumstances and culture, and acted paternalistically rather than collaboratively.

The team also approached the work through a systems perspective, relating the Navajo way of living, behavior, and attitudes with technical possibilities, agency responsibilities and interactions, and the emotional toll and other challenges of the pandemic.

### **An Effective Path Forward: The Water Access Coordination Group Model**

The Navajo Nation, under the leadership of President Jonathan Nez, has shown the way to address the Nation's immediate needs during the pandemic while also fortifying the Nation after the crisis ends. Funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act provided an initial infusion of significant federal dollars. Funds allocated to tribes were much needed and welcome, but no panacea. The CARES Act funds came late to the tribes, with many restrictions on their use. Perhaps the most challenging condition was that the funds had to be spent by December 31, 2020, or lost.

Despite these concerns and the gravity of the pandemic, the Navajo leadership was resolute in addressing the challenges their Nation faced. "As

**FIGURE 2** Navajo Nation COVID-19 Water Access Coordination Group



Source: Water Access Coordination Group (2022)

much as we went through in our history on this planet, in this world,” Nez told a news reporter, “we’ve always been overcomers. We will overcome this pandemic” (Ciletti, 2020). Jason John, director of the Navajo Nation Department of Water Resources, who is also Navajo and whose service to the Nation has spanned decades, was ready to act. John had previously tackled equally daunting issues, such as the settlement of certain Navajo water rights. Working closely with the Navajo Nation Council, he immediately produced a compelling white paper that listed the priorities and projects necessary to effect both short- and longer-term change. None of these projects required exotic technology or expertise.

To address the urgent need to provide water to homes that lacked piped water, the Nation took several steps. It set forth a COVID-19 Water Access Mission with the goal of providing clean water and storage containers, handwashing stations, and disinfection tablets to Navajo citizens. At the invitation of Nez, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and IHS-deployed staff assessed the situation and made recommendations on how to increase access for residents living in homes with no piped water. They produced a survey determining that additional watering points were needed in 59 of the 110 Navajo Nation Chapter communities to reduce the long distances families had to travel to access

**FIGURE 3** Transitional Water Point

A newly installed transitional water point on the Navajo Nation, one of 59 constructed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photograph by Nikki Tulley.

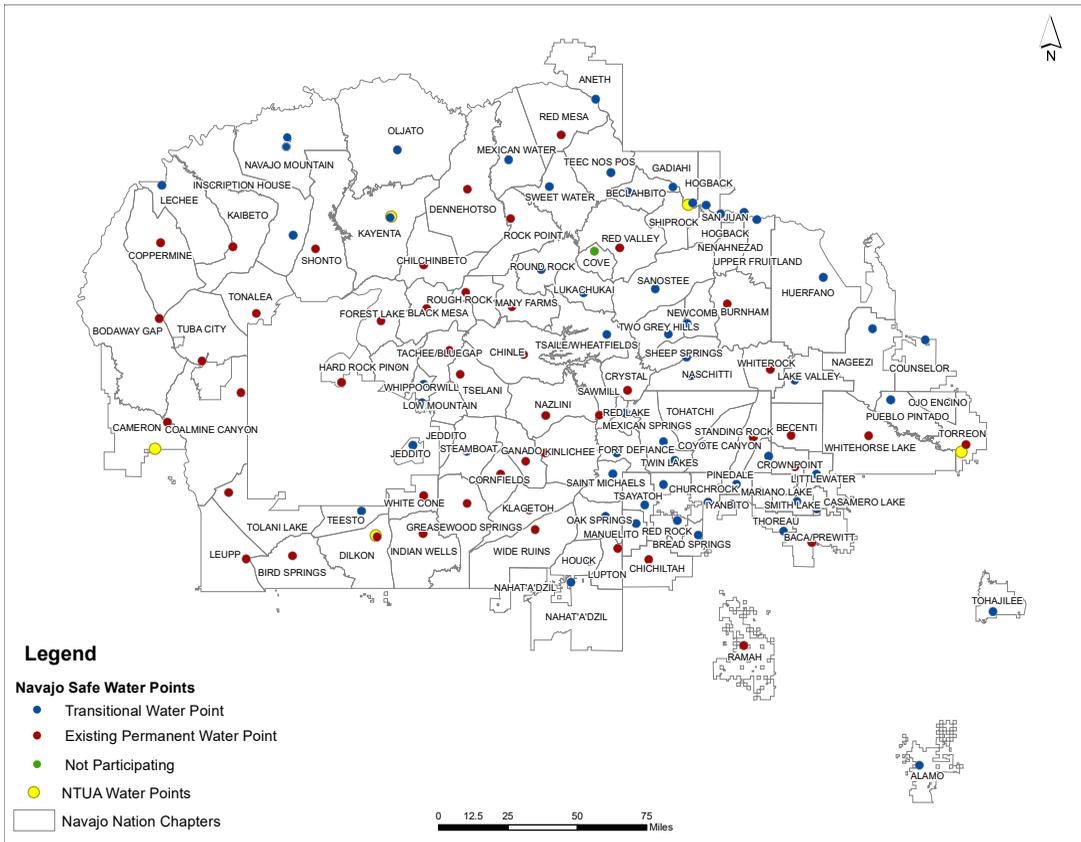
water and to eliminate the reliance on unregulated, potentially contaminated sources.

Under the leadership of James Adakai of the Navajo Nation Division of Community Development and David Harvey of the IHS Division of Sanitation Facilities Construction, the Navajo Nation Water Access Coordination Group (WACG) was formed, composed of Navajo leaders, Nation and federal agencies, nonprofits, universities, and the Agnese Nelms Haury Program in Environment and Social Justice at the University of Arizona. (See Figure 2.) This team worked together to execute the Water Access Mission, whose vision as described in the founding document was to “increase access to quality water to mitigate the spread of coronavirus across the Navajo Nation” by achieving a specific goal: “Identify, acquire, prioritize, and use available resources to increase access to quality water for tribal homes, using available data to identify and design interventions” (WACG, 2022b, p. 1).

The WACG began meeting weekly in mid-April 2020 to discuss the elements of the intervention and how they should be implemented. After the intervention approaches were developed, the group worked to streamline the signing of funding documents by the IHS and the Navajo Nation to ensure that CARES Act funds were readily available. Discussions then turned to how to quickly coordinate needed tribal and federal reviews for construction approvals. This was followed up with Chapter-by-Chapter construction, progress reports, and training local Navajo Nation Chapter Houses on their use.

By August 2021, all 59 water points were fully functional despite the curfews and other restrictions on work crews imposed during the height of the pandemic and its resurgence. (See Figure 3.) The mission literally is “accomplished,” although the WACG continues to meet to monitor usage of the sites, make any modifications requested to improve the sites, and work toward providing permanent water

**FIGURE 4** Navajo Nation Water Access Points



Source: Water Access Coordination Group (2022)

access points. Inspirational stories abound of the “frontline heroes” who made this possible and who responded to the crisis in many other ways (D’Elia, 2021; Robbins, 2021). The nonprofit organization DigDeep Right to Water Project, a longtime partner of the Navajo Nation in delivering water to homes without piped water, expanded its delivery service with 10 additional water hauling trucks reaching an additional 1,800 square miles.

A subgroup of the WACG also was formed to design and implement communication tools to inform Navajo communities about the newly available safe water points. To provide timely information on the location and use of the safe water points, the WACG oversaw the creation of a “story map” that is accessible via cell phones, which most Navajo families have (WACG, 2022). This web-based application, providing

interactive engagement with mapped data while telling a story, also contains video messages, shows the closest location to any safe water access point on the Nation, and can push alerts about any changes. (See Figure 4.)

Radio and print ads announcing the availability of the new transitional watering points were proposed to reach a population that stretches across an area larger than West Virginia, and, in its rural stretches, with fewer than 10 people per square mile. The funding to support this work was provided by the Haury Program, which functions as a philanthropic foundation, and the Southwest Research and Information Center; outreach was coordinated by DigDeep.

Key to the success of the mission was that the office of the president and vice president of the Nation was represented at all WACG and

**TABLE 1** Navajo Nation Water Development Needs

Category	Estimated Cost
Large regional municipal water supply projects*	\$632,000,000
Local domestic and municipal water infrastructure*	\$1,806,057,000
Livestock and agriculture	\$682,410,000
Service to water haulers*	\$8,000,000
Completion of Navajo Indian Irrigation Project	\$760,000,000
Water storage facilities	\$47,500,000
Drought response and mitigation	\$10,000,000
Floodplain delineations and management	\$10,000,000
Watershed restoration demonstration projects	\$8,308,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 3,964,275,000</b>

\*Most critically needed projects.  
Source: Navajo Nation (2020)

subgroup meetings, assuring that the Navajo executive branch would steer the work done by these teams.<sup>1</sup>

### More Needs Remain; More Work Is Ahead

The Navajo Nation's water access goals and needs extend beyond construction of the transitional water sites. (See Table 1.) Recognizing this and hoping to effect systemic changes, the WACG subgroup began to compile member organizations' water research interest topics that could advance the Nation's water access and quality objectives. One goal of this effort was to develop a common understanding by universities about the drinking water research priorities of the Navajo Nation. This included plans for future research, such as mapping water sources across the Nation and helping identify and treat contaminated water where hundreds of abandoned mines have compromised water quality and threatened Navajo health, livestock, and food sources.

Key to the Haury Program's funding, and likely to that of other funders who wish to support the Navajo Nation on water access, is that the Nation already has stated its water priorities. The Navajo plan includes developing regional water projects, improving small public water systems, irrigation projects, and drought mitigation (Navajo Nation, 2020). Philanthropists, water researchers, policy experts, environmental agencies, and federal and state governments can readily advance goals and effect systemic change set by the Navajo leadership by supporting these tribal priorities.

The WACG also provides a model for how to advance this change in a manner that is highly collaborative; that engages governmental, university, nonprofit, and other funding partners; that is driven by the Navajo Nation leadership; and that respects tribal sovereignty and Native knowledge about what the people who live on the Nation need and desire. This is how respectful and effective philanthropy should work to

<sup>1</sup> *Working Together for a Better Future*, a video produced by the Navajo Nation, tells the success story of the WACG in the partners' own words. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OBvKbhFXDs>.

*Preservation of fragile resources and promotion of water sustainability for Indigenous peoples requires listening closely to those whose connection to the water, land, livestock, and wildlife in these communities is profound — indeed, sacred. The people who live on the land know best what the needs there are.*

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address the critical needs of the Nation and other Indigenous peoples.

### **Adapting the WACG Model to Other Indigenous Sustainability Programs**

The Navajo Nation is not alone in facing severe water quality and access challenges. Clean water access is a global crisis that has particularly impacted the world's Indigenous communities. Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a severely disparate effect on Indigenous people around the globe. Funders and other partners that wish to respond effectively to these current and systemic crises must proceed quickly and powerfully. The threat to many Indigenous communities is literally an existential one.

But no effective response can or should be designed without proper respect and deference to Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty. Preservation of fragile resources and promotion of water sustainability for Indigenous peoples requires listening closely to those whose connection to the water, land, livestock, and wildlife in these communities is profound — indeed, sacred. The people who live on the land know best what the needs there are. Native knowledge about and respect for natural resources thus must be preserved and passed on — for justice's

sake and to best preserve these critical resources. (Tsosie, 2019; Youngblood, 2019).

The Navajo Nation's WACG team, its collaborative design, and its recognition of the ongoing systemic needs of the Nation and engagement of multiple partners offers a superb model for directing funding in the most impactful and respectful manner. It allows each agency or partner to bring its human and financial resources to the table, with collaborative decision-making on how best to expend these funds to achieve the overall goals as set out by Navajo Nation and with their guidance at every step. It also offers a means for funders who work in this space to join forces.

### **Lessons**

Three important lessons should be drawn from the WACG model:

1. Prospective partners in sustainability projects should seek enhanced communication with the Native American, Indigenous, or other community leadership.
2. Members of the Indigenous community must steer the funded project and administer the funds if they choose, with support from native and community scholars and leaders conversant with and connected to the community.
3. Any water sustainability project should engage multiple disciplines, agencies, experts, and potential funding partners.

### **Start With a Formal Tribal Consultation**

First, following the example of the federal government's Tribal Consultation mandate, sustainability project partners should seek enhanced communication with the Native American, Indigenous, or other community leadership by a formal request for consultation. This centers the community in the work, develops a relationship that extends beyond specific funding requests, and emphasizes ways to respond that respect Native American, Indigenous, and community governance and sovereignty. An example of a tribal consultation policy that can

be extended to any group proposing to work with tribes is one developed by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (2021):

Tribal Consultation is an enhanced form of communication that emphasizes trust, respect, and shared responsibility. It is an open and free exchange of information and opinion among parties, which leads to mutual understanding and comprehension. To establish and maintain a positive government-to-government relationship, communication and consultation must occur on an ongoing basis so that Tribes have an opportunity to provide *meaningful* and timely input on issues that may have a *substantial direct effect* on them. (para. 1)

During tribal consultation, project partners should seek to develop authentic relationships outside of funding opportunities to understand challenges and opportunities along with ways of working together collaboratively. This process should not add additional responsibilities to the tribe; project partners should do much of the work to educate themselves. During consultation, for example, project partners may strive to understand:

- What water sustainability and education/training questions, including those related to COVID-19, are most important to your community/Nation now and in the next five years?
- What special considerations should be in place as we seek and offer funding for these purposes?
- How can the project's water researchers and policy experts best encourage and facilitate partnerships to prepare for and respond to water sustainability challenges and the education and training priorities of your community/Nation going forward?

These considerations can easily be modified to fit all Native American and Indigenous communities, to assure that the community voices not only begin the goal setting but continue to control the project's direction and priorities throughout the funded work. Once goals and

needs are defined by the Native American and Indigenous leaders, their statements should guide the funder's call for grant applications, allowing the application process to be streamlined and reducing the burden on nonprofits and tribal leaders when applying.

### Community Members at the Helm

Second, Indigenous community members must steer the funded project and administer the funds if they choose. Native and community scholars and leaders who are community-conversant and connected are essential. The University of Arizona water research and policy team that works with the WACG is led and counseled by associate professor and hydrologist Karletta Chief, who is from the Navajo Nation, speaks Navajo, understands the meaning of water to the Nation, and can navigate the intercultural and legal complexities of Navajo governance structures. She writes,

For Indigenous people, the study and observation of water were never separated from the people. For some Indigenous people, separating people and water is impossible as the origin, occurrence, form, and quality of water often define an Indigenous person, clan, people, and/or community. (Chief, 2020, para. 1).

Native leaders at the fore means the project designers and implementers will see interconnections that will affect whether the funded work will be successful. For example, the Navajo water sustainability team understands how water needs link to other critical issues, such as food security, livestock, off-grid and renewable energy, health, education, broadband access, and culturally appropriate health messaging. In short, nobody knows this better than the Navajo Nation leaders.

A team approach guided by Native leaders is also better informed to identify whole solutions, and can help grantees address interconnected needs to create systemic change as opposed to pursuing a crisis-specific Band-Aid. A "solve the whole problem" funding design, with a demand of up-front and continuous Native American and Indigenous community consultation and

*[T]he Navajo Nation COVID-19 WACG model offers both local and global lessons, as part of a shared story about how thoughtful philanthropists, universities, government actors, and other partners may rise to meet water and other sustainability and human rights challenges with respectful engagement of Indigenous leaders.*

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leadership in setting goals, also assures that grantees will continue to work closely with the leadership as the project evolves and can seek best ways to support what may be a dynamic statement of priorities.

#### **Engage Multiple Disciplines, Experts, and Funders**

Third, the water sustainability project should engage multiple disciplines, agencies, experts, and potential funding partners. Grantees should be strongly encouraged — if not required — to consult the range of resources that the specific problem requires. For almost all water sustainability projects, such broad cooperation will produce better answers, reduce duplication

of effort, encourage more innovative problem-solving, and yield greater philanthropic impact per dollar applied.

With scarcity of funding, limits to tribal capacity for rapid implementation of projects, and the abundance of needs, such resource efficiency is imperative. An array of vital actors at the planning table and working from the same goal statement will produce greater trust and compliance in project implementation that entails community involvement and training. It also will lead to greater funding and knowledge sharing. If all move in unison to address priorities set by Native Nations, progress will be more feasible, rapid, comprehensive, and enduring.

In these ways, the Navajo Nation COVID-19 WACG model offers both local and global lessons, as part of a shared story about how thoughtful philanthropists, universities, government actors, and other partners may rise to meet water and other sustainability and human rights challenges with respectful engagement of Indigenous leaders.

The stakes are high. By some accounts, a staggering 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity exists on Indigenous lands (Raygorodetsky, 2018). Biodiversity, of course, is directly linked to water — which is essential to all life. Thus, the fate of all people, not just that of these vulnerable Indigenous communities, hangs in the balance. The urgency of this work cannot be overstated; nor can the importance of doing this work in a manner that is respectful, collaborative, and attentive to Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty.

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**Nancy Petersen, M.S.**, is assistant director of the Agnese Nelms Haury Program in Environment and Social Justice at the University of Arizona. Correspondence concerning this article can be addressed to her at [nancypetersen@arizona.edu](mailto:nancypetersen@arizona.edu).

**Karletta Chief, Ph.D.**, is an assistant professor in the Department of Environmental Science at the University of Arizona.

**Toni M. Massaro, J.D.**, is executive director of the Agnese Nelms Haury Program in Environment and Social Justice at the University of Arizona.

**Nikki Tulley, M.S.**, is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Environmental Science at the University of Arizona.

**Crystal Tulley-Cordova, Ph.D.**, is principal hydrologist with the Navajo Nation Department of Water Resources.

**Jonelle Vold, J.D.**, is vice president of development at the University of Arizona Foundation.