First Nations Development Institute, which will observe its 35th anniversary next year, was founded on the goal of helping struggling Native American tribes and communities get back on their feet economically while setting the stage for future prosperity. This would happen by supporting them in regaining control of their assets, building new assets, and launching or expanding projects that have economic development potential, often from the grassroots, ground-up level.

First Nations' Native Agriculture and Food Systems Initiative is at the intersection of where improving Native health and nutrition meets with Native community and economic development. The work would address the critical problem of diet-related health and health and nutrition issues in many Native American communities, while also holding out the promise of creating new jobs and businesses for those communities. Further, this work could encourage the idea of sustainability, stewardship and increased responsibility in food harvesting, production and handling methods -- attributes that echo traditional Native ways -- while also offering tribes a platform for revitalizing their cultures, traditional teachings, ceremonies and practices.

It was a win-win idea then, and it still is. We’re now working with American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian communities on food-systems projects.

Accessing healthy food is a challenge for many Native American children and families, and they suffer grossly exaggerated rates of diet-related diseases because of it, such as diabetes, obesity and heart disease. Without access to healthy food, a nutritious diet and good health are out of reach. To increase access to healthy food, we support tribes and Native communities as they build sustainable food systems that improve health, strengthen food security and increase the control over Native agriculture and food systems. First Nations provides this assistance in the form of financial and technical support, including training materials, to projects that address agriculture and food sectors in Native communities.

We work to provide program models that can build healthy communities for the survival of Native nations, and mechanisms to create an enabling environment to develop, grow and expand agriculture-related entrepreneurship and economic development activities. It's that recognition that food systems intersect with other important Native assets – including sovereignty, health and well-being, culture and economic development.

We have made a good start in Native food systems work, but we were only able to fund about 7% of the applications received for Native food-related projects over the past four years (2011-2014). Out of 614 grant requests totaling $24 million, we were only able to fund $1.7 million in projects. Clearly, we still have a long way to go.

By Raymond Foxworth (Navajo)
Deputy Director and Senior Program Officer
First Nations Development Institute