The National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA) is an association of tribal governments that has an interest, directly or indirectly, in the issue of tribal governmental gaming. Presently, there are about 185 tribal nations that engage in some level of gaming on their homelands. These 185 tribes have approximately 285 gaming facilities around the country. These tribes run gaming operations in 28 of the 50 states.

There are approximately 557 federally-recognized tribes. These tribes have a potential opportunity to engage in gaming for economic development purposes. However, it is apparent that the 185 tribes engaged in gaming are less than half the number of federally-recognized tribes. Indian gaming is not as widespread as we might think.

The Functions of the NIGA

The NIGA has two main responsibilities:

- To act as an advocate for legislative initiatives that benefit member tribes and tribal governments all around the country, and to engage in political activity related to that mission.

- To engage in policy issues which include other federal units such as the National Indian Gaming Commission (NIGC).

Although the NIGA and NIGC sometimes have policy disagreements, they generally can come to terms. They do everything they can to be less of a barrier to each other.

NIGA Policy Goals

NIGA has a number of goals which it aspires to achieve:

- To protect and preserve the rights of tribal governments to engage in gaming for the purpose of economic development.

- To protect and enhance the integrity of tribal governmental gaming through the institution of sound policies and operational procedures.

- To encourage tribal governmental units to use their revenue resources to increase or upgrade their capabilities so that they become better, more useful and responsive governments. This is not just for their own citizenries but, more importantly, it is also for the surrounding non-Indian communities, governments, municipalities, counties and even state governments. Cooperation is necessary for economic development.

Also, NIGA seeks to improve the quality and quantity of services that tribal people will have access to.
The Uniqueness of Tribal Governments

Tribal governments are unique. They are not a conventional form of government that we might study in our school systems. Tribal governments incorporate some of the social and traditional aspects of the Native American way of life into their systems.

For instance, tribal governments are responsible for providing housing. This really throws a lot of people off balance. They see the need for private home ownership and the need for those more conventional things, but they fail to understand why tribal governments have a role in offering and providing housing opportunities for their citizens. It is a part of the social and traditional component that was merged into this more conventional governing responsibility. This is considered unique, by some, yet it has served Indian country very well over time.

The Historic Relationship Between the Federal Government and Indian Tribes

One reason for misunderstandings about tribal governmental gaming is the historic and long-standing relationship between Indian tribes and the federal government. It is a unique relationship—with unique responsibilities and unique opportunities that no other group of people in the country have access to. Looking at a map, it is hopefully very easily and very quickly understood why this unique relationship was forged in the first place. Indian people seceded a lot of land to settlers and the federal government in exchange for this relationship. It is debatable even today whether or not the promises from this relationship are being fulfilled.

Misunderstandings about Indian Gaming

There is a great deal of misunderstanding about the regulation of Indian gaming. There are some who insist that Indian gaming is completely unregulated—that there are a lot of opportunities for organized crime and skimming of money off the top. Congress and other units of the federal government have conducted a series of hearings on this topic. Every single time, without exception, the reports have come back stating there is no evidence of organized crime infiltrating or existing in any tribal governmental gaming anywhere in the country. Hopefully, if you do not believe the NIGA, maybe you can believe the Congress or the federal government.

The Success of Indian Gaming

NIGA has been very happy with the results of its involvement in tribal governmental gaming. There is not a single tribal leader in this country that would suggest gaming on Indian lands is a sound policy for an economic basis. Each tribal leader recognizes and sees gaming as a very limited window of opportunity. NIGA is going to do everything it can to make sure that what revenues it generates today are invested wisely and put into development, education and services for its people. NIGA wants to provide dividends in the long run.

The NIGA’s viewpoint is that gaming is a means to a larger economic responsibility that tribal governments have, rather than being a basis for an economy. NIGA has actually invested a substantial amount of money in education. There are more Indian people in higher education—going to colleges and universities—today than there were 10 years ago. In one community, for example, there are more than 600 tribal students who have been able to go to college because of tribal revenues that support scholarships.

NIGA has been able to use tribal gaming revenues to supplement many new services for youth and the elderly that previously were nonexistent. One example is a program similar to Meals on Wheels where
the elders are provided one quality meal a day (or a week, in some cases).

Problem Areas

Tribal reservations tend to mirror what is going on in the urban areas of non-Indian society. There is a growing gang problem in tribal communities around the country. This is not because of gaming. It is because of the influence that has been brought from places like Phoenix, Arizona and Los Angeles, California, where Indian people have gone to live for various purposes. Anti-gang programs exist to prevent kids from engaging in those types of activities. The objective is to keep them busy and motivated, and to keep their ambition levels high for achievement.

Tribes are doing everything they can to improve the physical infrastructure on reservations. Improvements are being made on water, utility, road and communications systems. These improvements are necessary to support industrial, economic and small business development.

Gaming on Indian lands has really been the only thing which has worked to generate the level of revenues that are essential and critical for real economic development. Well-meaning federal initiatives enacted by Congress and federal agencies have been introduced over the years with the intent to stimulate growth and development in Indian communities. Yet, unemployment still hovers around 35-50 percent in most tribal communities. Indians have the highest rates of suicide and school dropouts in the nation. One reason for this is there is nothing for the children to look forward to in terms of careers and jobs. These are very serious problems that the tribal leaders have had to consider.

The National Gambling Impact Study

A recent national study on the impacts of gambling (Cornell et al.) has raised a number of questions. One of the more prominent issues is that since tribes with gaming tend to make a lot of money, why do they not share their wealth with the less fortunate? NIGA responded to this question by stating that when Arizona declared a revenue surplus two years ago—somewhere in the neighborhood of $600 million—no one cried out for them to share that surplus with New Mexico or anywhere else.

Tribal casinos are training their personnel to detect compulsive gambling behavior. Casinos have brochures and phone numbers available for patrons as they come through the doors. Limits are being placed on the amount of money you can withdraw from automatic teller machines and the number of credits that can be extended.

In the last legislative session in Arizona, there was a bill presented to dedicate approximately 5 percent of the revenues that are generated by the lottery to compulsive gambling programs. The bill died before it got a committee hearing. In other words, the state legislature was not interested in dedicating a portion of their funds to address the problem of compulsive gambling. The tribes very proudly announced that they were doing more than their part.

Reference
