

Capitalism's Last Frontier: Entrepreneurship on the Navajo Nation



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Abstract:

Nearly one century ago, the Navajo Nation government was created in response to the discovery of major oil reserves on Navajoland, a 28,000 square mile landmass that spans Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. The newly founded government accepted agreements with multinational companies in the hopes of bringing jobs and economic opportunities to the community. Over the decades, it has become clear these agreements and the policies supporting extractive industries have caused irreparable harm to cultural practices, damaged the Colorado Plateau's air, water, and land, and hindered tribal members living on reservation land from developing businesses that support the local economic base.

Drive through any community on the Navajo and Hopi nations today and you'll see the same contingent of businesses—a few fast-food joints, a gas station, a dollar store. Small, local, sustainable, and culturally cognizant businesses are largely absent as a direct effect of the tribal economic-development models initiated in the early 1920s to ensure successful extraction of natural resources held on tribal lands. Creating entrepreneurial pathways is a sincere route to developing a diverse and more sustainable economy, increase household incomes, and improve health outcomes for residents on tribal lands.

