A population that rarely registers in the world’s consciousness is undergoing a profound and instructive renaissance. Since European contact, American Indian tribes have endured racism, disease and attempted extermination. Yet remarkably, a growing number of the more than 560 tribes are moving beyond oppression, giving the world inspiring stories of societal resilience.

The Mississippi Choctaw, for example, increased their average life expectancy from under 50 years to 68 years in three decades. In the early 1990s, the Winnebago tribe’s unemployment was over 60%; now there are more jobs than working age people in their community. The Mille Lacs Band of the Ojibwe is putting their once-disappearing language into everyday use.

Such success stories are increasingly commonplace, whether the theme is social services, education, economics or the environment.

What explains this resilience?
Part of the answer is policy. After multiple policy failures, including forced relocation and assimilation, the US government shifted to a policy of self-determination in the 1970s, giving tribes greater opportunities to control their own affairs. It is the only policy approach that has ever led to meaningful socioeconomic change. But, enlightened policy is not enough. A large proportion of America’s 5.2 million Native people continue to struggle.

A dozen years ago, I asked a chief from interior Alaska what enabled his tribe to overcome an environmental crisis that threatened everything Athabascans hold sacred. His answer was Neel ghul neets niiy – meaning “we work together and we help each other”.

The resilient tribes tend to share a similar “can do” attitude. They spend less time blaming others for their situations and instead focus on what they can do. They tackle compelling problems by designing their own solutions. And, they look to the future rather than attempting to return to an idealized past. Picture kids rapping in their Native language or spiritual leaders staying connected via social media.

The most resilient tribes – the ones repeatedly achieving success on their own terms – also back up their attitudes with action. They put themselves in the driver’s seat. Some toss out the ill-fitting “foreign” constitutions handed to them in the 1930s and create truly legitimate governing systems. Others take over functions previously (and ineffectively) managed by outsiders, such as policing, healthcare delivery and economic ventures.

In short, they seize control of their own futures in big and little ways, from building governing institutions to writing their own codes and regulations. And it works.

We American Indians often joke among ourselves that we are survivors. There is growing proof that tribes can not only survive but also thrive in the 21st century.

It is a renaissance worth watching and learning from.

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