

CASE STUDY

Project 2.1: Understanding the values of stakeholders in Australian post-mining economies: Gove, Northern Territory

CRC TiME
Transformations in Mining Economies

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Introduction

Gove Peninsula landscape and history

Understanding the unusual landscape and history of the Gove Peninsula (hereafter, ‘the Peninsula’) is crucial to understanding its future transition. The Peninsula lies on the North-eastern corner of the mainland of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory (Figure 1). This region has been occupied by Indigenous people for many tens of thousands of years and the inhabitants speak various dialects of the Yolŋu language group. They are divided into at least 13 clans, which are the basis for a complex system of the ownership of territory, and whose members must ‘marry out’ into other clans according to complex cultural rules. This results in residential populations with diverse clan cultural affiliations. The main landowning clans on the Peninsula are the Rirratjingu, Gumatj, and Galpu clans.



Figure 1: Gove Peninsula. Source: Mapcarta.com and Mapbox

The overall landscape type is tropical savannah, with a range of diverse local habitats, and geologically, the Peninsula holds substantial surface deposits of bauxite, which has been the sole basis for commercial mining in the area. The landscape is imbued with deep cultural significance for its Yolŋu owners and this significance and the development of mining in the region, have both had substantial impacts on the Australian nation as a whole.

Yolŋu people had considerable contact with non-Indigenous people prior to colonisation compared with many other continental Indigenous Australians. Macassan trepangers from the Indonesian archipelago journeyed to the Arnhem coast for centuries prior to 1770 and this contact involved trade, seasonal residence, and other diplomatic relations (MacKnight, 1976). This experience continues to shape Yolŋu responses to ongoing colonisation. The region experienced some violent colonial incursions in the 1800s and early 1900s, but no long-term colonial residence was established prior to World War I.

In response to colonial massacres in this region and in other parts of Australia, Arnhem Land was made a protected reserve in 1931, technically closed to outsiders with the exception of Anglican and Methodist missionary societies (Dewar, 1992). Other than some historically noteworthy encounters with fishermen (Egan, 1996), the Reserve remained comparatively well protected from the more extensive ongoing colonisation occurring elsewhere. In 1935, a Methodist mission was established at Yirrkalá and the missionaries encouraged members of the Yolŋu clans dispersed throughout the region to centralise their residence at the mission. The mission emphasised Western education and mainstream economic participation, but was also tolerant of Yolŋu cultural beliefs and practices. Centralising residence both created and exacerbated inter-clan tensions, partly as the land on the Peninsula is primarily owned by only some of the clans from the wider region. During World War II, an air base was built, increasing connectivity between the Peninsula and the wider Australian nation.

Peninsula mineral development, Yolŋu resistance, and Indigenous land rights

In 1952, substantial bauxite deposits were found by the Australian Aluminium Production Commission in Melville Bay, north of Yirrkala. The Commonwealth Government then enabled changes to mining-related legislation to enable the Administrator of the Northern Territory to grant mining rights to companies on Aboriginal reserves.¹ The Commonwealth Government approved plans for mining in 1963, excising 362 km² from the Arnhem Reserve. In response, Yolŋu clan leaders, facilitated by mission staff, produced the 1963 Bark Petition to the Australian parliament, stating that they were residents of the land that was removed and had been unaware of the developments. The petition further declared that the area contained vital sacred sites and hunting grounds. The petition led to a parliamentary select committee and remains on display in the foyer of Parliament House in Canberra, but its central concerns were largely ignored. In 1968, the Commonwealth government granted permission for the mining consortium Nabalco to build a bauxite mine and treatment plant.

Yolŋu traditional owners then launched legal action in the Northern Territory Supreme Court. *Milirrpum vs Nabalco Pty Ltd* is the first Indigenous land ownership and land rights case in Australian history (Williams, 1986). Justice Blackburn ruled against the Yolŋu, finding that their rights had been invalidated by colonisation by the Crown. Nabalco was able to continue its operation, establishing the bauxite refinery and the mining town of Gove (Nhulunbuy).

The negative court decision and further Yolŋu articulation of their position led directly to the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission (known as the Woodward Royal Commission) and then to the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act of 1976. This was the first piece of legislation in Australia that specified a process for recognising and granting Indigenous traditional ownership. It also required the creation of major regional land councils who are independent statutory authorities of the Commonwealth. They have designated functions to assist Aboriginal people to acquire and manage their traditional lands and seas, consult with traditional landowners and other Aboriginal people with an interest in affected land, and ensure that landowners give informed consent before any action is taken to affect their lands and seas. The Northern Land Council performs these functions for Traditional Owners across the northern mainland of the Northern Territory.

The actions and cases undertaken under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act would further enable Australian legal understanding and experience of Indigenous culture, custom, and law. This in turn supported subsequent recognition of native title by the High Court of Australia in the 1992 *Mabo* decision, leading to the Commonwealth Native Title Act 1993 that has provided a mechanism for recognising Indigenous rights in country across large areas of the continent. As a result, Yolŋu resistance to mineral development on the Peninsula is a crucial precursor to these national developments in the legal, political, and organisational recognition of Indigenous rights.

Gove Peninsula mining type and mining methods

Bauxite production on the Peninsula started in 1971. The bauxite lies on a layer at the surface and so the mine type is a strip mine in which the trees and thin overburden are removed and then a layer of bauxite several metres thick removed. The lowered area is then revegetated. This distinctive type of mining has a large footprint on the landscape compared with other mining types. However, provided revegetation is undertaken with pre-existing plant species, an inexperienced observer may not detect the final impact on the landscape when compared with pit or open cut mining. On the Peninsula, revegetation has been progressively undertaken throughout the recent life of the mine, reducing the apparent landscape impact at any one point in time. Nevertheless, the volume of mineral removed in

¹ <https://www.nma.gov.au/explore/features/indigenous-rights/land-rights/yirrkala>

bauxite mining is substantial: 11.8 Mt of bauxite was exported from the port in 2021.² The associated alumina refinery was a condition of the original lease but was closed in 2013 due to poor operating viability, partly as it operated on diesel power. Rio Tinto intends to cease all mining operations entirely by 2030 at the latest, and potentially earlier.

Town creation, homelands, and regional demography

The decision to create a town to support the mine was consistent with the prevalent operating model for the minerals industry at the time the mine commenced. It was also consistent with Commonwealth Government approaches to regional economic development in Northern Australia that focused on large scale and established industries rather than the small scale and artisanal emphasis adopted by the missions. Data on the pre-existing Yolŋu population of the region prior to mineral development is scarce and/or inaccessible, but a well-known response to the arriving of mining and the mining town was the homelands movement (Morphy, 1991). This movement involved clan-based groups leaving Yirrkala and other missions and returning to their original clan territory to establish small Indigenous-only communities of between 10 and 150 people. This enabled them to avoid the worst of the social and cultural impacts of a comparatively large number of non-Yolŋu arriving in the area and particularly of the wide availability of alcohol which had previously been very restricted. Homeland residence remains an important feature of life in the area.

Census data shows the residential and demographic effects of these influences. Data from 2001 (well prior to the refinery closure) showed a region-wide population of 13,080, of which 40% were non-Indigenous and 29% were resident in Nhulunbuy. 2016 regional data is not fully comparable, but the corresponding population figure for Nhulunbuy was 3,240, indicating the decline of the town population following the refinery closure. Data from the 2021 census shows a population of 3,267 in Nhulunbuy, indicating a stable overall population since 2016.³

A new journey together’ – wider stakeholder commitment to the transition vision of Traditional Owners

The Gove Peninsula Futures Reference Group

Following the Gove refinery closure in 2013, the Northern Territory Government (NTG) commenced a series of internal planning steps to begin preparation for eventual mine closure. In 2019, the NTG convened the Gove Peninsula Futures Reference Group (GPFRG). This stakeholder-based group supports communication, planning and decision making with regard to the future of the Peninsula and by extension the wider Arnhem Land region within which it lies. Table 1 identifies the members of the GPFRG and their interests in the transition process.⁴

Table 1: Gove Peninsula Future Reference Group: selected roles in mine transition

GPFRG MEMBER	MEMBER DESCRIPTION AND GENERAL ROLE	ROLE IN MINING TRANSITION
Northern Territory Government	Governance of the Northern Territory through devolution	– Oversight of mine closure

² <https://www.riotinto.com/en/operations/australia/gove>

³ In the 2021 census a comparatively high number of respondents (over 20%) did not state whether they were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, making it difficult to estimate any changes in this regard.

⁴ See Beer et al. (2022) for an earlier account from the CRC TiME of stakeholders in the Gove Peninsula transition.

	of Commonwealth government powers ⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Facilitate post-mining planning to offset loss of services and subsidies provided by the mining company – Enable future service provision and alternative economic development
Rio Tinto	Large multinational mining corporation that has owned and operated the Gove mine since 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Bauxite mining until scheduled cessation – Refinery decommissioning and site rehabilitation – Mine closure and site rehabilitation – Fulfill post-mining legacy responsibilities
Northern Land Council	Independent statutory authority of the Commonwealth with responsibility for assisting Aboriginal peoples in the Top End of the NT to acquire and manage their traditional lands and seas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Meet obligations and responsibilities under the Land Rights Act (NT), including Traditional Owner identification and consultation – Facilitation and management of activities, leases, and tenure arrangements on land rights land – Support and advocacy for Traditional Owners
Gumatj Corporation	Corporation representing the Gumatj clan – Traditional Owners for parts of the Gove Peninsula – and focused on business and community development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Traditional Owners and managers of key territory on which the mine operates – Major recipients of royalty payments from current Rio Tinto mining – Owner/operator of a small bauxite mining operation and mine-training centre – Fostering economic development through owning, managing, and/or enabling diverse businesses and enterprises
Rirratjingu Corporation	Corporation representing the Rirratjingu clan (Traditional Owners for parts of the Gove Peninsula) and focused on economic independence and financial self-sufficiency for the Rirratjingu community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Traditional Owners and managers of key territory where non-Yolŋu people reside and/or mining operations occur – Major recipients of royalty payments from current Rio Tinto mining and from the Yirrkala town site – Owners of Rirratjingu Mining which operates the Gove blue metal quarry
Commonwealth Government	National government with responsibilities identified in the constitution including	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provides the majority of NT government revenue⁶

⁵ States are responsible for all matters not identified in the Australian Constitution as Commonwealth Government responsibilities. Australian Federal Territories are not States, although their governments perform similar functions to State governments based on the devolution of Federal (Commonwealth) powers. The Federal government retains certain powers to override Federal Territory parliamentary legislation and government decisions.

⁶ Projected as 69% of total revenue in 2022–2023: <https://budget.nt.gov.au/budget-papers/where-does-the-territory-governments-revenue-come-from>.

	defence, immigration, taxation, air travel and social services payments, as well as a funding role for many State and Territory services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Sets policy and provides social and welfare services payments to the highly social security dependent regional Arnhem Land community – Oversees the Federal Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act and the land councils the Act requires – Major role in key infrastructure (roads, ports, air services) – potential influence through decisions about defence, immigration, taxation, etc.
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In addition to the formal members of GPFRG, Developing East Arnhem Limited (DEAL) is responsible for leading key economic development activities for the group. DEAL is an independent not-for-profit company with the mission to drive economic development and diversification in East Arnhem including housing, strategic infrastructure investment, data gathering and analysis, and governance and administrative support.

The Traditional Owners' Vision for the future of the Peninsula

In 2021, the GPFRG facilitated the production of a document that outlined the Traditional Owners' vision for the future of Nhulunbuy and the Gove Peninsula (GPFRG, 2021). Entitled 'A new journey together', the document provides some background to the GPFRG, the history of mining on the Peninsula, and Traditional Owners' previous responses to mining. Based on the views of the Rirratjingu clan and Gumatj clan Traditional Owners as the two primary landowning clans on the Peninsula⁷ it outlines the vision for the future as follows:

The Gove Peninsula is one of the most special places in Australia. Our vision is to rejuvenate the region. It will be a place for us to share our culture, and a business and services hub for all of Arnhem Land. We will work together to create a stronger and more secure future for generations of Yolŋu and Däpaki [non-Aboriginal people] to come.
(GPFRG, 2021, p. 6)

The rest of the document then provides key elements of the overall vision (Table 2) and some guiding principles for the transition that the Traditional Owners ask all stakeholders in the Peninsula transition to observe (Table 3).

Table 2: Key elements of the Traditional Owner Vision. Source: GPFRG (2021, pp. 6–7)

KEY ELEMENT	FURTHER EXPLANATION
Recognition of Traditional Owners	Yolŋu are recognised as Traditional Owners of the Gove Peninsula, and people who come to this region will respect our land and our culture.
Yolŋu and Däpaki together	Yolŋu and Däpaki will live and work together in harmony in Nhulunbuy, as a leading example for the rest of Australia.

⁷ Yolŋu territorial ownership patterns are complex and most local areas, particularly coastal areas, comprise a 'patchwork' of land and waters belonging to different clans. This patchwork is both constituted and traversed by the Ancestral beings who created the landscape and continue to dwell within it (Morphy & Morphy, 2006; Williams, 1986). The 2021 GPFRG vision document does not describe the methods used to elicit the Vision. Yet the document is explicit that it derives from the two primary clans it refers to directly, rather than being sourced from or endorsed by the other 13 clans from the wider region, at least some of whom also have historically held territory that is impacted by mining development.

Connecting with culture and country	Mining has changed our lands, but Yolŋu history and song lines remain. Nhulunbuy will be a place for us to share our culture with the world.
A diverse economy	The Gove Peninsula will be a place for new business ideas, building on its special location and history. We will have a diverse economy with a choice of jobs.
Nhulunbuy as a services hub	Nhulunbuy will be a hub for people from across Arnhem Land to access education, training and health services.
Rejuvenating Nhulunbuy	We want to keep everything that is good about Nhulunbuy and improve it. Our vision is to maintain a sustainable population and create an exciting, well-managed community.
Infrastructure ready for the future	We will have reliable, affordable essential services and quality infrastructure to support a good quality of life and a strong economy.
Town, communities and homelands strong together	Yolŋu will be able to live safely, happily and with dignity in nearby communities and homelands. The whole region will be connected.

Table 3: Guiding principles from Traditional Owners for the Peninsula transition.
Source: Collated from GPFRG (2021, pp. 14–15)

GUIDING PRINCIPLE	FURTHER EXPLANATION
The Traditional Owner vision must be at the centre	We invite all stakeholders to support Traditional Owners to achieve this vision, in recognition of our rights as custodians of the Gove Peninsula. By putting this vision at the centre, we can plan and invest for the long-term.
We will work together with unity among the Clans, and in partnership with Ḏäpaki	Through the Gove Peninsula Futures Reference Group, we will work in a spirit of trust and openness. Our Clans must have an ongoing voice in decisions, and we will need the best information to guide us.
We should start making decisions now, to create certainty for the future	To achieve our vision, we must not wait until mine closure. Traditional Owners will put in place new land tenure arrangements as soon as possible to provide certainty for residents and businesses. Other stakeholders must do their part by investing in infrastructure, developing new industries and creating pathways for Yolŋu into jobs.
Transition should create opportunities and not problems for Yolŋu	Mining began without Yolŋu having a say. We do not want to be left with problems after it ends (such as poor housing or infrastructure). We are working together with Rio Tinto under the Gove Peninsula Traditional Owners Agreement to make decisions about rehabilitating land, retaining assets and

	creating opportunities for Yolŋu businesses during transition.
We must empower our young people, who are future leaders	Our young leaders have helped write this vision. They will be our voice in the future. We should provide support for them to develop as leaders and involve them in making decisions.
We should think in new ways	The history of the Gove Peninsula is unique, and we are beginning a new journey. Stakeholders must embrace new ideas. Yolŋu and Däpaki have different knowledge and world views. We will share our knowledge, and we ask others to listen and understand us.

The Vision document has been endorsed by all the GPFRG stakeholders as providing strategic direction for transition. This GPFRG commitment is partially a pragmatic response to the fact that the land will revert to Traditional Ownership – that Yolŋu will be the final decision makers on this land. Yet it also reflects alignment in the visions of different stakeholders for the future of both Nhulunbuy and the Peninsula. Five work streams are identified by document to begin implementing this vision and supporting transition. These are discussed in further detail. Key principles and categories from the Vision document are used where appropriate in the analysis that follows to highlight alignment between participant interview content and the Vision.

Mining’s impact on the region

Social and economic changes

Across the interviews, respondents generally prioritised the social and economic changes wrought by mining in the Gove context. The first question asked about changes to both the community and landscape, and respondents in six of the seven interviews began with social, cultural and/or infrastructure changes rather than landscape or environmental ones. In five of the seven interviews, a follow up prompt to consider landscape changes was required to elicit a response about such changes. This may be a consequence of both the cultural and community specificity of the Peninsula, as well as the specific type of mining undertaken there.

Within the responses about social, economic, and community changes, respondents in two interviews noted that mining at Gove had significantly influenced Indigenous land rights struggles – answers consistent with the history provided above. A majority of respondents also identified the large number of non-Yolŋu people who moved to the region and some major effects of this.⁸ These effects can be summarised as the creation of a series of cultural, geographic and economic divisions – divisions between Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu, between the Gove Peninsula and the rest of Arnhem Land, and between the Yolŋu homelands and the much larger town of Yirrkala that emerged from the former mission. Two further effects are the establishment of important physical infrastructure, and Yolŋu people having enhanced understanding of, and participation in, the mining industry. Examples of these are discussed in turn.

Intersecting cultural, geographic, and economic divisions

⁸ One respondent noted that the Dhimurru land management office was created to manage the effects of non-Yolŋu recreational use of the surrounding landscape. This was one of the first Indigenous land management offices created in Australia.

The early arrival of alcohol with the mine had a significant impact on Yolŋu society, and alongside the negative social and health effects, respondents linked this directly to the outstation or homeland movement in which most Yolŋu clans established small communities away from Yirrkala from the early 1970s onwards:

... the death rates of young people, men in particular, just went up and up and there was no possibility of processes of adjustment because the mining town, in a sense, did prioritise itself for a long period of time in terms of access to alcohol. (Respondent 10)

During the 60s, mining was coming up, the township of Nhulunbuy, and Yirrkala was slowly changed. But the problem was nanatji [alcohol], alcohol and drugs. That's why the Yolŋu wanted to have Yirrkala separate as a dry community. And [the] same with homelands, they need to be a dry community. They didn't want to live in regions with people that disturb privacy – the Yolŋu lifestyle. (Respondent 1)

The 17 km geographic separation between Yirrkala and Nhulunbuy was also a cultural and an economic division, as this respondent noted:

Until quite recently, there's been two pretty well distinct societies here, the white and the black, and they didn't really intermingle very much. So Nhulunbuy was the mining town and they're all white workers, pretty much, and then the Aboriginal people lived here [Gunyangara] or in Yirrkala or other places, and there wasn't much Indigenous employment in the mining at all. (Respondent 6)

The creation of a royalty system from the mine, combined with the lack of Yolŋu employment, also generated economic inequalities within Yolŋu society:

[There was] the introduction of a class system, because the royalty regime doesn't favour all the area affected. The vast amounts of the royalties go to a very small subset of the local population, and that has had profound and ongoing social effects. (Respondent 9)

... there's been a bit of greed and unequal sharing, from what I've seen, so some people have done a lot better than others. (Respondent 6)

From that you could argue that maybe 20% of the population has been favoured by being able to build an investment portfolio into the future which others don't have access to. (Respondent 10)

A further consequence of the royalty distribution system, and to a lesser degree the resettlement from the mission entailed by the homelands movement, is an economic and a geographic division within wider Yolŋu society in Arnhem Land:

... There's obviously a lot of wealth that's been generated as a result of the mine here, not only for Yolŋu businesses and Traditional Owners, but also for non-Yolŋu businesses. That economic inequity that you see between the Gove Peninsula and the broader region is certainly something that plays through in the conversations with communities and homelands off the Gove Peninsula. (Respondent 8)

In one interview, respondents noted that the historical divisions and inequalities partly derived from government assumptions about what mining development would bring and hence, a lack of policy and action to manage its effects:

Government policy diminished the importance of local initiatives... they failed to focus on development initiatives, resources and everything else, on Yirrkala and the homelands. So they took for granted that somehow employment was going to be in the town

(Respondent 10)

The mining town shifted government's view away from what the mission had in mind, which was the internal development of a regional economy towards, 'oh well! that would be catered for by Nhulunbuy'. I think that was a really major thing. When we first of all arrived at Yirrkala, the number of Yolŋu actually employed full time in different things was enormous, so the shop, which was a very successful store, was almost entirely Yolŋu-run.

(Respondent 10)

The nature of economic activity, and the concentration of wealth in the non-Yolŋu community has had other social and economic consequences. One respondent noted that decades of mining had led to some local non-Yolŋu people expecting high incomes without substantial educational qualifications or extensive work hours – such people were known locally as 'Gove specials'. Historically, the industry has employed more non-local males without higher educational qualifications than is the case in many other industries, further influencing community dynamics. Two respondents in this study reported that it was currently unclear how much of the disposable income created by mining development was spent in the town, and therefore what benefits from that income accrue locally. Higher income earners in mining may not be purchasing many goods and services locally compared with lower income earners with fewer purchasing options. These considerations indicate the more subtle social and economic impacts of mining development in a region such as Arnhem Land.

Infrastructure development

In five of the seven interview responses reflecting on changes, respondents referred to the significance of the local infrastructure that mining had brought. Key comments about this infrastructure included that it was used by all, not just the company; that it was substantial for the size of the town; and that residents had become accustomed to this comparatively high quality of service:

... the mining town isn't just a mining town, it's also the regional service centre. So things like the hospital, there are all kinds of facilities there that simply wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been for the mine, and people have got used to those things being there.

(Respondent 9)

Nhulunbuy is our service provider area; school, fuel, barge, Qantas landing and the road to Golumala. So all of us are servicing that, all of us are using that. (Respondent 1)

... (it's) a significant level of infrastructure investment that you wouldn't see generally in a population of this size in a region. So things like large airports that can take jet planes, ports – a town that's incredibly well serviced for the size of its population. (Respondent 8)

... the Indigenous populations are really reliant on Nhulunbuy as a services hub, and you see that in the [Traditional Owner] Vision obviously, that they want Nhulunbuy to remain strong. The Traditional Owners do because they see it as essential for their way of life up here as a services hub now, but 50 years ago it wasn't the case. (Respondent 5)

Increased Yolŋu knowledge of and participation in mining

In three of seven interviews, respondents referred to improvements in Yolŋu knowledge of mining practices, and further of Yolŋu involvement in mining, as a social and economic consequence of the mine at Gove. This was a phenomenon of more recent history, particularly dating from the arrival of Rio Tinto in 2007 and the 2011 Gove agreement:

... Rio Tinto, the third mining company, came in and it changed a bit when we signed our Gove Agreement 2011, that opens access for Yolŋu to work in the mine. Work training, [there

were] big changes there, and this opens up access there for [clan name] Traditional Owners to have contracts with the Rio Tinto. (Respondent 1)

... [there is] a broader awareness of mining and what mining can bring from a positive and negative sense amongst Traditional Owners and communities that you might not see in other places that are as remote as this, and probably a deeper understanding and engagement with the mining industry. There's continuing conversations with other mining operators that are looking to mine here. The Gumatj people who are one of the Traditional Owner groups of the Gove Peninsula have established their own mining operations which arguably never would have happened if there wasn't the bauxite mine here. (Respondent 8)

In 2007 when I left and having worked closely with Yolŋu people for the previous eight years, the attitude towards mining was more or less 'this is a whitefella business. They do the mining [and] yeah we get some royalties and some benefit from it, but it's basically they're stealing our land, they're running their business on our land and they're taking it'. But in coming back just over ten years later I've seen a lot more engagement with the local Aboriginal people and a lot more benefit flowing to, particularly the Traditional Owner groups in the region. (Respondent 7)

As the above quotes show, respondents identified growing Yolŋu understanding of the mining industry, and direct engagement in it, as an important recent social and economic change created by that industry.

Landscape changes

Respondents identified a series of landscape or environmental changes wrought by mining, at times in response to prompts about landscape change and/or the type of mining used on the Peninsula. The Gove mine is a standalone facility – the next nearest mine on Groote Eylandt, over 200 km away in a direct line, is inaccessible by road, and on land belonging to Traditional Owners of a different language family. As a consequence, some respondents compared the distinctive impacts of Peninsula mining with other mining contexts elsewhere, others answered based on their local understanding. Two primary sources of impacts were identified – those from mining operations and those refining operations.

Changes caused by mining operations

The strip mining process has two major effects – it creates an impact across a wide geographic footprint and it enables a progressive, ongoing rehabilitation process for areas that have been mined, rather than rehabilitation predominantly occurring at or near the end of mine life. Both aspects of this impact were noted by respondents.

[we've] been doing progressive rehabilitation. Compared to a lot of other kind of mines, the expression and what you see on the surface after the mine has gone through an area is less than hard rock pits and arguably less than the impact that coal sites have. (Respondent 5)

[It's] a much more vast area of land. But it's almost like, remove three or four metres so it drops down in its height or elevation, but then the rehabilitation process basically puts topsoil and seeds on top of the newly exposed surface, and it's allowed to regenerate. (Respondent 7)

It's difficult to pinpoint the older areas of rehabilitation from the virgin bushland next door. (Respondent 3)

I was quite struck by, in some ways, how limited the impacts are on the landscape, being that they effectively strip almost up to eight metres down. It's not as though it's a coal mine where you have a massive pit. So in that respect, it's somewhat light on the environment, although I do understand it does change the landscape quite dramatically. (Respondent 4)

However, the effects of this kind of mining are still evident, and particularly so for the Traditional Owners who know the country best.

The landscape physically has changed and you basically see the scars on the earth, particularly when you fly in and out of Nhulunbuy. (Respondent 7)

It's a mixture, not natural trees, it's a mixture. And the soil, it was placed, they ripped [it out], so there is rough ground. So the ground, the bushes and the trees are sort of mixed in that area. It's not like when I first go into the natural environment, it's different from the mining area. So that's the difference. So if you walk through that you maybe break your leg or ankle because it's rough, rocky, even though they are growing bush back. (Respondent 1)

Changes caused by refining operations

Respondents identified the environmental impacts of the refinery process as a more challenging legacy to manage than the landscape effects from mining. Respondents noted that the refinery itself is highly visible, but the company believes this site can be successfully rehabilitated:

Obviously the refinery process has changed the landscape here hugely. The refinery itself out on the Peninsula at the port is a very substantial small city of infrastructure, equipment, pipes and whatever else. (Respondent 3)

We will demolish the refinery and bring this back to natural vegetation and you broadly won't really be able to tell 20 years from now that there was a refinery here, short of a bit of a retained infrastructure that we're talking to the Traditional Owners about handing over – tanks and a few other things that may remain. (Respondent 5)

A more significant issue as acknowledged by the mining company and by many other respondents is the refinery residue disposal area, known as the red mud ponds.

The biggest impact on the landscape is the residue disposal areas where for many years, red mud – it was a by-product, a waste of the refinery circuit itself. There's caustic red mud within those residue disposal areas or tailings facilities that continues to exist. We reprofile them and we flatten the slopes and we put a liner over the top cap and then revegetate. But it'll never look like a natural setting out there. (Respondent 5)

... that's a legacy that's going to be there forever and a day, probably. So they seem to be doing it right, engineering good solutions, but there's already been a fair bit of damage to the environment around the residue disposal area. So there's been seepage under the walls and on an aerial image you can see where it's affected, trees are dead. It's only relatively small areas, but there's definitely damage. (Respondent 6)

As the comments above show, understanding and prioritisation of the refinery residue issues was highest amongst those directly involved in the industry, and the government as a regulator. However, community and Indigenous respondents also noted the significance of the red mud ponds as a landscape impact.

Key values expressed

The distinctiveness of the Peninsula case shows the importance of understanding the system context, and particularly the historical context. This is partly why a longer history of the region and its influence was provided for this case study. Respondent consideration of landscape and community changes on the Peninsula shows the pre-eminence of social, cultural and economic considerations in mining impacts because of this context. Values

highlighted include the significance of justice (in the form recognising both historical dispossession and contemporary Traditional Ownership) and the associated cultural and spiritual values of the landscape. Concerns about safety, risk, and the distribution of liability emerged in considerations of the impacts of the red mud ponds. One comment from a Traditional Owner addressed biodiversity in relation to strip mining impacts, but environmental values were not strongly emphasised in initial considerations, reflecting the type of mining and the progressive rehabilitation process enabled by this form of mining.

Best possible outcomes and significance of outcomes

The next question asked respondents to provide their best possible outcomes from a transition to post-mining, and how those outcomes were important to themselves and/or their organisations. Given the GPFRG commitment to the Tradition Owner Vision, it was expected at least some respondent views expressed in this study would reflect key aspects of the Vision document. To assist local understanding and impact, the following section uses subheadings derived from the Vision in places where they align with respondent commentary, as well as identifying where some gaps exist.

‘Recognition of Traditional Owners’ – stakeholder commitment to the Traditional Owner vision

A Yolŋu respondent in the study strongly asserted the primacy of Traditional Owner power and authority in the process of transition:

We don’t want parliament down there, the bureaucrats running us – our community, our lives – under their plan. [We need a] local plan. This is just ngarraku (my) my feeling and my thoughts for future. [It should] come to Yolŋu’s control in different areas.

Yolŋu is the decision maker. For Nhulunbuy, it has to be Rirratjingu decision maker[s], final decision maker[s] – Rirratjingu. Before [the] Commonwealth government, [the] Northern Territory government come in and [the] Northern Land Council come in, or any business people come in. We’re the final decision maker. The foundation is Rirratjingu. Djalkiri not rupiyah.⁹ (Respondent 1)

Strong statements of commitment to realising the Traditional Owner vision for the future of the Peninsula came from government and community organisational respondents, in part because of an alignment of perspectives:

... our commitment is to the TO [Traditional Owner] Vision and that’s government policy now... the Vision articulates a pretty bright future, and so I think it’s a great roadmap... we had a position that pre-dated the Vision, but the Vision in itself, without government influence, came up with a very similar story. So it was actually just an alignment of goals too. (Respondent 3)

We’re very aligned, as our vision is shared not only by our organisation and other stakeholders, it aligns closely with the Traditional Owner vision for the future of Nhulunbuy. (Respondent 8)

Other stakeholders are already obliged to take Traditional Owner direction:

⁹ Djalkiri has a series of meanings but in this usage can be translated as ‘foundations’ in a cultural and kinship sense. Rupiyah is the Yolŋu word for money, derived from the Macassan word for the same.

... we're here to represent the interests and aspirations of local Traditional Owner people. So for me that's front and centre and it's one of the key reasons why the Northern Land Council exists. (Respondent 7)

[The] language I'm talking is not to be fading away, to carry on talking. Language. The skin need to be as it is, not going to change into that [white] colour. Enough? Your identity, your surname need to be carried on. They are the main ones. Gurrutu [kinship] interlinked on your father's side family and your mother's side family. [We] need to bring them in. (Respondent 1)

Without directly referring to the Vision document, other respondents indicated understanding of the relative importance of Traditional Owner views and aspirations. The mining industry respondent referred to 'working back from what the Traditional Owners want' as a means for thinking about best outcomes, and the METS respondent commented that 'none of it can happen unless the local Indigenous [people] want it to happen, so they'd have to be on board with it'. Reflecting on good outcomes, a Traditional Owner highlighted three aspects – linguistic and cultural continuity, community safety, and good business relationships with other stakeholders:

We need a safe community and peace[ful] community, and good relationships business-wise. Bilinya (like that). The Northern Land Council, the Northern Territory Government and Commonwealth Government have to work with us [and] to work with the other business people. (Respondent 1)

Yolŋu and Däpaki together' – intercultural relationships

Following the transition, Yolŋu Traditional Owners will still be embedded within a wider system of governance, infrastructure and services that require non-Yolŋu people in the area. This intercultural relationship between Yolŋu and Däpaki is a dominant theme across the entire Peninsula transition process. The return of land to Yolŋu hands has the potential to 'address some past wrongs' as one respondent expressed it, but rather than enabling simple co-existence, Rirratjingu and Gumatj have a more ambitious aspiration:

Yolŋu and Däpaki will live and work together in harmony in Nhulunbuy, as a leading example for the rest of Australia. (GPFRG, 2021)

Having noted this aspect of the Vision, one Däpaki respondent demonstrated the potential of this approach:

... this is a really amazing place in Australia to live, and to be, it's a really humbling place as well, if you open your eyes and you're willing to have cultural experiences, and talk to people. I think it's also really important in terms of strengthening the regions as well, and having a strong regional hub up here. It would be a loss to Australia, if you were to lose a place like, Nhulunbuy. (Respondent 4)

Reflecting further on a positive future transition, this respondent also looked forward to existing local geographic and cultural divisions easing:

At the moment you could very much probably draw the cultural lines between Nhulunbuy and Yirrkala, and Gnyangara. The hope is there will be greater connection between Nhulunbuy, Yirrkala and Gnyangara,¹⁰ acting as a Gove Peninsula area as a whole, rather than three very distinct, very culturally distinct areas. (Respondent 4)

¹⁰ A Yolŋu community close to Nhulunbuy that is smaller than Yirrkala but larger than the homelands further out.

One respondent identified that Yolŋu leadership had an increasing business and commercial focus, reflecting enhanced engagement within the town and Yolŋu understanding of the need to generate economic value from their land. A Yolŋu participant noted the two-way intercultural learning required for corporate activity, and that Indigenous corporate activity can in turn strengthen Indigenous cultural identity:

We got [trainer name] here doing governance training. So we're asking them to [help] understand a bit of business knowledge for our corporation going through. And then also telling them to understand [the] cultural awareness program. So we need to wear a business hat and a cultural hat. Because our Yolŋu cultural beliefs is strengthened by this corporation.
(Respondent 1)

A future state of harmonious intercultural relations -'Yolŋu and Däpaki together' – is supported by Däpaki awareness of the distinctiveness of the Yolŋu context, the easing of local geographic and cultural divisions, and the growing corporate and commercial capacity of Yolŋu organisations. Again, this emphasises the values of fairness and justice, highlights convening and collaboration as key actions for the transition process and emphasises relations between a prior and future owner and those residing and working on that land, rather than a stakeholder process.

'A diverse economy'

Economic diversification is another important component of the Vision and of stakeholder responses in this study. A Yolŋu respondent identified the willingness to receive new business approaches:

We are already working closely with Rio Tinto and with the stakeholders here in Nhulunbuy, to be part of that business development strategy going forward after Rio's gone... The land would be open, for any business people to come in, who can negotiate properly – a proper agreement. (Respondent 1)

Further comments about diversification below highlight industry diversification, as well as greater diversity amongst owners, operators, and beneficiaries.

Diversifying industries

Diversification of the economic base was supported by many other respondents, with options such as tourism, health and education services, and fishing mentioned as possibilities:

We need to diversify the economy because mining is going to finish, so that's not an industry that they'd be looking to go into. Opportunities around tourism, art and culture, and really genuine cultural experiences for people, I think that's an opportunity going forward.
(Respondent 7)

... this becomes how we move away from a mining area into a services area, government services in particular, and we become a training and services hub for the region.
(Respondent 4)

There are also some really strong opportunities around that diversification of industries, and I think that a lot of people would say that mining hasn't necessarily brought the jobs and benefits particularly for Yolngu, that people might have wanted to see out of mining in the region. So a rebalancing of what the industry makeup is here and how do those industries meet Yolngu aspirations in terms of business and employment and benefits for their communities? (Respondent 8)

Reflecting on future options, Respondent 6 identified smaller scale Indigenous mining, tourism, port services, commercial fishing, health and education services, and defence as aspects of a diversified future economy. The mining respondent also noted the significance 'doing our best with getting whatever industries or small businesses in' to offset the departure of their industry.

Diversifying owners, participants and beneficiaries

iversification of the economy involves more than increasing the types of economic activities undertaken. It also involves diversifying the owners, participants, and the beneficiaries from those activities. On the Peninsula, this means altering the economic focus from Däpaki to Yolŋu.

If we establish a new entity for grants, those grant[s] will go into that Yolŋu decision making. That way it will flow down from Yolŋu decisions ga [and] Yolŋu control – it can be Yolŋu independent, Yolŋu funding. That money should go into a Yolŋu entity and do the roadwork, plumbing, house electricity, education hub. [It] should go into Yolŋu and it flows down. Ngarraku (mine), that is my thought. (Respondent 1)

In that Yolŋu and Däpaki together story is the idea that the benefits of the post-mining economy don't just accrue to certain sections of the community, that they are broadly, the opportunities exist for all, in business, in jobs... it's not integrated culture, but like a culture which is more respectful of each other. (Respondent 3)

... a different range of jobs and opportunities, in different industries. Some focused training and development, which is more geared towards having more Yolŋu people in the jobs that perhaps Däpaki are in now. All of those benefits can be kind of enlivened by a transition process, which actually positively takes account of those things. (Respondent 4)

It's a matter of using this opportunity to transition, almost like a shifting power between mainstream economic and business development, and business ownership by non-Aboriginal people, towards a community which has Yolŋu at the forefront of economic development, control and ownership. Which is their right because they own the land that the whole community sits on. I think over the next sort of 5, 10, 15, 20 years I would hope to see a lot more Yolŋu participate in not only the mainstream workforce but in real strong business ownership and opportunity. (Respondent 7)

Respondent 1 proposes that government funding for roads, schools, housing be provided to a Yolŋu local government, which would then award contracts to Yolŋu businesses. Local service provision by Indigenous organisations currently exists at Yirrkala and the homelands, but only to a limited extent at Nhulunbuy. This is a clear area of future opportunity. Increasing Yolŋu business ownership implies leveraging the advantage of owning the land, but also making strategic investments. Indigenous community respondents stated that this is already occurring:

Respondent 2: [education and training] is half the business. The other half is accumulating investments to help fund after Rio leave. We own a lot of property in town with long term leases... we actually are building infrastructure in town. Not just for ourselves but for others to use, which is newer. Then people are willing to go and rent those spaces to make sure that we've got income as well after the mine goes. So long term tenants is a big thing for us... and then not trying to invest in things that may not be around, if things change.

Respondent 1: Yalala [later] that mining when it stops, we can survive as business.

Respondent 2: And that being said, you're investing outside here a lot now as well. So there is risk mitigating factors that have been put in place just to make sure that if things do go south from here, after the population dies, they've still got assets elsewhere as well.

Reflecting the emphasis above, one key guiding principle in the Vision for the transition is that 'Transition should create opportunities and not problems for Yolŋu' (GPFRG, 2021, p. 15).

'Infrastructure ready for the future'

Three further components of the Vision relate to infrastructure and service provision. These are 'Infrastructure ready for the future', 'Nhulunbuy as a services hub' and 'rejuvenating Nhulunbuy'. Consistent with this, retaining and enhancing infrastructure and associated service provision was strongly emphasised by respondents in imagining positive futures:

Because of all those facilities and buildings that exist on the land, we need to work together. Because Rirratjingu is the landlord now. This is our service provider area. We don't want to close it and go Darwin or Cairns or wherever. This is our home. We want to work with the locals here. (Respondent 1)

... the curtailment of the refining operations really provided an opportunity for more regionalisation of services and there's now a lot more government and non-government service providers based within the region... so the ability to retain that same service level, retain those people who are regionally based and in fact potentially grow that, will be a really important part of the transition. (Respondent 8)

... it's less about the population of Nhulunbuy and it's more about the services that are linked to that current population...if we're maintaining schooling, healthcare, access to groceries and fuel, renewable power and water for the region, those are the basic needs. So that I think is kind of the fundamental first outcome. (Respondent 5)

If Nhulunbuy doesn't remain as a sort of government service centre and [have] things like the hospital and so on, people are going to be much, much, much more remote than they are now. (Respondent 9)

Reflecting further on infrastructure, a Traditional Owner respondent commented that the infrastructure in the town needed to be handed over in good condition and well maintained, noting sewerage and housing as two key examples.

'We must empower our young people, who are our future leaders'

reflected in respondent comments about the future:

We need to talk to those kids and our young ones, give them training, government competence training, understanding what business are, understand our cultural living on country programs are, we need to stick to that. Otherwise their minds will go off the track... (Respondent 1)

So we do have social programs that we've started. So there is a strong push towards young Yolŋu people, getting any help they need to grow. (Respondent 2)

Australian universities have been incredibly, incredibly slow at recognising that they've got to move their education into Indigenous domains, so there's a sense in which lots of universities are beginning to think this but don't know how to at the level of the Chancellery... (Respondent 10)

It's something Yolŋu have always asked for, 'we don't want to have to go away; bring it to us here and we will consume it'. And I would like to see much more of that kind of thing in the future. (Respondent 9)

Long-term non-Indigenous residents also think about how the work they are doing creates opportunities for their descendants.

... my eldest might want to stay on here, who has grown up here, gone to school, likely to do finishing school here, and potentially want to go into other jobs and opportunities in the region. (Respondent 3)

Site rehabilitation

In responding to the question about 'best possible outcome', no respondent referred to rehabilitation of the mine and refinery site as an initial response. This is consistent with the Vision document, which does not refer directly to site rehabilitation as a major aspect of transition. As noted above, mining areas have been progressively rehabilitated throughout the life of the mine and the refinery is in the process of being demolished. One respondent commented that once rehabilitated, the mined areas would 'come back', but did not elaborate further. In considering the role of the company in the future, one respondent did identify how important the rehabilitation aspect was:

Rio is still going to be in the mix. Because we're not going to let them go, are we? They're going to have to fix the Red Mud Ponds. They might be here for the rest of their business lives. (Respondent 2).

When prompted about this aspect of best possible outcomes, the mining industry respondent provided more detail about the company's ongoing legacy responsibilities, again emphasising the social and economic outcomes – how that was integrated with Yolŋu employment goals:

So we hold that facility and maintain it in perpetuity. It's called a post-relinquishment management area. So we will relinquish and we will hand it back to the Traditional Owners, but we're working with Rirratjingu, and we will be continuing to work with them, on how we establish them to be able to run that facility. (Respondent 5)

... the employment that the ongoing operations and maintenance of the RDA [Residue Disposal Area] can represent for Yolŋu people, it's an important part of our plan. (Respondent 5)

Corporate reputation

Site rehabilitation is an important aspect of a wider social issue – corporate reputation. The industry respondent went on to discuss this element of the outcomes sought, and that this was the primary driver and motivation from a company perspective.

... there's no revenue at the end of this. It's for a social and environmental outcome only. I guess if I were to sell it internally to Rio, I'd be saying this is a big – if we do this right – opportunity to help us with our social reputation. That is probably the way if I were to look through it with internal glasses. I mean it's also just happens to be the right thing to do as well and it's absolutely necessary I think to avoid a really negative legacy moving forward. (Respondent 5)

Key values expressed

Key values expressed in relation to best possible outcomes include: justice and fairness through recognition; collaboration across cultural boundaries; the cultural and spiritual values

of places as Traditional Owners understand them; the economic values of place – diversification, business innovation, and infrastructure supporting robust economies; and an emphasis on youth and younger workers. From a mining company perspective, environmental conditions, safety and risk at the impact sites are important. Yet it is the social impacts and opportunities for Yolŋu that are emphasised more strongly as influencing their future reputation.

Challenges to achieving outcomes

The Vision document is framed positively, outlining key goals and the principles guiding the transition to enable these goals to be achieved. It does not directly address challenges, so these need to be inferred from what the document does say. In this study, interview respondents identified several key challenges affecting future desirable outcomes. These can be summarised under: wider stakeholder involvement and engagement; alignment in transition; isolation; governance and institutional capability; and services and infrastructure issues. Further information about these are as follows.

Stakeholder involvement and alignment in transition

A challenge identified by some respondents was the need to involve other stakeholders or actors in the transition who have not yet been substantially engaged. At the most challenging end are long-term Peninsula community residents – stakeholders in any transition – who may resist working with Traditional Owners. For these people, accepting equality between Yolŋu and Däpaki on the Peninsula may be difficult, let alone prioritising a Traditional Owner Vision as the key goal of transition:

... how [do] we overcome some of those, unfortunately, existing prejudices that are here, that are probably quite deeply embedded, to be able to see that equality between both Yolŋu and Däpaki? That will be a particularly tough one, because it will require social capital change, or social capital and change that is different, less tangible than building infrastructure.
(Respondent 4)

When I first moved here it was very much a mining town and most of the population wouldn't have known that they were on Aboriginal land, wouldn't be engaged with Yolŋu in any meaningful way. (Respondent 8)

Other important residents may not necessarily be as resistant to a process grounded in the interests of Traditional Owners as future landowners, but they may still find it hard to see value or relevance in the early stages of transition planning:

But to the residents of Nhulunbuy, to the business owners of Nhulunbuy in the Gove Peninsula, there's not as much visibility and often in the early stages of these significant planning processes [such as for mining transition], there's not a huge amount of tangible things that you can point to, to say 'this has been achieved and this means X for you'. So continued communication and bringing businesses and residents along on the journey so you don't lose investor or resident confidence, particularly [with respect] to the industries and businesses and resident types that we're trying to retain in the region. Those are probably the biggest challenges. (Respondent 8)

The Vision directly refers to the regional Yolŋu homelands – 'town, communities, and homelands strong together' – emphasising that 'the whole region will be connected'. A respondent noted the longstanding challenge of effective recognition and servicing of homelands communities:

For me, the homelands are critical and if government support the homelands, which they say they do, then they need to back that up with finances and with flexibility in the way they deliver their services to those homelands. From what I see, the homelands, both the communities physically themselves and the people – to I suppose a lesser extent – are treated like second-class citizens. (Respondent 7)

Achieving a higher standard of servicing for homelands generally, and enabling homeland community involvement in Peninsula transition specifically, remains a challenge for achieving best outcomes from that transition.

A third stakeholder that presents challenges for engagement is the Australian Government. It has multiple responsibilities, but one respondent noted that if the Peninsula is framed purely as a mining transition, it potentially limits engagement on other important strategic issues:

... settings like this are unique, in that there are obvious intersections of Indigenous policy, there's the strategic considerations of a deep water port in the north. So there are hooks for Australian government involvement, but it's a challenging space to engage them in mining transition work. (Respondent 3)

As the above quotes show, engagement with the long term Däpaki resident community, the Yolŋu homeland communities, and the diversity of relevant actors within the Australian Government were identified as potential engagement challenges in post mining transition.

Stakeholder alignment in transition

Within stakeholders already engaged through the GPFRG, respondents noted challenges with implementing the Vision that had been enabled and agreed by GPFRG. Moving to implementation highlighted differences in understanding and alignment within that overall agreement:

One of the main challenges is that we have a TO Vision document which sets out high level goals. But it's perhaps the alignment of every key member, at least in the Futures Reference Group, about what the next steps are to achieve those goals, that's a challenge. Because everyone has different ways of viewing how you think you get from A to B. (Respondent 4)

As we go through a transition in this community, I'm starting to see the various stakeholders start to, as they always have, view the current and the future from their own perspective, both now and what could this look like in the future. (Respondent 7)

There's going to be some huge challenges and negotiations in that process that exist, whether it's Traditional Owners making decisions over tenure, whether it's Rio Tinto in their expectations of assets that are handed over. But the end goal is pretty clear. It's just the questions will be who pays, who has control, who lets go control at different points. So there's this really interesting, fascinating exercise to go through there. (Respondent 3)

The previous quotes show how multiple respondents identified engagement of a broader set of stakeholders, and alignment between existing stakeholders focused on implementation, as key challenges in transition.

Isolation

As noted above, northeast Arnhem land occupies a central place in wider Yolŋu culture. It has a rich history that includes trade and diplomacy predating Australian colonisation and more recent direct Yolŋu engagement with national institutions such as the Australian parliament and the High Court. The Garma Festival (held on the Gove Peninsula) has been a significant date on the Australian cultural, political, and corporate calendar for decades.

Partly as a consequence, the Vision does not describe the region as remote or isolated. Yet certain forms of isolation – logistical and economic – were identified by respondents in this study as key challenges:

The Isolation Is a big one – cost of freight and mobilisation of people and equipment in and out of the place. But that makes it more attractive for tourism in a lot of ways, and probably makes it strategically a good Navy base... But I guess the cost of airfares, that's another, because it's isolated, that's the main problem with it. (Respondent 6)

One of the things that's a really big challenge here is just the tyranny of isolation and distance. It makes it very difficult to bring sustainable jobs in. Even when we're trying to build, let's say, sustainable housing or sustainable power, it's all the more complex and difficult because of how isolated we are up here. So that's one of the biggest difficulties that we have...anytime that you want to produce something here, you have to think about how you're going to ship the base inputs in and also ship whatever you're producing out. That just really starts to add up and make it difficult to access markets from such an isolated spot. (Respondent 5)

... when push comes to shove, the problems that Yolŋu face are actually the problems that all people in Australia who don't live in the major cities have. It's the kind of country Australia [is] – it's this vast continent where the majority of the population lives around the southeast coast and it's like, how do you manage the lives and make sure that people have decent lives in the whole of the rest of that vast continent? (Respondent 10)

Crucially, the isolation these respondents identify is primarily logistical and economic, rather than social, cultural or political. This is an important distinction in a transition that seeks to use a Traditional Owner perspective as its foundation.

Governance and institutional capability

Some respondents identified governance and institutional capability challenges that may affect transition. One of these was the absence of appropriately structured Yolŋu – wide and Yolŋu-led institutions:

... Yirrkala is kind of hostage to the shire. Now that there's no longer a town council,¹¹ you've got this shire which is basically not a Yolŋu organisation at all, sitting as their only real institution. (Respondent 9)

At the moment, Rio Tinto effectively runs the Nhulunbuy Corporation which looks after the town. So it'll be [asked] what becomes of that governance? Is it a council? Who runs those municipal services? And what does it look like? And how are the people of the town represented, as well? (Respondent 4)

There isn't a coherent Yolŋu-run institution with wider Yolŋu interests at heart that kind of sits there. I think that needs to develop in some ways, otherwise, once again, any development that happens there is going to be top-down, it is not going to be led in any coherent way by Yolŋu. (Respondent 9)

... one is going to have to create Yolŋu-based local systems of governance which have a degree of power that then links in with an organisation – Aboriginal organisation – in Nhulunbuy that is somehow going to take on the effective functions of a regional local

¹¹ This is a reference to the creation of new and geographically much larger local government entities in 2008 across the Northern Territory. In many places it created local government for the first time, but in others such as Yirrkala it resulted in the loss of a previous (Yolŋu-driven) authority.

*government entity, which doesn't exist at the moment at all for all sorts of reasons...
(Respondent 10)*

One respondent commented on the importance of there being broader representation of clan groups outside of the formal corporate structures. There are Yolŋu-led organisations involved in transition discussions, but the two which participate in the GPFRG are each explicitly based on one clan. Reflecting on decision making about the town, a Yolŋu respondent identified Rirratjingu Corporation as one venue for discussion and resolution of key issues amongst Yolŋu people. Yet further comments by that respondent also showed the potential for tension within Yolŋu clans about the transition and how some Yolŋu-to-Yolŋu relationships may need to be understood as primarily commercial rather than cultural.

Rirratjingu, it is a big umbrella, or a big tree, [or] shade – because of the Land Rights Act. So we understand it as a tree or shade [where] other clan groups can sit under the shade and we share things. We share it and we plan for the future. Good leadership, one mind, one spirit, one unity. (Respondent 1)

If Yolŋu are willing to share Nhulunbuy, cultural side, they can come in. They [should] not play politics – just [acknowledge] Rirratjingu land. But if you're willing to negotiate in a business way, for example tourism or set up retail shop, anything, that's a proper way of being. (Respondent 1)

Creating new Yolŋu-led institutions and/or adapting existing institutions to address new needs and requirements represents an important challenge in transition. Should governance and implementation institutions be created, respondents noted further challenges of staffing capability.

There's too much training for training's sake, and people have not been equipped educationally to run their own affairs in this kind of society, when they're an encapsulated minority in a massive settler state, and until that changes, they are not going to be self-determining. (Respondent 1)

Another respondent highlighted how natural staff and leadership turnover can affect long term planning and implementation.

... you go through different cycles of leadership within Rio Tinto, within the government, within our Traditional Owner groups as well. You know I think we've all sat in the room together and at times have noted that probably none of us will be here in that same room ten years from now when the keys are handed over. (Respondent 5)

Finally, there are substantial resource constraints upon key institutions. As the mining company withdraws, government – particularly the Northern Territory Government – will become an increasingly important institution to fill the space created. Yet that government operates under serious constraints, as one respondent noted:

... they're broke, they got no money. They rely on the Commonwealth Government to fund just about everything. So, for local Territory government stakeholders to have to go to Darwin and rattle their can and say we need X amount of millions of dollars is a pretty difficult thing for them to ask for. (Respondent 7)

Services, infrastructure and physical assets

As noted above, the infrastructure and service provision functions of Nhulunbuy are crucial aspects of the Vision, and the town infrastructure is ageing. So it is not surprising that respondents noted these as key challenges for the transition:

... building a sustainable post mining future around very aged infrastructure will be a challenge. A lot of things that are really critical to the operation of the Gove Peninsula, the town of Nhulunbuy, but also that service the broader region, are probably at the end of life, some of it might have been for some time. How do you invest, spend the money or not and make those decisions around what to keep, particularly when it's critical infrastructure you want to retain but obviously there's not endless streams of money flowing in to resolve some of those issues? (Respondent 8)

One respondent described the importance of connecting infrastructure – maintaining the sustainability of air services, improving the road to reduce reliance on expensive sea freight, and creating stronger digital connections. They then noted the housing challenge, in which the current situation of maximum occupancy made it hard to attract new businesses to offset the drop in demand as mining wound down. Underlying these specific examples is the funding model:

The town is a fundamentally subsidised town, either by government or by mining and so structurally, the economy has to move to be sustainable away from reliance on mining and related subsidies, to a more sustainable footing. (Respondent 3)

The Vision outlines one goal as 'Rejuvenating Nhulunbuy'. One respondent did not see the plans so far as going far enough in representing this:

What I don't see at this point is some really big picture thinking about what the opportunity is. Not just to maintain the community so that it slowly over time survives, but use the exit and the rejuvenation of the community [as an opportunity] to really create a modern regional community that uses its energy sustainably, has really good management, control of its environment and its water, and all of those sort of things. (Respondent 7)

Key values expressed

Identifying the need for engagement with wider stakeholders in the transition – Däpaki in Nhulunbuy, Yolŋu in homelands, and the Australian Government are the examples given here – shows the importance given to collaboration by those already involved. It also emphasises effectiveness as a key principle – the transition cannot be achieved without these important contributors from different cultural and geographic contexts. The need for collaboration and the importance of effectiveness also underpin respondents' identification of potential stakeholder misalignment at the implementation phase – agreement of the Vision is necessary, but not sufficient to achieve successful implementation. The isolation that needs to be identified is of a specific kind – logistical and economic – indicating a concern with efficiency and cost effectiveness. These two shape comments about physical infrastructure. Concerns about governance and institutional capability reflect how fairness and the distribution of responsibility are valued across stakeholders.

Dimensions of actions taken

The creation of the GPFRG and its work to enable the Vision represents an important collective action by key stakeholders in the transition process. More specifically, the Vision document contains five workstreams intended to support its realisation. A sixth workstream, 'Yolŋu and Däpaki together to support community strengthening', has been added to the GPFRG activity schedule since the document was produced (NTG, pers.comm.). These six workstreams are summarised in Table 4.

The GPFRG secretariat is provided by the NTG and Rio Tinto. The NTG in particular has a substantial interest in ensuring the workstreams are delivered, as one respondent noted:

There's a risk that if government doesn't engage early and effectively, at some point, there's going to be these pressures to transition, and the mine will want to close. And if we haven't dealt with them up front and managed the risks around in that transition, we end up running the risk of paying for it, no matter what... (Respondent 4)

Table 4: Workstreams to enable the Traditional Owner Vision. Source: GPFRG (2021)

WORKSTREAM	KEY ACTIONS
Land Tenure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Supporting effective transition from the current town Special Purposes Leases to new tenure arrangements under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976. – Master planning for Nhulunbuy
Economic development and transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Maximising the benefits to the region from mine closure work, town transition and long-term monitoring – Supporting existing businesses to grow and diversify – Building the capability of the local workforce – Facilitating investment in new industries – Ensuring housing for industry growth – Fostering respectful partnerships with Yolŋu businesses
Essential services and infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Transition of essential services to new authorities, including power generation and distribution, water, and sewerage – Securing and improving enabling infrastructure such as key roads, telecommunications, ports and airports
Community and government services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Sustaining and strengthening core government and community services to support Nhulunbuy as a regional services hub for East Arnhem – Supporting regionalisation of government services
Town governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Supporting the transition of Nhulunbuy into a gazetted Local Government Area – Putting in place new arrangements for town governance and municipal services
Yolŋu and Däpaki together ¹²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Workstream and actions not specified in original Vision document

The Vision document provides a collective framework for actions and responses by stakeholders in the GPFRG. In this study, respondents identified further actions taken by themselves or the organisations they were part of. The following examples encompass planning and strategy, developing new collaborations, using different approaches for Peninsula compared with homeland communities, and organisational repositioning:

... last week we had a three day meeting as a team to completely update a strategic Gove closure strategy document. (Respondent 5)

... we've actually formed a company with one of the Indigenous groups here, and we are looking to work with them on future projects supporting transition. (Respondent 6)

... the economic activity at the moment is on the Gove Peninsula, but if we are looking at removing mining from that, we really need the broader region to be contributing and participating actively in the economy. There's a lot of interest in doing that. But equally, [we must be] making sure that there are different approaches to support businesses. Working with businesses on the Gove Peninsula are very different to the support and engagement that is needed in communities and homelands. (Respondent 8)

¹² Not included in the original Vision document.

... it is restricted to a degree around the Land Rights Act with its mandate, which is basically to help facilitate things, not so much to upskill and educate Traditional Owners, either individually or as a group. But we are changing our mindset internally so that we can be more hands-on and more able to really sit down and communicate, educate and inform Traditional Owners around the steps that they need to take. (Respondent 7)

Other main stakeholders

Respondents were asked to identify other stakeholders in the transition process. Table 5 shows how often stakeholders were identified by respondents in particular interviews.

Table 5: Nomination of stakeholders by other stakeholders

STAKEHOLDER	NUMBER OF TIMES IDENTIFIED ACROSS INTERVIEWS
Traditional Owners	7
Northern Territory Government	7
Commonwealth government	7
Mining company	6
Nhulunbuy or regional community	6
Northern Land Council	5
Business community	4
Homelands	2
External investors	1

The core stakeholders acknowledged by all are the Traditional Owners and the respective governments. The mining company, Nhulunbuy regional and business communities, and the Northern Land Council were also identified by a clear majority of the respondents.

Augmenting the summary table above are respondent comments that highlight three aspects of stakeholder identification: the complexity within Yolŋu society; the long term non-Indigenous residents; and the external investors who may be yet to invest:

... Traditional Owners first and foremost from my perspective, the two main groups, the Rirratjingu and the Gumatj. Galpu to a lesser extent. The Galpu's a harder group because they have very little organisational structure and so they're a more difficult stakeholder. (Respondent 7)

There's the existing communities that go beyond the Traditional Owners, and there's 14 clans with families in Yirrkala. There are challenges around the [different] views of Traditional Ownership on the Gove Peninsula as you're probably aware, and so there is really a strong need to engage the homelands, Bapurru¹³ [other clan] families, and other groups, with what the NLC [Northern Land Council] might term as interested groups, rather than affected... there is definite need to build a consensus more broadly than just the two significant TO groups here on the Peninsula. (Respondent 4)

This complexity, combined with formal legislative obligations to recognise it, also makes the regional Indigenous broker and contact organisation very important.

The NLC [Northern Land Council], without them at the table, it would sometimes be incredibly difficult to perhaps engage with some of the TOs. Because we have them at the

¹³ 'Bapurru' means 'everyone else' from the perspective of the speaker.

table in order to properly engage with the TOs, but also some of the land tenure things that are more easily resolved at a Northern Land Council level. (Respondent 4)

[The] Northern Land Council represents Rirratjingu as the Traditional Owner of Nhulunbuy, and [the] Northern Land Council is also representing Gumatj country. Then through [the] Northern Land Council we get Northern Territory rupiyah (money) or Commonwealth rupiyah to help towards development, to establish going forward after mining is gone. (Respondent 1)

In thinking of other stakeholders, respondents also recognised Däpaki individuals and families who were heavily invested in the town:

... there is a quite large proportion of the population who have businesses here, have raised multiple generations of family here, are heavily invested from a property and business and community perspective and they're a really key stakeholder group. That's one of the ones that probably need to be brought along on the journey, that won't necessarily have, at the outset, have a seat of the table, but will be really critical to that post-mining transition and the investment and commitment to the town that will see people here in the future. (Respondent 8)

Those key group of Balanda and Däpaki,¹⁴ individuals that are non-traditional owners that live in Nhulunbuy. Whether they're small business owners or long term residents, they are a really key stakeholder in all of this as well. (Respondent 2)

Well, most of them will leave, but there will be some long-termers who would be prepared to invest. (Respondent 6)

A third category is external people who are yet to move to or invest in the area, but may be willing to do so:

the external investor one is particularly interesting as one that we probably don't think about enough sometimes in these situations, perhaps which are potentially transformative if you identify the right people in the right places. (Respondent 4)

Westpac is obviously heavily leveraged in this town with a range of mortgages and business loans and other things, and they've got a lot of local customers... [we are] engaged with the finance sector specifically, not just as investors, but as a stakeholder, who have a got stake in the town. (Respondent 3)

In summary, the identifications of other key stakeholders in the transition were relatively consistent across the respondents, reflecting the high level of engagement between members of the GPFRG. Responses also highlighted the internal complexity of Yolŋu society, the significance of the regional Northern Land Council, how key long term non-Indigenous residents are positioned, and the potential role of external finance and investment.

Understanding of other stakeholders' best possible outcomes

Respondents were asked to show their understanding of others' positions to provide insight into levels of alignment between self-understanding of goals and interests and how others perceive those goals and interests. Following are examples of responses for three key

¹⁴ Balanda and Däpaki are alternative Yolŋu words for 'white person' or 'European'. 'Balanda' has a Macassan origin, referring to contact with the Dutch - 'Hollander'.

groups of other stakeholders – the Traditional Owners, the Northern Territory Government, and the mining company.

Best outcomes for Traditional Owners

Respondents identified remaining on country and preserving customary ways of life as important aspects of their understanding of Traditional Owners aspirations.

The bottom line for Yolŋu is that they want to stay on country. They do not want to migrate en masse into the centres of the population... They would obviously aspire to a more comfortable and less poverty stricken life than they have now, but it's not actually the driver...

They want to stay being Yolŋu, which means they need to have that Yolŋu way of being on country secured and safe. (Respondent 9)

They want to have their favourite fishing and hunting places. They don't want to be bumping into caravans and tourists when they go there, so they want a minimal impact on their traditional hunting grounds and fishing grounds. (Respondent 6)

Other responses identified the acknowledgement of past wrongs, and the need for Däpaki in the area to be respectful of the principle of Traditional Ownership, as important goals for Yolŋu people.

Another big one would be better understanding of their culture and sharing of it. Because they've been discriminated against, it's not too long ago in the past when there was massacres in this area. (Respondent 6)

A really big focus for Traditional Owners as well is around that cohesion, that community, and the right people being here – people who understand and respect that they're on Aboriginal land and that that's what the future of this town is. Success for them really is that those principles are embedded in everything that is put in place for the future of the town. (Respondent 8)

The service provision role of Nhulunbuy and the need to generate economic opportunities were also highlighted as central to Traditional Owner and wider Yolŋu goals for the region.

The best possible outcome for them – they want their people employed and they want sustainable employment for Yolŋu people, particularly once revenue from royalties dries up. So for Traditional Owners it's the sustainable employment and whether we maintain all of the services that we currently have in the region. They're kind of the top two, if you distil it all back to their absolute needs, those are the two things. (Respondent 5)

Even though we've treated them terribly, one way or another, over the years, they seem to understand that you need an economy, and the employment and training opportunities are good, because the old ways are not really sustainable anymore and they haven't been for a long time. I think they'd like to see opportunities for their children. (Respondent 6)

Respondents did not refer directly to the Vision document when considering the goals and aspirations of Traditional Owners, but they did demonstrate understanding of Traditional Owner views and perspectives that are consistent with the Vision.

Best outcomes for Government

Respondents focused on the Northern Territory Government rather than the Australian Government when considering government as a stakeholder. Respondents view of key

government motivations and best possible outcomes emphasised cost effectiveness in service provision.

From a state government perspective, they'll be looking at the services that they're obliged to provide to the community and what does that look like. Speaking purely politically here, they're looking to take that on as seamlessly and as simply and as cheaply as they possibly can, to then continue whatever the community looks like into the future. (Respondent 7)

So they want to see a thriving Nhulunbuy with a town population as large as it is right now, or larger. And for the economy that sits behind that, because when we're talking about providing the services, they need those taxpayers and the users of the services in Nhulunbuy itself to be maintained. (Respondent 5)

One respondent also highlighted the relationship between centralisation and decentralisation as a central question for government in assessing outcomes.

The Northern Territory haven't really seen that there's an advantage to having the so-called 'wilderness' populated by Indigenous people. But they would probably rather not have everybody suddenly flocking into town and becoming long-grassers,¹⁵ basically, which is what would happen. (Respondent 9)

Respondents identified resourcing and resource constraints as a key motivation for government. The Northern Territory Government's commitment to the Vision is unusual, but no respondent commenting on the Northern Territory Government position identified this commitment as the primary outcome the government was seeking from mining transition.

Best outcomes for Mining industry

In assessing the best possible outcomes for the mining company, other stakeholders noted ongoing corporate reputation as a key driver. This supports the company's underlying need to maintain social license and keep operating elsewhere in the future.

A lot of people would be watching this to see that they do an honourable handover and try and leave a good legacy, because they're a worldwide mining operation, and public relations-wise, they'd be aware that a lot of people would be watching. (Respondent 6)
For them, internationally, and nationally, being able to point to a region where they have really successfully rehabilitated and exited with a positive plan in place, is of value to them financially and reputationally into the future. (Respondent 3)

Rio's a global mining company. So Rio Tinto leave and yes, they'll leave behind some legacy benefit to the community, but perhaps they'll leave some legacy detrimental impacts as well. But they're working towards their exit and they'll leave and they'll move on and they'll continue to do what they do elsewhere. (Respondent 7)

Respondents noted a level of self-interest in the mining company's position and desire to maintain their reputation and wider social license to operate. Yet they also acknowledge that this self-interest is aligned with key outcomes from transition desired by others focused on the Peninsula transition.

¹⁵ Northern Territory vernacular reference to living in an informal settlement.

Key values and their alignment

In the final stage of each interview, the researcher identified particular themes or issues that had emerged in the interview and tested those with the respondent(s) for further comment, correction, and/or endorsement. These themes were not intended as comprehensive or even brief summaries of the values expressed, but rather a way of checking major themes, points of interest or emphasis and examining potential relationships between different responses in the interview. Figure 2 and Table 6 summarise some key themes raised at the end of each interview.

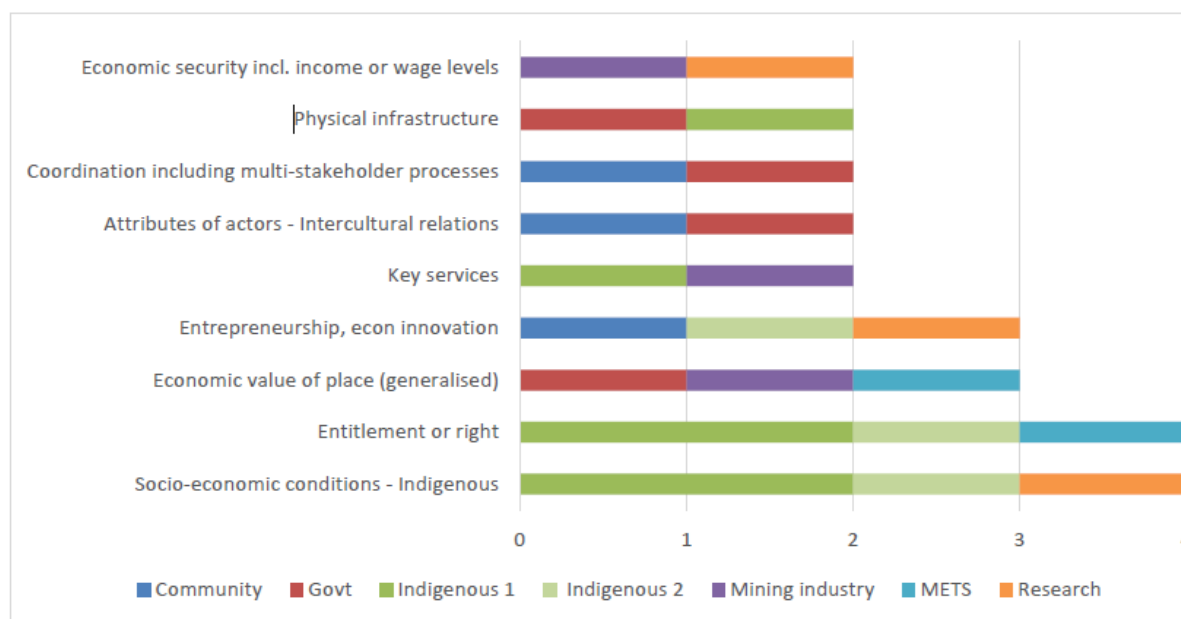


Figure 2: Summary of key themes by category of stakeholder (Gove Peninsula case). Note: Figure shows themes raised by more than one category of stakeholder. Themes consist of categories of value and elements of system context

Table 6: Summary of key themes/emphases by respondent interview (Gove Peninsula case)

INTERVIEW NUMBER	KEY THEMES/EMPHASES ABOUT TRANSITION IN INTERVIEW
1 (Respondents 1 and 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Traditional Owner control of the country and of the town – Effective Yolŋu involvement in transition decision making – currently very few Yolŋu in GPFRG – Maintaining key infrastructure and services in Nhulunbuy – Yolŋu as central to economic development and new industry creation – Retention and protection of Yolŋu culture
2 (Respondents 3 and 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Adopting the Vision as policy and as guiding action – Infrastructure enabling regional development – Decentralisation of services is an opportunity for growth – Timing is critical and actions need to be coordinated – Demographic changes in transition – new composition of the regional Däpaki community – Yolŋu and Däpaki – importance of reconciliation and strengthened community
3 (Respondent 5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Social outcomes of transition as a primary objective – infrastructure, services, employment

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Ensuring environmental and rehabilitation obligations are met – Values of other stakeholders align with organisational self interest – Massive investment by mining company in effective transition to meet reputational goals
4 (Respondent 6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Re-assertion of Traditional Owner control that is economically productive – Ongoing value of relationships with Traditional Owners – Retain amenity of existing Peninsula lifestyle
5 (Respondent 7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Reassertion and recognition of Traditional Ownership – Highlighting the business and economic implications from Traditional Ownership – Current transition over-emphasises population maintenance, responsibility minimisation and/or service provision compared with entrepreneurialism, opportunity, and sustainability
6 (Respondent 8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Significance of Yolŋu and Däpaki relations – Tight timing and the effective staging of key actions – The East Arnhem region providing a wider non-mining economic base – Involving the Australian Government – the levers for engagement and the greater impact of policy post-mining
7 (Respondents 9 and 10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Extensive historical impacts of mining – Land Rights, wealth inequality, proportionally less Yolŋu employment, alcohol and social problems – Policy inadequacy due to government assumptions about how benefits of mining will occur – Opportunities of new post-mining economy – natural and cultural resources, digital engagement

Figure 2 and Table 6 highlight strong alignments as well as some variations amongst stakeholders.

With respect to alignment, of particular note is the recognition of Traditional Owner control and their associated Vision in guiding the future course of transition. Related to this, intercultural relations between Yolŋu Traditional Owners, other (predominately) Yolŋu Indigenous people, and Däpaki (non-Indigenous) people – is also an important theme across all of the interviews.

One component of intercultural relations is the need to enable diverse forms of economic participation by Yolŋu people, another is the collaborative effort to retain infrastructure and services. A couple of the respondents directly commented on the high level of alignment amongst GPFRG members:

Broadly the values of a lot of the different stakeholder groups while they're very varied, are quite aligned at a principled level. (Respondent 8)

... We may have some nuances in different outcomes with NTG [Northern Territory Government] and with Traditional Owners, but broadly we're all after the same thing. Success in this case for the Northern Territory Government and the Traditional Owners, we can talk about the very, very specifics that we may differ on at times, but we want this place to be self-sustaining. We want it to be returned back to as best state as we possibly can and that it's not polluting the environment. We want the Traditional Owners to be happy with the outcome, being the most important stakeholder at the end of this. We want them to be able to move forward and thrive up here in East Arnhem. So all of us want that and that's the best thing for [organisation name]. (Respondent 5)

The Peninsula is an unusual context when considering values that are of primary importance across a group of what are considered equivalent stakeholders. This is for two related reasons:

1. The reversion of land ownership to Traditional Owners once the mine departs.
2. The collective commitment by other key stakeholders to the Traditional Owners' Vision – the values of one 'stakeholder'.

Effectively, the Gove Peninsula example highlights the limitations of a stakeholder model in circumstances where a prior and exclusive claim by Indigenous Australians has legal and associated social and moral force. This is a situation that many other Indigenous Australians would likely find desirable – to be part of and supported by a stakeholder process but also considered prior to and foundationally separate from it. The research undertaken here provides evidence that some values, goals, priorities and principles expressed in the Vision are taken seriously by other key stakeholders – that they are in some senses shared or at least aligned. No aspect of the Vision appeared to substantially and directly conflict with the values and goals expressed by other respondents in this study. Yet it is clear that particular values and goals were prioritised more by particular respondents, and other values in the Vision remained dormant or unexpressed in the conversations. This points to the need for models of governance that recognise the historically prior status and future power of Indigenous Australians, yet at the same time enable dialogue across a wide set of diverse stakeholders to identify points of commonality and difference, and then generate ways of resolving differences. Doing so can support inclusive and resilient outcomes for all involved in the transition process.

REFERENCES

Foran, T., Barber, M. and Ackermann, F. (2022). [Understanding the values of stakeholders in Australian post-mining economies](#). CRC TiME Limited, Perth.

ABOUT US

The Cooperative Research Centre for Transformations in Mining Economies is part of Australia's national innovation ecosystem. Our diverse partnership brings scale, collaboration and coordinated investment to tackle the most complex mine closure and post-mine transition challenges. Together we're rethinking what's possible to improve outcomes for people, communities, the environment and industry.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians across all the lands on which we live and work, and we pay our respects to Elders both past and present.

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