

Yolŋu Master Plan: Cultivating Economic Empowerment and Food Security Post-Mine Closure.

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ABSTRACT

The closure of Rio Tinto's Gove Mine by the end of this decade will significantly impact East Arnhem's economy and society. To address these challenges and support integrated strategic mine closure planning, in 2023, Rio Tinto invested in an Agribusiness Options Study to identify businesses that could enhance food security and economic empowerment. This Study was guided by a local Steering Committee (SteerCo), led by Palladium and included Traditional Owner (TO) corporations – Gumatj Corporation Ltd, Rirratjingu Aboriginal Corporation, and North-East Arnhem Aboriginal Corporation, along with support from Rio Tinto, Developing East Arnhem Ltd, the Northern Land Council, and the Northern Territory Government.

From the Study, SteerCo identified the Yolŋu Master Plan (YMP) as a sustainable agribusiness focused on the production of fruit, vegetables, and bushfoods. The aim of the YMP is not only to grow local fresh food but also to support local employment, learning, and training and to help the Homelands develop their own Market Gardens. Originally designed to supply local markets, the YMP has the potential to expand to external markets (e.g., Darwin) and develop agritourism opportunities.

Due to the modest scale of agriculture in the region, the YMP was divided into three Horizons to align capital spending with community readiness. In 2024, the SteerCo initiated Horizon 1a to grow fruits and vegetables and explore bushfood options. This six-month trial provided key insights and empowered TO Boards with the information required to guide them for the long-term implementation of the YMP.

This paper will examine how having strong relationships with TOs and incorporating multiple perspectives ensured that the YMP aligned with community priorities for a post-mine economy. Through effective governance, a balance was struck across cultural, social, and economic objectives. As a result, the YMP serves as an approach to developing post-mine economies that prioritise sustainable Indigenous-led development.