**RECLAIMING THE CYCLE - INDIGENOUS WORKFORCE LEADERSHIP ACROSS THE EXTRACTIVE ASSET LIFECYCLE**

**From Rights Holders to Workforce Leaders: Designing Indigenous-Centred Workforces Across the Life of an Extractive Industry Asset**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper presents a transformative framework for reimagining Indigenous workforce participation in Australia's extractive industries, positioning First Nation Australians as Rights Holders rather than stakeholders throughout the mining asset lifecycle. With approximately 240 mine closures projected by 2040, representing $4-8 billion in annual rehabilitation expenditure, the Australian mining sector faces unprecedented challenges in ensuring sustainable transitions for regional economies and Indigenous communities. Despite the mining industry employing higher proportions of Indigenous Australians than other sectors—including 18% of Indigenous men in remote areas—significant gaps persist in retention, career progression, and equitable participation across all phases of mining operations.

Drawing on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), this research employs a critical synthesis methodology integrating peer-reviewed literature, policy analysis, and case studies to develop a comprehensive workforce design model. The framework aligns with CRC TiME's Songlines Project Life of Asset approach, embedding Indigenous participation across six key stages: Exploration, Feasibility, Design and Construction, Operations, Pre-Closure, and Closure and Transition.

The analysis reveals that successful Indigenous workforce strategies require phase-specific approaches that integrate Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK), culturally responsive training models, and recognition of traditional governance structures. During exploration, Indigenous roles in cultural heritage assessment and environmental monitoring leverage millennia of accumulated ecological knowledge. The construction phase demands innovative vocational pathways, including micro-credentialing and alternative assessment methods addressing linguistic barriers. Operational phases benefit from Indigenous business integration and culturally safe workplace environments, while closure and post-closure transitions present opportunities for sustainable employment in land rehabilitation, renewable energy, and cultural tourism enterprises.

Critical challenges identified include intersectional discrimination affecting Indigenous women, who perceive themselves as occupying the bottom position in mine site hierarchies; inadequate translation of FPIC principles into Australian legislation; and the persistent "pay-out" rather than "participation" model that prioritises passive royalty payments over active workforce engagement. The paper argues that embedding employment provisions within Community Development Agreements and Indigenous Land Use Agreements creates enforceable pathways for sustained participation.

This research contributes to international discourse on extractive industry transformation by demonstrating how recognition of Indigenous peoples as Rights Holders, combined with lifecycle-integrated workforce planning, can create regenerative post-mining futures that honour both Indigenous aspirations and sustainable development imperatives.