

# Skills better investment for indigenous

Mining should bring more than unskilled jobs to indigenous people, writes Kirsten Storry

IN REMOTE indigenous communities, there is little local economic development or mainstream employment. Those employment opportunities that do exist in the mining, pastoral and tourism industries largely go to non-indigenous workers.

The proposed Iaukile mine at Aurukun on Cape York Peninsula brings the problem into sharp relief.

The Aluminium Company of China Ltd is expected to be named the preferred developer of the Aurukun mine in July. The deal is reportedly worth about \$3 billion in investment for the proposed mine and washing plant at Aurukun and the proposed refinery on

Queensland's east coast. In Aurukun alone, the deal would mean 700 construction jobs over three years and more than 100 ongoing jobs.

Following the July announcement, the Wik and Wik Way communities of Aurukun will conclude an agreement with the preferred developer and the Queensland Government. *The Courier-Mail* has estimated that the deal could deliver communal native title royalties of about \$100 million over the 30-year life of the mine.

Royalties alone will not help create the economic development and activity that the Aurukun community needs. That said, royalties could be

more useful to economic development if individuals were allowed to have private property rights in the future income stream and to own a private interest in their communal land.

Without mainstream employment and engagement in the real economy, the economic viability of remote indigenous communities is in question. This is a fundamental and confronting issue in indigenous policy. It is even more confronting when some communities lack the most basic literacy and numeracy competencies needed for such economic development.

Some indigenous communities are now negotiating with mining companies for commitments to education and employment. One example is the Gulf Communities Agreement which the Weanyi, Gaktham, Minginda and Kukay communities signed with the Century mine and Queensland Government in May 1997.

On top of royalties, there was more than \$1.5 million set aside for local indigenous education, employment and training.

About 20 per cent of workers at the Century mine are indigenous, well above the Australian mining industry average of less than 5 per cent.

## Australian mining has long faced an unskilled and uncompetitive indigenous workforce

But these workers mainly hold basic entry level positions. Few have a trade, although there is some hope that continuing investment in apprenticeships will improve the skill profile of the indigenous workforce at Century mine.

If the mine is to be operational by 2012, Aurukun has to develop a strategy now for a competitive local indigenous workforce that

is literate and numerate. Long term, there is a pressing need to reinvestigate formal schooling in remote communities like Aurukun. Shorter-term, there is a clear need to establish an adult learning initiative.

Adult education is not as economically efficient as early

childhood education, but that doesn't mean it can't be successful. Adult learning centres are more successful when learning is tailored to real-life needs of the indigenous learners. There is evidence from Canada that adult learning centres can identify a market need and develop a targeted training program for indigenous learners in partnership with industry.

An adult learning centre could determine the labour skills which will be in demand in the new local economy and develop a joint course in partnership with the local mining industry. If successful, it could grow.

A centre could become a training hub for indigenous workers in the mining industry, or a technical middle school for indigenous children to stay in their communities, undertake local vocational training and eventually enter into local employment.

The Australian mining industry has long been facing the problem of an unskilled and uncompetitive local indigenous workforce. Literacy and numeracy must not continue to make mainstream employment unattainable for the Aurukun community.

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