Preface

This study concerns agreements made between Indigenous Australians and the mining industry, and focuses on three such agreements in three Australian states. Set in the period 2003–2007, the study examines agreement outcomes within the shifting Indigenous policy context of the time that sought to de-emphasise the cultural behaviour or imperatives of Indigenous people in undertaking economic action in favour of a mainstream approach to economic development.

Key themes in this study concern concepts of value, identity and community and the tension that exists between culture and economics in the Australian Indigenous policy environment. In examining this tension, the study identifies that poor socioeconomic status precludes many Indigenous people from engaging in the formal programs associated with mining agreements, and in many cases from gaining economic benefits from the agreements. For these people, and also for many Indigenous people who do qualify to work in the industry, a tension exists between the imperative to maintain cultural identity and the potential cultural assimilation implied by their increasing integration into a market economy.

Significant diversity exists within the Indigenous polity, but a key theme that emerges is that those integrally involved with the mining industry, and who participated in this study emphasise a desire for alternative forms of economic engagement that combine access to the mainstream economy with the maintenance and enhancement of Indigenous institutions. Such aspirations reflect on-going and dynamic responses to modernity. A clear tension emerges then between the construct of sustainable development futures entailed in the agreements, and the futures that Indigenous people affected by mining imagine for themselves. The value that is derived from productive action associated with a range of culturally based livelihood practices, both in economic and symbolic terms, is juxtaposed against the neo-liberal development ethos contained in the three mining agreements. Contested notions of value and productivity are illustrated throughout this study by the description of the structures of the agreements and Indigenous responses to them.

The study emerges from an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project entitled Indigenous community organisations and miners: partnering sustainable development? Partners in the project were the Committee for Economic Development of Australia, Rio Tinto, and the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at The Australian National University. My involvement in the study was as a doctoral student at CAEPR, under the supervision of Professor Jon Altman, and this monograph is an edited version of my doctoral thesis.
The research for this study occurred between 2003 and 2007, and entailed both documentary research and field work at all three locations. I am indebted to the many people who gave generously of their time and information across the Pilbara, the southern Gulf of Carpentaria and the Kakadu region. A total of 241 interviews with approximately 190 people were conducted across the three field sites. Throughout the study those who contributed remain anonymous, except in the case of a few public figures. Overwhelmingly, I found that the Indigenous people who I spoke to, as well as mining company staff, were passionate about the subject of Indigenous engagement with the mining agreements. In all three locations there was evidence of highly effective aspects of this engagement in the context of the agreements, but other aspects of the agreements were clearly not meeting their objectives.

The study highlights the ambivalence of many agreement participants to the monolithic structures that are established under the agreements. But despite this ambivalence, there is clearly a desire from all parties involved to attain better outcomes from their engagement with each other. A common criticism from participants in the study is that the state is either absent in the agreements, or subsequently retreats, leaving the mining industry to assume certain state-like qualities in the delivery of services in mine hinterlands. This role is an uncomfortable one for the industry in a sovereign country like Australia, and one which undoubtedly creates confusion and conflict between the parties to agreements.

Research arising from this ARC linkage project, including two previous monographs (Taylor and Scambary 2006; and Altman and Martin 2009) has had a positive impact on subsequent mining agreement outcomes. This research is said to have had a significant influence on the negotiation of the next generation of Rio Tinto mining agreements in the Pilbara, finalised in 2011. Collectively, the participation and access agreements with several Indigenous groups in the Pilbara, and covering 71 000 square kilometres, represents a major development. Although these subsequent agreements are not considered here, it is clear from this study that the development of such agreements in Australia is a continuing process, with new agreements seeking to redress dysfunctional aspects of past agreements.

Finally I wish to thank the ARC, the Committee for Economic Development of Australia, Rio Tinto, and CAEPR for generously supporting the project, *Indigenous Community Organisations and Miners: Partnering Sustainable Development?*, from which this study emerges. I specifically thank Professor Jon Altman for his careful supervision of the entire research project, and also of my doctoral studies. In addition I thank the College of Arts and Social Sciences at The Australian National University for providing support in bringing the study to publication.