

LAND IN BOUGAINVILLE: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CUSTOMARY LAND TENURE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN MELANESIA

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This paper is an exploration of the importance of customary land in Melanesia, and in Bougainville. Customary land tenure in Melanesia is truly a window to a different way of relating to the land and resources of our planet. But it is not just about land. Customary land tenure is about how people and families relate to the land and to each other – and how they work together and share, so that the land provides for everyone. It is highly diverse and highly complex, and most people outside of rural Melanesia do not understand it.¹ Customary land tenure is about deep histories and deep relationships between land and families – within which land is not a commodity, but part of the community and part of the family. Within Melanesia, Bougainville is unique due to its

history of ten years of civil war precipitated by conflict related to a foreign-owned mine.

This paper explores the question of customary land in Melanesia, examining what is so distinctive about it and how this land tenure system relates to rural Melanesian economies. It then discusses the push by outside actors to replace customary land with western models of land tenure. Finally, it concludes by looking at the combined Melanesian resistance

1. Co-Author’s note: as someone who grew up in urban Canada, I, Catherine Sparks, was privileged to spend over three years living in rural PNG (1996-99), going with my mother-in-law to work in the food gardens at least a couple of times every week. It was primarily from her (and my father-in-law too) that I gained an understanding of customary land tenure.

These nations are also incredibly biologically diverse, while being among the last places in the world where the people who have built an intimate relationship with the land over many generations still control its use, with 80% of the population living in the rural areas and providing for themselves within the traditional, primarily non-cash, economy.

to this challenge, through MILDA, the Melanesian Indigenous Land Defence Alliance, and the impact that MILDA has had in Bougainville.

The Traditional Economy and Customary Land Tenure in Melanesia

The Melanesian nations of Papua New Guinea (PNG), Bougainville, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu are culturally and linguistically the most diverse in the world with more than 1,000 distinct languages spoken. These nations are also incredibly biologically diverse, while being among the last places in the world where the people who have built an intimate relationship with the land over many generations still control its use, with 80% of the population living in the rural areas and providing for themselves within the traditional, primarily non-cash, economy. This traditional clan-based regime provides the people with complete food, housing, employment, and other forms of social security, and protects them from scarcities created by the cash economy.² The links between customary land and the traditional economy in Melanesia have been described by Vanuatu

2. Anderson 2015, 2; Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies 1999, 145; Faraclas 2001, 75; and Lepani, Charles, 2008, in Bourke, R. Michael, and Tracy Harwood (eds.), 2009. Food and Agriculture in Papua New Guinea. ANU E-Press. http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p53311/pdf/whole_book_Part_1.pdf, p. vii.

Member of Parliament (MP) Ralph Regenvanu.³ Regenvanu explains that, “almost all of this 80% of the population:

- live in settlements (villages) with other members of their traditional extended families, on land that is theirs under the rules of custom;
- satisfy most of their food and other requirements using traditional methods and forms of land, sea and resource utilisation (eg. gardening practices), on their customary land and sea;
- speak their indigenous language;
- are governed by traditional leaders;
- have their disputes resolved within communities by traditional leaders using traditional dispute resolution approaches; and participate in custom ceremonies which cement their place as members of their community.”⁴

Moreover, Regenvanu highlights how a high proportion of urban dwellers also participate in and depend on the traditional economy to a significant degree, using kinship networks to access food and other resources and resolving conflicts in the traditional way.⁵ While MP Regenvanu is talking specifically about the Vanuatu context, the same can be said of PNG, Bougainville, and Solomon Islands. And thus, because of the continued strength of the traditional economy, there is still no absolute poverty – that is, no pervasive hunger and no homelessness – in rural Melanesia.⁶

3. MP Ralph Regenvanu has been the Vanuatu Minister for Lands and Natural Resources for most of the time since 2011 and up until 19 December 2017 when he became the Vanuatu Minister for Foreign Affairs.

4. Ralph Regenvanu, “The Traditional Economy as a Source of Resilience in Vanuatu” in *In Defence of Melanesian Customary Land*. Ed. Tim Anderson and Gary Lee (AID/WATCH: Sydney, 2010), p 31.

5. Ralph Regenvanu, “The Traditional Economy as a Source of Resilience in Vanuatu” in *In Defence of Melanesian Customary Land*. Ed. Tim Anderson and Gary Lee (AID/WATCH: Sydney, 2010).



Photo credit: Christina Hill

Importantly, the basis for the traditional economy is a diverse range of systems of customary land tenure.⁷ But many people ask – what exactly is customary land tenure? To begin with, it is important to understand that the Melanesian relationship with land is traditionally inalienable and non-commodifiable in nature – a dynamic highlighted by a statement made by the Vanuatu Minister for Lands, Sethy Regenvanu, in 1980, the year

6. Despite occasional short-term food shortages, household food security in PNG is generally high with over 80 percent of food energy consumed continuing to come from garden-grown foods; see Mousseau 2013, 8; and Bourke, R. Michael, and Tracy Harwood (eds.), 2009. *Food and Agriculture in Papua New Guinea*. ANU E-Press <https://bit.ly/2NbIYRv>. p. 130.

7. Jamie Tanguay, “Melanesian Well-Being Indicators: A Biocultural Approach”, in Eleanor Sterling et al. *Culturally Grounded Indicators of Resilience in Social-Ecological Systems. Environment and Society: Advances in Research*, 8 (2017): 68-71; and Ralph Regenvanu, “The Traditional Economy as a Source of Resilience in Vanuatu” in *In Defence of Melanesian Customary Land*. Ed. Tim Anderson and Gary Lee (AID/WATCH: Sydney, 2010).

that Vanuatu won its national independence:

For ni-Vanuatu, land is more than simply a commodity to be used for gain and to be disposed of when it has been stripped of its value. Land is an intrinsic part of themselves and their whole being. Land to ni-Vanuatu is what a mother is to a baby.⁸

The Core Value of Reciprocity

While in contemporary ‘western’ culture people tend to define themselves by their possessions, in Melanesian culture, people define themselves primarily by their relationships – their relationships to an extended family linked to a geographic locality.⁹ Systems of customary land tenure are based not on attainment of individual assets and profit, but on strengthening relationships wherein everyone has enough of everything. The

8. Sethy Regenvanu, *Land is what a Mother is to a Baby*, *Pipol’s Forum*, (12 August 2003), 6-7.

For decades now, various colonising (and neo-colonising) forces have been trying to change the non-commoditised relationship between Melanesian people and their land in order to get them to work more readily within the wage labour economy.

late William Takaku was a famous actor and cultural activist from Pidia in Central Bougainville. When asked about why he was working with communities to organise the Kaur (or Reeds) Festival in Bougainville, Takaku explained that the festival was ultimately about highlighting and revaluing the concept of reciprocity that has been central to Melanesian culture – he said,

“The Reeds Festival is about sharing. In our culture, ‘Taponang’ is the sharing of the garden harvest among women, and sharing of fish from the hunt among men. This was the paramount Melanesian biocultural community life done out of loving kindness so that everyone remains equal; so that no one goes home not having a bit of what others have reaped from the land or the sea. It was a distributing and sharing of goods and knowledge which is being replaced by ignorance, greed, and craving in the predictable and yet surprising ‘developed’ world.”¹⁰

It is this value of reciprocity that is the basis for the traditional economy and customary land tenure.

In a world where the weaknesses and shortcomings of the cash economy are more and more evident every day, there is an urgent

9. Bernard Narokobi, *Lo Bilong Yumi Yet, Law and Custom in Melanesia* (Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, and the Melanesian Institute for Pastoral and Socio-Economic Service: Goroka, PNG, 1989), p 21.

10. William Takaku, *Tampara Duanta Melanesia Updates, 1 August to 31 October 2010*. (Project Report to Funder.) Awara, Bougainville: Tampara Duanta Melanesia, p 4.

need to look for and to other ways of living on this planet. This paper makes the case that Melanesia – in places where its traditional economy and customary land tenure are strong – provides that example. And yet, this unique and critically important system is under urgent threat from the forces of globalisation and commoditisation.

The Challenge to Customary Land Tenure

For decades now, various colonising (and neo-colonising) forces have been trying to change the non-commoditised relationship between Melanesian people and their land in order to get them to work more readily within the wage labour economy. Up to now they have not been successful. However, the process has started and is now well underway through long-term processes of colonisation, including colonial/neo-colonial education systems that change the way people think and change what they believe in. Most outsiders, and now even many Melanesians themselves, do not believe in the validity of customary land tenure – they believe that the land needs to be surveyed and registered in order for the tenure to be legitimate and for the land to be ‘safe’. At the same time, foreign aid agencies often describe customary land tenure as an impediment to ‘development’¹¹ and purport the need for ‘land reform’ in Melanesia – that is, the registration of individualized land titles¹² under centralised state control to make it easier for companies, especially foreign ones, to access and control land.

11. AusAID. *Pacific Regional Aid Strategy 2004-2009*. Canberra, Australia. <https://bit.ly/2wcIUoT>; and Lissant Bolton, 2015, *Women and Customary Land Tenure in Vanuatu: Changing understandings in Edvard Hviding and Geoffrey White (eds.) Pacific Alternatives: Cultural Politics in Contemporary Oceania*. Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Publishing, p 148-150.

12. There are now laws that allow for registration of group titles as well, but the point is that registration allows for identification of ‘landowners’ who can then be accessed by companies wanting to access their land for business development.

Upon achieving Independence, the protection of customary land was guaranteed in the Constitutions of PNG, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu (in 1975, 1978 and 1980 respectively). In PNG, the Constitutional Planning Committee (CPC) Report that informed the drafting of the Constitution states that it is vital to protect customary land rights, and that land rights and use of natural resources should be about trusteeship rather than ownership. The CPC noted that, “The recent report of the Commission of Inquiry into Land Matters emphasized the need to ensure that our people are not deprived of their ancient land rights, stressing that Papua New Guinea does not want to see the emergence of a class of landless people as has occurred in so many other developing countries” and “the basic concept in our society with regard to use of natural resources is that one generation holds and uses resources in the capacity of trustee for future generations”.¹³ Furthermore, the PNG Constitution and law are supposed to protect customary land, preventing it from being sold, leased, mortgaged or disposed of except in accordance with custom.¹⁴ In its 2008 report, *Review of Incorporated Land Groups and Design of a System of Voluntary Customary Land Registration*, the PNG Constitutional and Law Reform Commission states:

“...the [customary land] system gives the members of the community self-sufficiency and security, and unites them as a unit. Under existing law, customary landowners are protected from losing their land or becoming a landless class.”¹⁵

13. PNG Constitutional Planning Committee Report 1974. <http://www.paclii.org/pg/CPCReport/Cap2.htm>.

14. Almah Tararia and Lisa Ogle, *Incorporated Land Groups and the Registration of Customary Land: Recent Developments in PNG in In Defence of Melanesian Customary Land*. Ed. Tim Anderson and Gary Lee (AID/WATCH: Sydney, 2010), p 23.

15. Papua New Guinea Constitutional and Law Reform Commission, *Review of Incorporated Land Groups and Design of a System of Voluntary Customary Land Registration*. (Report No 5, May 2008). Constitutional and Law Reform Commission: Boroko, Papua New Guinea, p 2.

Each of the three Melanesian nations has different histories of how their post-Independence land laws have been developed and imposed, but in all cases the goal has been the same – to transfer control of land from the domain of Melanesian custom law to the domain of western-style law.

Independence have been focused not on protecting the land for the ongoing use and benefit of the indigenous communities and their descendants, but on ‘freeing up’ and ‘mobilising’ land for neo-liberal ‘development’.¹⁶ Each of the three Melanesian nations has different histories of how their post-Independence land laws have been developed and imposed, but in all cases the goal has been the same – to transfer control of land from the domain of Melanesian custom law to the domain of western-style law (developed to protect property and ‘rights’¹⁷), thereby converting the land into a commodity so it can be used by companies for their own profit. And in all cases, the push to ‘mobilise’ the land for ‘development’ has come from foreign aid and development agencies – particularly the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and before that the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). For example, in 1995 the World Bank imposed a condition that PNG undertake ‘land reform’ as part of the World Bank’s Structural Adjustment Program, leading to massive opposition from

16. Even in cases where a land law has been amended to make the system less prone to corruption, still the basic reason for creating the laws was to make customary land available for use by outside companies; see also Iati Iati. *Customary Land Rights and Pacific Islands: Security & Stability*. *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, Number 419 (April 19, 2018), Washington, DC: East West Centre.

17. In Melanesia, there is a critique of the promise of ‘rights’ – many activists will explain that ‘rights’ are something small and insignificant compared to the God- and ancestor-given birthright ‘power’ of having control over / access to customary land.



Photo credit: Joel Simo

“Notably, customary land tenure issues have a strong link to the major security issues in the region such as the Bougainville conflict, the Solomon Islands conflict, and the Fiji coups.”

- Dr. Iati Iati

civil society. Despite this, AusAID’s Pacific Regional Aid Strategy 2004-2009 stated that it would continue to push for ‘land reform’:

“The traditional communal systems of land ownership have led to a low level of security of tenure for investors which impacts on the development of the private sector and economic growth. A lack of clarity around land ownership is creating conflict within Pacific societies. While clearly a long-term and challenging issue, Australia will support research, pilot approaches and consider options for progressing this issue.”¹⁸

In 2009, AID/WATCH published concerns that AusAID’s \$54 million Pacific Land Program was financing support to Melanesian governments in undertaking land reforms that were primarily donor-driven and aiming to enable foreign investment.¹⁹ And yet in 2015, DFAT continued to assert that, “land and land titling is a critical constraint to inclusive economic growth.”²⁰ Dr. Iati Iati, a University of Otago academic from the Pacific, recently focused attention on how land reforms that “even intimate alienation of customary lands, have been very unpopular in the Pacific”, while also making links to security and

18. AusAID. *Pacific Regional Aid Strategy 2004-2009*. Canberra, Australia, p 29.

19. AID/WATCH, *Australian Aid to the Pacific (The Pacific Land Program) Briefing (Prepared for the Pacific Regional Representative of the Office of The High Commissioner for Human Rights)*, (AID/WATCH: Sydney, Australia, 2009), p 3.

20. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *An Australian Investment to Support Law and Justice in Papua New Guinea, Justice Services and Stability for Development, Investment Design Jan 2015*. p 14.

stability in the region:

“Notably, customary land tenure issues have a strong link to the major security issues in the region such as the Bougainville conflict, the Solomon Islands conflict, and the Fiji coups.”²¹

In the case of PNG, the first law introduced whereby customary land could be converted to private freehold land was the Land (*Tenure Conversion*) Act 1963. Land registration under this law results in permanent alienation. In 1987 the Act was amended so that Incorporated Land Groups (ILGs) and other customary groups could apply to register their land. *The Land Act 1996* provided for lease-lease back arrangements,²² including Special Agriculture Business Leases (SABLs) which have led to the alienation of 5.5 million hectares of customary land.²³ The Somare Government introduced the *Land Registration (Customary Land) Act 2007*, passed in 2009, to further facilitate the voluntary registration of customary land. Under this law, representatives of an ILG apply to the newly created Director of Customary Land Registration to register clan land; upon registration, a certificate of title is issued in the name of the ILG and the ILG can then lease or mortgage the land; customary law ceases to apply to the land.²⁴

The 2008 Pacific Land Conference – sponsored by AusAID as part of its Pacific

21. Iati Iati. Customary Land Rights and Pacific Islands: Security & Stability. *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, Number 419 (April 19, 2018), Washington, DC: East West Centre.

22. Almah Tararia and Lisa Ogle, Incorporated Land Groups and the Registration of Customary Land: Recent Developments in PNG in *In Defence of Melanesian Customary Land*. Ed. Tim Anderson and Gary Lee (AID/WATCH: Sydney, 2010), p, 25.

23. Act Now PNG, *Customary Land Registration: Too Dangerous to Touch*, 2017; and Frederic Mousseau, *On Our Land: Modern Land Grabs Reversing Independence in Papua New Guinea* (The Oakland Institute: Oakland, CA, 2013), p 11.

24. Almah Tararia and Lisa Ogle, Incorporated Land Groups and the Registration of Customary Land: Recent Developments in PNG in *In Defence of Melanesian Customary Land*. Ed. Tim Anderson and Gary Lee (AID/WATCH: Sydney, 2010), p, 25.

Land Program – was held in Port Vila, Vanuatu. The theme of the conference was ‘Making Land Work’.²⁵ In his official presentation, Steven Sukot, a civil society representative from PNG, stated that in Melanesia, land had been working for generations and was still providing for the needs of 80% of the population living in the rural areas. He concluded by saying that land laws imposed since Independence in 1975 had benefited the multinational companies, not the people.²⁶ The Australian Secretary for International Development Assistance, however, stressed that “obstacles to economic growth are based on uncertainty over land tenure”, necessitating continued land reform.²⁷ Despite these criticisms, many point to the strengths of customary land tenure systems.²⁸ In rural Melanesia, while some clans may control more land than others, the central importance of relationships, in addition to cultural norms of redistribution, reciprocity, and generosity, have continued to function to such an extent that even today the overwhelming majority of people has access to enough land to provide food and other basic needs for her/his family.²⁹ At the same time, studies show that land registration and land law codification in other countries have had primarily negative social impacts, including increased rates

25. AusAID, *Making Land Work: Reconciling Customary Land and Development in the Pacific: Case Studies on Customary Land and Development in the Pacific* (AusAID: Canberra, Australia, 2018) <http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/making-land-work.aspx>.

26. Steven Sukot, *People’s Perspectives: Understanding the Relationship between People and Land in PNG and the Struggle to Maintain These Important Relationships* (AID/WATCH: Sydney, 2008) <http://milda.aidwatch.org.au/resources/documents/people%E2%80%99s-perspectives-understanding-relationship-between-people-and-land-png-and>.

27. Bob McMullan, *Launch of Making Land Work – Pacific Land Conference*. Speech by Australian Government Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance, Pacific Land Conference, 12-13 June 2008, Port Vila, Vanuatu.

28. Act Now PNG, *Customary Land Registration: Too Dangerous to Touch*, 2017; and *In Defence of Melanesian Customary Land*. Ed. Tim Anderson and Gary Lee (AID/WATCH: Sydney, 2010).

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of community conflict, rural indebtedness, inequality, and landlessness.³⁰

The Melanesian Indigenous Land Defence Alliance (MILDA)

After the 2008 Pacific Land Conference, civil society representatives from PNG and Vanuatu joined together to form a regional body to counter criticism of customary land tenure and to promote the real life narrative of how land is already working for the majority of rural Melanesians. Following on this, the first official meeting of MILDA was held in Madang, PNG, in June 2009. Since then, MILDA members have continued to meet regularly,³¹ to build networks and to continue to advocate the strengths of customary land tenure and warn against the dangers of misguided land reform agendas.

29. Tim Anderson, *Land and Livelihoods in Papua New Guinea* (Australian Scholarly Publishing: North Melbourne, 2015), p 149-50; Ralph Regenvanu, "The Traditional Economy as a Source of Resilience in Vanuatu" in *In Defence of Melanesian Customary Land*. Ed. Tim Anderson and Gary Lee (AID/WATCH: Sydney, 2010), p 33; Steven Sukot, *People's Perspectives: Understanding the Relationship between People and Land in PNG and the Struggle to Maintain These Important Relationships* (AID/WATCH: Sydney, 2008); and Paige West, *Dispossession and the Environment: Rhetoric and Inequality in Papua New Guinea* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2017) p 82.

30. Tim Anderson, *Land and Livelihoods in Papua New Guinea* (Australian Scholarly Publishing: North Melbourne, 2015), p 18-19; and A Ganjanapan, *The Northern Thai Land Tenure System: Local Customs versus National Laws*. *Law and Society Review*, 28(3), 1994, p 609.

31. MILDA regional meetings: 2009 – Madang, PNG; 2010 – Mele, Vanuatu; 2013 – Honiara, Solomon Islands; 2014 – Lelepa, Vanuatu; 2016 – Buala, Solomon Islands; 2017 – Panguna/Arawa, Bougainville.

The network now includes members from throughout Melanesia – from Maluku and West Papua, to PNG, Bougainville, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Kanaky/New Caledonia.

The MILDA network sees land mapping and registration as the key tool that has been used over the last 500 years to alienate indigenous peoples from their lands. And given that Melanesia is one of the very last places in the world where these processes of land tenure mapping and registration are still incomplete, MILDA is working to keep land in Melanesia under customary tenure.

MILDA network members hold that land under customary tenure is within the sphere of indigenous power and control – they know the borders and they know the rules. But once the land has been mapped and registered, it is commoditised and transferred over to a legal system that the majority of indigenous Melanesians do not understand, nor control; a system that requires huge amounts of money to be successful within. In the experience of indigenous peoples here in Melanesia, once their land has been registered they lose control of it and seemingly forever. They have no way of competing with the moneyed people and companies that they are up against. What is more, MILDA members want to continue living within the non-commoditised world of reciprocity and mutual benefit that customary land tenure provides for.

At its second regional meeting, held in Mele, Vanuatu, in 2010, MILDA produced the Mele Declaration, which affirmed the 'commitment to indigenous control of customary land' and defended 'the continued control of Melanesian communities over their land, sea, water, air and natural resources.' It further declared land to be 'a non-alienable resource that cannot be parted with.' (See Appendix 1 for the complete *Mele Declaration*.)

The land has belonged to us – and we to it – since time immemorial. Land is our mother and the source of life for our people. Land secures life, fosters and strengthens relationships that sustain our society. It embodies the link to our past, present and future and therefore sustains everything we do. MILDA members reaffirm the sanctity of land.”³²

MILDA 2017 in Bougainville

In August 2017, MILDA convened in Panguna and Arawa on Bougainville. One main objective of gathering in Bougainville was for youth from other parts of Melanesia to witness first-hand the impacts of large-scale extractive industries, and to learn from the hardships the people of Bougainville had endured – before the war, due to the environmental and social devastation that their societies had faced as a result of mining, and then during ten years of civil war fighting to defend their land and resources. Youth from around Melanesia were able to see how the people of Bougainville had stood up together against those with power and money, united in the belief that they were fighting for a better future for their children. Meeting participants from other parts of the region said that they will never forget visiting the Panguna mine pit, and seeing how the heart of the earth had been torn away and destroyed to feed the insatiable greed of a few.

For the Bougainvillean participants, the MILDA meeting was an important opportunity to share and increase understanding among their Melanesian neighbours about the current situation and process leading up to the 2019 referendum on Bougainville’s Independence.³³ The Bougainvillean

32. Melanesian Indigenous Land Defence Alliance, The Mele Declaration 2010.

33. Leonard Fong Roka, B’ville ex-combatants threaten violence against Panguna family. PNG Attitude, 17 August 2017. http://asopa.typepad.com/asopa_people/2017/08/panguna-ex-combatants-threaten-violence-against-roka-family.html#comments.

[...] the representatives from Vanuatu were able to provide an example of an independent nation that is moving forward without environmentally-destructive large-scale extractive industries and with a focus on the traditional economy.

participants explained that they want political independence, while also ensuring that they maintain control over their land and natural resources. The people recognise that they need laws that truly reflect this key aspiration – laws that will benefit the Bougainvillean people rather than favouring companies and those with money. The local participants explained that they had fought to close down the Panguna mine, protect their land and environment, and achieve Independence.

The MILDA meeting provided an opportunity for participants from all Melanesian nations – those still also colonised (West Papua and Kanaky); those that are independent but have destructive large-scale resource extraction industries, such as logging and mining (PNG, Solomon Islands, and Fiji); and one young independent nation with no large-scale logging or mining, but facing the threat of an aggressive real estate industry (Vanuatu) – to share with those from Bougainville. While the Bougainvilleans voiced their major concern about how they might run their own country without large-scale mining, the representatives from Vanuatu were able to provide an example of an independent nation that is moving forward without environmentally-destructive large-scale extractive industries and with a focus on the traditional economy.³⁴

34. While Vanuatu does not presently have large-scale mining or logging, it is facing the onslaught of the real estate industry; however, its development and mainstreaming of Indicators of Wellbeing that measure and value the contributions of the non-cash traditional economy are a conscious attempt by the government to start measuring the contributions of customary land to people’s everyday lives in order to slow down the tide of land sales; see Tanguay 2017 for more on this.

The meeting produced the Arawa Declaration 2017 (see Appendix 2), which reaffirmed much of the sentiment of the Mele Declaration 2010, and ‘the right of all Melanesian peoples, specifically Bougainville, Kanaky and West Papua, to exercise the full process of self-determination towards a referendum for independence without interference from outside influence.’³⁵

Conclusion

It is asserted by some that Bougainville needs mining in order to support an independent Bougainville – a narrative based on the assumption that there are no viable ‘alternatives’ for cash income generation and ‘development’ of an independent Bougainville. This paper has argued that the attempt to rewrite land tenure and the attempt to reopen the island to large-scale mining are inherently linked – one process supports and enables the other. However, the paper has also argued that an alternative path of development for Bougainville, one focused on land-based traditional economies, is one that is already embedded in traditional Melanesian culture and land tenure systems. It makes the case that the basis for the ‘alternative’ already exists – being the way of life that most rural Bougainvilleans are already living, operating within a mixed economy that blends the non-cash contributions of the land-based traditional economy supplemented with cash earned from small-scale income generating activities (like sales of surplus agricultural products at local markets, sales of cash crops, etc.).

Through the current global ‘development’ paradigm in Melanesia, Melanesians’ most important asset, land, is gradually slipping away in the name of ‘progress’ and development models prescribed by foreign consultants and adopted by our governments and elites. These models are paving the way

for the indigenous populations to lose their traditional power and control over land. Under the new imposed land registration laws in Melanesia, land becomes an alienable commodity. These laws are changing the intrinsic relationship that Melanesians have had with their land and if not remedied will eventually set us on a path of poverty and exclusion from what has been rightly in our control since time immemorial. These imposed laws are enabling what we call a ‘de-customisation of land’ that benefits foreign investors and developers with cash – this process has already displaced land from thousands of Melanesians and threatens to transform Melanesian people from communities of self-sufficient traditional producers into impoverished landless wage labourers, willing to work for less than subsistence wages.

Bougainville does not need to reopen the Panguna mine, or any other large-scale mine, to fund its independence – real independence already exists through the traditional economy and customary land tenure. Whatever development path Bougainville chooses to follow from here on needs to ensure that it builds slowly and sustainably, and does not undermine this vital foundation.

35. Melanesian Indigenous Land Defence Alliance, The Arawa Declaration 2017.