



The Mele Declaration 2010

The declaration of the 2nd annual meeting of the Melanesian Indigenous Land Defence Alliance, held at Mele Village in Port Vila, Vanuatu, 14-19 June 2010

In response to increasing threats to customary land systems posed by the land reform agendas of international financial institutions, aid agencies, governments and elites within our own countries, the second annual meeting of the Melanesian Indigenous Land Defence Alliance (MILDA) affirms its commitment to indigenous control of customary land systems. Recognising that the threats to customary land are directed against the Melanesian Pacific as a region, our intention is to unite and organize on a regional basis, to defend the continued control of Melanesian communities over their land, sea, water, air and natural resources. We assert that the customary land systems are the basis of life and community in Melanesia.

Established in 2009, MILDA is an alliance of groups and individuals united by a shared vision, a common cause, and a commitment to working together. Our members are fieldworkers and community members, women's representatives and mothers, fathers and grandfathers. We include church leaders and traditional leaders, academics, regional NGOs and international supporters. We first came together last year in Madang, PNG, and following from that we came together this year in Port Vila, Vanuatu. We came from Papua New Guinea, Bougainville, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Australia, and were privileged to have traditional chiefs with us. We came to share experiences, stories and skills, and strategize a regional response to the persistent pressure for registration and leasing of customary land.

Land has always been of the highest value to the lives of our peoples, and so it will be for generations to come. In all Melanesian traditions, land is regarded as a non-alienable resource that cannot be parted with. The relationship which we have with our land is special and unique, and cannot be accounted for through Western systems of value. The Melanesian definition of land is inclusive. Land extends from the surface of the ground to the centre of the earth. It stretches above us to the limits of the sky. It includes the waters of our rivers, streams and creeks. It includes our oceans. 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.

The meeting asserted the following:

1. We are opposed to any form of alienation of land from customary landowners, whether by outright sale or through leases which remove landowners' capacity to effectively control, access and use their land.
2. We believe that the ways in which land is used and distributed should be determined by Melanesian custom, and not Western legal systems.
3. We assert the value of traditional economy, which promotes self-reliance amongst our people and communities, and we are opposed to actions and policies which encourage the dependency of Melanesian peoples on others, including the state.
4. We reject all policies which require that customary land be registered as a precondition for business or development activities, and demand that Melanesian governments cease all pressures for customary land registration, whether voluntary or involuntary.
5. We oppose all foreign programs, bribes and inducements to bring about customary land registration in Melanesia.
6. We call for a total overhauling of the current land administration in Melanesia to weed out corrupt land dealings and fraudulent titling. All customary land taken by these means should be returned to customary owners.

The Melanesian Indigenous Land Defence Alliance resolved that it will meet again next year in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville.