

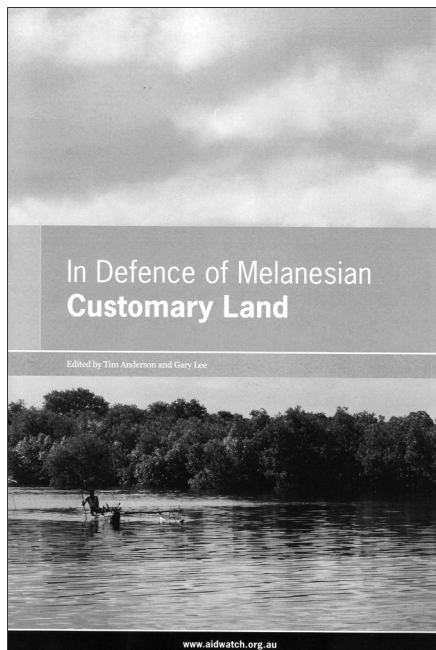
Noted

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Getting media up to speed on Melanesian land issues

In Defence of Melanesian Customary Land, edited by Tim Anderson and Gary Lee. Sydney: AID/WATCH, 2010, pp. 44. ISBN:978-0-646532-37-0. *Defending Melanesian Land*, directed by Tim Anderson. Short film: Sausi – Village cooperation. DVD, AID/Watch: Sydney

UNDERSTANDING Melanesian customary land is challenging for foreign journalists. Issues of land tenure when they make it to the news in the region are mostly linked to resources, foreign investment and economic development. Journalists tend to fall victim to their own misunderstandings about land ownership in this part of the Pacific, often aggravated by misinformation produced by investment groups and their ‘think tanks’ which pursue ‘their own economic agendas under the guise of modernist policy’ (p. 2).

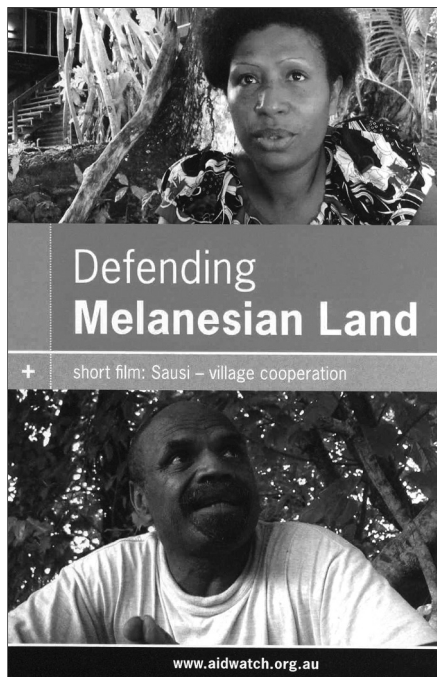


This publication, with its accompanying video produced by AID/WATCH, seeks to address some of these misunderstandings and correct some of the misinformation promoted by these investment groups, whose aim to acquire cheap land creates lobbying groups that pressure island governments to introduce new legislation that undermines indigenous rights.

It is not surprising then to see policy papers produced by such a ‘think tank’, the Sydney-based Centre for Independent Studies, claiming the ‘communal ownership of land is the primary reason for deprivation in rural Pacific communities’ (p. 2).

Unfortunately, regional media tend to pick up this rhetoric which claims that indigenous forms of ownership are damaging to economic development. These claims contribute to the general public's misunderstanding of how people can own land without being able to sell it, not appreciating that families using their own customary lands in combined subsistence-cash crop operations can often generate more value than those with paid jobs. Journalists themselves tend to be unaware of the socio-economic and cultural aspects involved in issues around land tenure leases, conversion and reform programmes, the productive value of customary land and the social security features of traditional land tenure systems. These issues, among others, are the focus of this valuable publication aimed at journalists, researchers and those involved in policy formation, such as AusAID.

This highly informative publication is organised on seven chapters around case studies, mostly drawn from Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu but with overall references to Melanesia. Steven Sukot from PNG talks about the wrong emphasis on customary land reform as it is promoted by the Papua New Guinea government with backing from some donors, which uses 'development' as the bait for land conversion, despite recent



reports showing the clear value of this system to PNG. Tim Anderson's historical comparison of issues of land registration, land markets and livelihoods in PNG and other former colonies poses several questions, such as 'why should customary land owners not see land registration and its associated promises as a step towards the dispossession of indigenous peoples, the purpose for which it was explicitly designed in the colonial period?' (p.19)

Ralph Regenvanu looks at the traditional economy as a form of resilience in Vanuatu and highlights

the importance of ‘counting’ its contribution to the country’s well being by calling for the development of alternatives to the Western GDP indicators that are more appropriate in the Melanesian context. He is also arguing that we need to shift the focus for development onto food security and says that maintaining customary land tenure is the basis for a sustainable food supply. (p.33).

The accompanying DVD further enhances the value of this publication. It brings alive the voices of Melanesian activists explaining their views on the importance of indigenous land to their people, and the reasons for the formation of the regional Melanesian Indigenous Land Defence Alliance. The DVD also includes a short film in Melanesian Pidgin demonstrating how a community, by coming together succeeds in rejecting the temptation for quick cash presented by oil palm development schemes. More of these successful examples need to be shared.—*Dr Evangelia Papoutsaki is associate professor in communication studies at Unitec.*



Tribute to Solomon Is women

Being the First: Storis Blong Oloketa Mere Lo Solomon Aelan, edited by Alice Aruhe'eta Pollard and Marilyn Waring. Honiara: RAMSI, and Auckland: Institute of Public Policy and the Pacific Media Centre, AUT University, 2010, 162 pp. ISBN 978-1-877314-76-6.

THIS BOOK profiles the stories of 14 outstanding women, revealing their intimate moments, their struggles and the highs they have faced during their lives. Solomon Islands women make up around 49 percent of the country’s population. Traditionally, these women are