

Foreword

Access to land remains central to the livelihoods of Melanesians. I welcome this important volume and the contribution that it makes to the discussion of land issues in the Melanesian region.

The movement for independence in various Melanesian countries was galvanised by the demand to return alienated land to the indigenous populations. The constitutions of Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands reflect this aspiration by retaining customary control over most land. In Vanuatu, for example, the Constitution has specifically maintained the jurisdiction of customary institutions over land. Since Independence, however, customary land has again been parcelled, commodified and leased. The recent land rush in Papua New Guinea and in Vanuatu demonstrate the potential impacts of land leasing on the customary system. These land transformations are discussed at length in this publication, and as such the volume offers important insights into understanding land issues in Melanesia.

A number of chapters in this volume deal with the implications of increasing urbanisation across Melanesia. While the problems associated with urbanisation look different across the region, all countries have faced challenges in trying to provide suitable land for the expanding populations around urban centres. These are difficult issues, but Melanesian policy makers must recognise that not everyone living in urban areas has an island or village to which they can return. The state has an obligation to try and provide its population with access to urban services, and necessarily this will involve the creation of new state land through the acquisition of new areas of customary land, which often requires substantial funds.

In discussing urbanisation in the Melanesian region, I think we need to challenge the idea of 'squatter' settlements on customary land. In my experience in Vanuatu, very few people are 'squatters' on customary land;

almost everyone has an agreement that they have entered into that allows them to live on the land. When people with customary agreements are evicted, I believe there is a role for the state in trying to relocate people and find them alternative areas of land to live on.

The research in this book contributes greatly to our understanding of how people are living on land in Melanesia in urban, peri-urban and rural areas. Many of the chapters in this book describe the various forms of transactions that take place over land, from customary agreements to formal leasing.

Policy makers from the Melanesian region need to learn from applied case studies of land issues in their own countries, and more broadly from across the region. Research findings must always be condensed into a form that policy makers can read and learn from. As such, I am pleased that this is an open-access digital publication, which should make it widely available throughout Melanesia.

I am delighted to see the large number of Melanesian women represented in this volume, and of Melanesian voices more broadly. It is essential that people from the region write about land issues in their own countries. It is important to see our own academics and practitioners writing about land issues that are so central to our Melanesian identity.

I commend the essays in this volume to anyone interested in the future of people living in the Melanesian region. Access to land is central to sustainable development. Maintaining adequate land access is a major social justice issue. Land is essential to the maintenance of *kastom*, kinship structures and language. The title of this book encapsulates the way in which people across Melanesia today find themselves at a crossroads, caught between the idea of land as property and the concept of land as life, which is central to *kastom*.

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