



The Takara Declaration 2019

MILDA is an alliance of groups and individuals with a shared vision and commitment to working together, who are united by a common cause to protect our indigenous land, which extends from the surface of the ground to the centre of the earth and underneath the ocean, and includes our air and sky, the waters of our rivers and streams, and our ecosystems, biodiversity, and intangible cultural heritage.

The 7th meeting of the Melanesian Indigenous Land Defence Alliance (MILDA) took place from 25 to 29 November 2019 in Takara Village, Shefa Province, Vanuatu. At that meeting, some 80 representatives of indigenous communities and organizations throughout Melanesia (including the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Fiji, Kanaky, Papua New Guinea, Maluku, Solomon Islands, West Papua, and Vanuatu) unanimously re-affirmed MILDA's decade-long commitment to indigenous Melanesian control over customary land and ocean systems under our customary laws and in accordance with our Melanesian ways. Those present at the meeting included indigenous leaders, community members (including men, women, young people, children and people with special needs), churches, academics, regional NGOs and international supporters.

This document, titled 'The Takara Declaration 2019' represents the points of consensus that emerged among everyone attending the meeting in response to the continued and increasing severity of the grave threats to our customary land and ocean systems posed by land reform schemes, the industrialization and militarization of our seas and seabeds, and other non-indigenous 'development' agendas and initiatives promoted by international financial institutions, aid agencies, commercial enterprises, governments and non-governmental organizations, as well as by governmental and other officials and elites within our own countries.

We recognise that these threats to customary land and ocean are directed against the Melanesian Pacific as a region, and therefore we pledge to remain united and organized as a region to defend and promote the continued control of Melanesian communities over

our land, seas, water, air and ancestral heritage. We re-affirm that our customary land and ocean systems are the basis of our lives and communities as Melanesian peoples, and therefore they are the foundation of our survival and well-being today, and the continued survival and well-being of our future generations.

We assert that Melanesian definitions of land are inclusive of the ocean, and that we have been the custodians of our land and ocean since time immemorial. In all of our Melanesian traditions, the relationship that we have with our land and ocean is special and unique, and cannot be replaced by foreign value systems without putting our well-being, our communities, our languages, our ways of life and our continued existence on the planet in danger of extinction. Our customary relationship with land, ocean and sky gives us complete food, housing, work and social security, it fosters and strengthens the networks that hold our societies together, and it embodies our connections to the past, present and future, thereby sustaining everything that we aspire to.

As MILDA members hailing from the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Fiji, Kanaky, Papua New Guinea, Maluku, Solomon Islands, West Papua, and Vanuatu, we reaffirm that our customary stewardship over land and seas under our customary laws has successfully preserved them for future generations, that our traditional customs, values and beliefs have secured the well-being of all members of our societies, and that our rich heritage of networking and community-building has guaranteed peace and social harmony in our traditional societies. Therefore, we declare that:

- i) We acknowledge and support the value and use of our indigenous resource management systems, indigenous knowledges and indigenous languages in the sustainable management of, and the maintenance of cultural links with, our environment and our natural resources;
- ii) We promote the production and consumption of indigenous food for resilience and the survival of Melanesian peoples;
- iii) We oppose agendas, initiatives, policies and actions which promote the dependency of Melanesian peoples on others, including the State;
- iv) We promote indigenous Melanesian systems of science, research, teaching and learning to bring about greater generation-to-generation transmission of,

understanding of and appreciation for our indigenous knowledges, practices and languages;

v) We oppose any form of alienation of land and ocean from customary landowners/land stewards, whether by lease, by outright sale or by any other form of acquisition, which remove customary landowners'/land stewards' capacity to effectively control, access and use their land and ocean. How land and ocean are used and distributed should be determined by Melanesian custom, and not by any foreign or non-customary system of law or governance;

vi) We commit to nurturing and supporting young indigenous Melanesian leaders and defenders of Melanesian lifeways.

In accordance with Article 3 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) which states that: "*Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development*", we further declare that:

i) We support the right to self-determination of the indigenous peoples of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Kanaky and West Papua;

ii) We promote security of information and personnel against threats from oppressive and/or suppressive agencies, systems, groups or individuals within our governments;

iii) We say NO to all policies that require customary land to be registered as a precondition for business or 'development' activities, and demand that Melanesian governments and aid donors cease and desist from exerting any pressure whatsoever toward 'customary' land registration or any other form of land registration, whether voluntary or involuntary;

iv) We say NO to all legislative acts and amendments with respect to land and resources that take away any rights, power and control from our people, and put any rights, power and control in the hands of any foreign or domestic government and/or investor. We call for the systematic review of all existing and proposed legislation with respect to land and resources in Melanesia that does not favour our people and our Melanesian ways, especially our stewardship over land and land-based resources;

v) We say NO to any form of industrialization and militarization of our ocean. We call for the systematic review of all existing and proposed legislation with respect to oceans and resources in Melanesia that does not favour our people and our Melanesian ways, especially our stewardship over the ocean and ocean-based resources; and

vi) We call for a total review of past and current land administration procedures and practices in Melanesia to expose and eliminate all fraudulent acts such as bribery and mismanagement. This should be done in order to completely do away with any form of corrupt land dealing in the present and future and to remedy the effects of such dealings in the past. All customary lands that have been registered, leased, transferred, subdivided, mortgaged, sold or otherwise acquired by fraudulent means should be returned to their rightful ancestral landowners/land stewards.

