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Foreword

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The Kimberley Land Council is a grassroots community organisation founded 30 years ago, during one of a number of major confrontations between Kimberley Aboriginal people and resource developers in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This occurred when the Government of Western Australia supported a multinational company to drill for oil on sacred ground on Noonkanbah, a cattle station that Yungngora people had only recently secured a lease over, after walking off the station some years earlier in protest at their appalling work and living conditions. In the end the drilling went ahead. But as a result of Noonkanbah Kimberley Aboriginal people became organised and established the Kimberley Land Council in our struggle to protect the things most precious to us, our land and sea, the sites and stories connected with them, and our culture.

The way of doing business with Aboriginal people, back then, was to ride rough-shod right over us. Many things have changed over the last 30 years, a point evident from reading the chapters in this book, which examine relations between indigenous peoples and resource developers in many different parts of the world. Today nearly all major resource companies and their industry associations espouse principles of corporate social responsibility, stating their intention to engage with the communities affected by their operations and to ensure that those communities share in the benefits of resource development. In the Kimberley and in many other regions, companies negotiate with Aboriginal landowners, paying them compensation and involving them in managing the environment; establish employment, training and business development initiatives; and in some cases exceed their legal obligations in protecting sacred sites. These initiatives are important, and can make a valuable contribution in assisting indigenous people to overcome the serious social and economic disadvantages they face as a result of centuries of dispossession and political marginalisation.

But there is also need for caution in assessing these changes. As Kimberley Aboriginal people have discovered to their cost, some companies adopt the rhetoric of corporate social responsibility, but in practice show little respect for Aboriginal people, their land

or their culture. Even where company intentions are good, adoption of corporate policies do not always translate into concrete benefits for Aboriginal people on the ground. Government policies are subject to change, and where they are hostile to indigenous interests, the enthusiasm of corporations for sharing the benefits of resource development with indigenous people can quickly evaporate. For these reasons there can be a large gap between corporate policies released in New York, London, Tokyo or Melbourne and the eventual outcome for Aboriginal peoples whose lands are used in resource exploitation.

Given this reality, it is essential to have available rigorous, critical analysis of the policies, motives and actions of multinational resource corporations in their dealings with indigenous peoples. It is equally important to appreciate the differing responses of indigenous groups, and to understand the impact of dominant political and legal systems on the choices open to them and on the strategies they pursue in dealing with corporations. This book makes a valuable contribution in this regard. It brings together information on the experiences of indigenous peoples around the world, of the impacts on them of corporate policies and actions, and of the successes and failures of indigenous peoples in engaging with resource companies and governments. By doing so it will help ensure that the principle of 'corporate social responsibility' becomes a reality in the Kimberley and in other indigenous homelands.