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Don't skip the women

On World Environment Day, CARE calls for a stronger role for women on forest conservation

The interests of poor women who live in and benefit from forests receive hardly a mention as the world currently negotiates measures to conserve forests as part of the global response to climate change. CARE International warns that support to forest conservation in developing countries can contribute to a worsening situation for women. "We can't just skip the women. They work, live and take care of the forests. Compensation money for forests will easily end up in the hands of powerful people while poor women without any rights lose access to use the forests," says Poul Erik Lauridsen, who is leading CARE International's policy work on climate change.

Today's World Environment Day (June 5th) takes place while more than 190 delegations are meeting at the UN Climate Change Talks in Bonn. Part of the agreement being negotiated includes measures to protect natural forests - also called REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation). The basic idea of REDD is that countries will get compensated for protecting their forests. However, without proper consideration of the social and economic reality of forest-dwellers and indigenous peoples, and women in particular, such an agreement might do more harm than good.

"Imagine there is a woman next door, who plants a little garden to make some extra income and send her kids to school. A large supermarket suddenly decides it will buy all vegetables grown locally. Would we want local men to take over the woman's garden and keep all the money?" asks Poul Erik Lauridsen. "But that's exactly what is happening in developing countries. Governments receive money from developed countries to conserve forests, and then restrict access and livelihood support to those who depend on the forest."

As it is a female traditional role to collect firewood, medicine and food, it will be the women who will lose out from this deal, especially since women usually have no rights to own or inherit land. "But when the forests are worth money, powerful people appear and demand control. And women can easily be scared away. Their use of the forest is not compensated," Lauridsen says.

Climate initiatives that overlook women are not only unjust but also less effective. Women are not just affected by climate change, they are also potential drivers. "Those who experience the problems are better at seeing the solutions," says Lauridsen. CARE is working with women worldwide to ensure their voices are heard in the climate debate to improve their access to information and resources.

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CARE International is a leading aid organisation with more than 60 years' experience fighting global poverty and delivering emergency assistance. In 72 countries, CARE works with the poorest communities to improve basic health and education, enhance rural livelihoods and food security, increase access to clean water and sanitation, and expand economic opportunity. Our long-term development assistance and emergency relief initiatives are currently benefiting about 55 million people around the world. In response to the growing crisis, CARE is helping the most world's most vulnerable communities adapt to the impacts of climate change.