

Empowering women through tenure rights in forestry

Ahead of the XIV World Forestry Congress, being held in Africa for the first time, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) hosted the In Good Company (IGC) forest stewardship workshop...

Delegates heard that the global forestry sector could play a powerful role in empowering rural women through land tenure.



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Cécile Ndjebet, director and founder of the Cameroon-based NGO African Women's Network for Community Management of Forests (REFACOF) said millions of African women work in forestry, but many lack the rights of land tenure afforded to their male counterparts.

"Women have a vital role, but their positions are often precarious. Women are frequently disadvantaged in a range of interrelated cultural, socio-economic and institutional ways, in their access to and control over forest resources and in the availability of economic opportunities.

"There is a need for collective action and commitment from all stakeholders to promote community rights and improved livelihood of local people, including women. Certification of forest products is a powerful tool for delivering that action for forest smallholders to grow a sustainable business and build livelihoods and dignity.

"Women often have highly specialised knowledge of trees and forests in terms of their species diversity, management and uses for various purposes, and conservation practices. Compared with men, women's knowledge tends to be linked more directly to household food consumption and health, which is particularly important during food crises.

"Empowering women in the forest sector can create significant development opportunities for them and generate important

knock-on benefit for their households and communities."

She adds that a primary component of this action is dedicated funding mechanisms for forest smallholders to make certification effective and to ensure secured land tenure for women.

Need to build in inclusion

In emerging nations, women's rights are often not directly linked with property rights and customary rights. There is a need to build the business case for women's inclusion, to invest in education and leadership training for women at all levels, and to raise awareness among both men and women of women's exclusion and of the benefits of women's inclusion, says Ndjebet.

Kim Carstensen, Executive Director of FSC, concurs, "Collective action on land tenure for women will not only improve the economic and ecological sustainability of forestry, but promote the ethos of 'Forests For All, Forever' rather than exploiting a finite resource to the point of exhausting it.

"This congress and the IGC are pivotal events for the sustainable use of Africa's forests, which in turn are linked directly to biodiversity and livelihoods on the continent and ultimately, to life on Earth."

The Forest Stewardship Council is developing a gender strategy to bring this crucial topic forcefully into the global forestry debates. The importance of forests can't be overstated: they help mitigate climate change, ensure adequate supply of fresh water, enhance biodiversity as well as sustainable incomes, livelihoods and food security.

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