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Row over UNDP-aided project in Idukki

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Idukki: The authorities have been implementing a UNDP aided project in the district based on decisions taken unilaterally, and without consultations, the High Range Samrakshana Samithi (HRSS), a people's movement formed under the Catholic Church for the protection of farmers, has alleged. The farmers' collective also claimed that forest department has been looking at forestry extension under the cover of the project.

The India High Range Mountain Landscape Project is a partnership between the environment ministry, state government and United Nations Development Programme aimed at developing an effective multiple use management framework for conserving biodiversity in the mountain landscape of the Western Ghats.

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"Before implementing the projects, they must discuss about them in the grama sabhas. But the officials did not do so," said Fr Sebastian Kochupurakal, general convenor of HRSS.

"We received information that the forest department has been implementing some works under the project. In 2010, when the project was first mooted, they had classified several areas as forest land, but after we raised protests, they revised the project. If they implement projects without proper discussion we will oppose them," said Kochupurakkal. The agreement for the project was signed in 2014, but in 2015 former Idukki MP Joice George filed a complaint before the UNDP Office of Audit and Investigations. In 2018, the government gave its approval for a revised Rs 32-crore project.

It will be implemented in 11 panchayats in Idukki, as well in parts of Ernakulam and Thrissur. At panchayat level, Haritha Keralam

Mission is implementing the project and inside forest areas, it is being executed by the forest department. The project is expected to be completed in 2022.

Dr T N Seema, former executive vice-chairperson, Haritha Keralam Mission rubbished the allegation of forestry extension. “We will address their concerns,” she said.

UNDP sources too said there are no projects under the mission to increase the forest cover in the district. “The projects under UNDP are comprehensive waste management, conservation of water resources, sustainable agriculture and livelihood management. The projects implemented through the forest department are to protect the biodiversity inside the forest land only. We are ready to discuss the concerns raised by all groups,” said a source.

Haritha Kerala Mission Idukki district coordinator GS Madhu said Haritha Keralam Mission implements all UNDP projects only after proper discussions with local bodies.