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COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE

Twenty-fourth Session

Rome, 29 September - 3 October 2014

Report of the Second Meeting of the Plenary Assembly of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP)

Executive Summary

The Committee on Agriculture (COAG) played a key role in the establishment of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP), which came into being at the end of 2012, after endorsement of its Terms of Reference by the 145th Session of the FAO Council.

As stipulated in the Rules of Procedure adopted by the Plenary Assembly (PA) of the GSP at its 1st session in June 2013, the GSP is to report to COAG.

The Plenary Assembly has met twice since the inception of the GSP, on 11-12 June 2013 and on 22-24 July 2014. Both meetings were well attended by FAO Members and other partners. The report of the 1st session was submitted directly to the 148th Council in December 2013, while the report on the 2nd session is submitted to COAG at the present session.

Overall, the GSP has made substantial progress and has engaged in an active partnership process. The main highlights are summarized in the present report.

Special mention should be made of the updating of the World Soil Charter, an instrument adopted by the FAO Conference as far back as 1981. Under the aegis of the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils, the main advisory body to the Plenary Assembly, an updated text was prepared, and it was further amended by the PA. The resulting text is reproduced in Annex of the present document and is submitted for the Committee's consideration, prior to transmittal to the 150th FAO Council, and ultimately the 39th FAO Conference.



Suggested action by the Committee:

The Committee may wish to:

- a) Express appreciation for the good progress made by the GSP since its inception, including the approval of Plans of Action, the arrangements made towards successful implementation of the International Year of Soils (2015) and the World Soil Day, and the planned issuance of a new seminal report on the Status of World Soil Resources at the end of 2015.
- b) Confirm the importance of vigorous resource mobilization efforts in connection with all GSP work, especially in supporting the implementation of the Plans of Action. In this regard, the Committee may invite all potential resource partners to make full use of the recently formulated Healthy Soils Facility.
- c) Endorse the updated World Soil Charter, prior to its consideration by the FAO Council in December 2014, and by the FAO Conference in June 2015.

Queries on the substantive content of the document may be addressed to:

Moujahed Achouri

Director, Land and Water Division

Tel: +39 06 570 53843

I. Background

1. Members may recall that since its 22nd Session of June 2010, the Committee on Agriculture (COAG) has played a key role in the establishment of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP), a new initiative which came into being at the end of 2012. The intent was to put in place a major instrument to generate renewed cooperation among all interested partners (i.e. FAO Members and institutions dealing with soil issues and their solutions), and more effective action for sustainable soil management at a time of severe threats to precious soil resources.
2. An intensive and inclusive consultation process unfolded since June 2010, at both technical and political levels. At its 23rd Session in May 2012, the Committee welcomed the progress made so far, and suggested that an Open-Ended Working Group review the Terms of Reference of the GSP before their submission to the FAO Governing Bodies. These Terms of Reference were eventually adopted by the 145th FAO Council in December 2012, allowing for formal inception of the GSP initiative immediately thereafter.
3. At its first meeting in June 2013, the main governance organ of the GSP, the Plenary Assembly (PA) adopted comprehensive Rules of Procedure (RoP) for all activities generated under its aegis. Of particular significance to COAG is Rule IX 1) which specifies that: *“the Plenary Assembly shall report, through the Secretariat, to the FAO’s Committee on Agriculture which may bring to the attention of the FAO Council any recommendation adopted by the GSP that may have policy implications, or could affect strategic programmes of FAO.”*
4. The PA met twice since the inception of the GSP, i.e. the above 1st Session of 11-12 June 2013 and the 2nd Session of 22-24 July 2014. As the FAO Council had been involved a few months before in the adoption of the GSP Terms of Reference, the report of the 1st Session of the PA was submitted directly to the 148th Council of December 2013¹. In line with the agreed RoP, the 2nd Session of the GSP Plenary Assembly reports to the 24th Session of COAG.

II. Highlights from the 2nd report of the PA²

5. Among the GSP activities addressed, and achievements reported by the Plenary Assembly, the following are singled out as worthy of particular attention by COAG:
 - Four substantive Plans of Action were adopted under GSP Pillars 1, 2, 4 and 5³. As the draft Plan of Action for Pillar 3 was still being fine-tuned at the time of this PA session, the latter will need to be considered at a forthcoming PA meeting.

¹: CL 148/REP “29. The Council acknowledged the progress made in the implementation of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP) and requested that subsequent GSP Plenary Assemblies make regular reports to the Committee on Agriculture (COAG) on the implications of their main decisions and recommendations. 30. The Council welcomed the adoption of GSP Rules of Procedure, complementary to the existing Terms of Reference, as well as the establishment of the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS). 31. The Council noted that the Plenary Assembly of the GSP had discussed development of Plans of Action for the GSP Pillars and the progressive establishment of Regional Soil Partnerships. 32. The Council further noted that the Plenary Assembly of the GSP had requested in particular the establishment of a dedicated facility under FAO rules to facilitate collection of extra-budgetary contributions to approved activities and projects in a transparent manner.”

² The full report can be consulted at:

http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/GSP/docs/plenary_assembly_II/GSP_PAII_Report.pdf

³ Pillar 1 - Promote sustainable management of soil resources for soil protection, conservation and sustainable productivity

Pillar 2 - Encourage investment, technical cooperation, policy, education awareness and extension in soil

Pillar 4 - Enhance the quantity and quality of soil data and information: data collection (generation), analysis, validation, reporting, monitoring and integration with other disciplines

Pillar 5 - Harmonization of methods, measurements and indicators for the sustainable management and protection of soil resources

- Progress is being made in establishing active and open Regional Soil Partnerships (RSPs) to support GSP implementation in the various geographical areas. The concerned Partners are invited to consolidate the RSPs so that a complete, fully effective network of RSPs may be in place as soon as possible.
- In addressing the overall resource mobilization for the GSP, the PA noted that there were encouraging signs of interest from resource partners (including approval of one project by the European Commission at the end of 2013), while much more remained to be done. An essential tool for resource mobilization called the Healthy Soils Facility (developed at the request of the PA) is now available to facilitate dialogue with, and the effective involvement of potential resource partners in this massive effort.
- Concrete action plans have been formulated in relation to two key awareness building mechanisms, i.e. World Soil Day to be celebrated every 5 December and the International Year of Soils (IYS) 2015, following their endorsement by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2013. The PA took a number of practical decisions to support their implementation, for example. Approval of logos and endorsement of a plan of action for implementation of IYS including the establishment of its Steering Committee.
- The PA endorsed an updated World Soil Charter and looked forward to its positive consideration in the 24th COAG Session and the 150th Session of the FAO Council, up to its final adoption by the 39th FAO Conference (see following section).

Updated World Soil Charter

6. The PA appreciated that the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS) had finalized an updated text of the World Soil Charter, the original version of which had been endorsed by the FAO Conference in 1981. This work had involved extensive consultations, including a working group appointed by the ITPS to develop successive drafts of the revised Charter.

7. Following its review by the PA, the new proposed text of the Charter for consideration by COAG is reproduced in Annex of the present document.

8. The ITPS, and subsequently the PA, felt it useful to capture the purpose of this exercise through the following words: *“There is an urgent need to update the vision and guiding principles as spelled out some 30 years ago by FAO Member Countries in the World Soil Charter (FAO, 1981). The 13 principles listed in the charter are still valid, but need to be updated and revised in light of new scientific knowledge gained over the past 30 years, especially with respect to new issues that emerged or were exacerbated during the last decades, like soil pollution and its consequences for the environment, climate change adaptation and mitigation and urban sprawl impacts on soil availability and functions. New priorities for action as well as follow-up activities should be identified, taking stock of past experiences and learning from the failures and mistakes that have resulted in a still persistent global problem of soil degradation and unsustainable use of available soil resources.”*

III. Suggested action by the Committee

9. The Committee may wish to:

- a) Express appreciation for the good progress made by the GSP since its inception, including the approval of Plans of Action, the arrangements made towards successful implementation of the International Year of Soils (2015) and the World Soil Day, and the planned issuance of a new seminal report on the Status of World Soil Resources at the end of 2015.
- b) Confirm the importance of vigorous resource mobilization efforts in connection with all GSP work, especially in supporting the implementation of the Plans of Action. In this regard, the Committee may invite all potential resource partners to make full use of the recently formulated Healthy Soils Facility.
- c) Endorse the updated World Soil Charter, prior to its consideration by the FAO Council in December 2014, and by the FAO Conference in June 2015.

World Soil Charter

I. Preamble

1. Soils are fundamental to life on Earth but human pressures on soil resources are reaching critical limits. Careful soil management is one essential element of sustainable agriculture and also provides a valuable lever for climate regulation and a pathway for safeguarding ecosystem services and biodiversity.
2. The outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) in June 2012, “The Future We Want”, recognizes the economic and social significance of good land management, including soil, particularly its contribution to economic growth, biodiversity, sustainable agriculture and food security, eradicating poverty, the empowerment of women, addressing climate change and improving water availability.

II. Principles

3. Soils are a key enabling resource, central to the creation of a host of goods and services integral to ecosystems and human well-being. The maintenance or enhancement of global soil resources is essential if humanity’s overarching need for food, water, and energy security is to be met in accordance with the sovereign rights of each state over their natural resources. In particular, the projected increases in food, fibre, and fuel production required to achieve food and energy security will place increased pressure on the soil.
4. Soils result from complex actions and interactions of processes in time and space and hence are themselves diverse in form and properties and the level of ecosystems services they provide. Good soil governance requires that these differing soil capabilities be understood and that land use that respects the range of capabilities be encouraged with a view to eradicating poverty and achieving food security.
5. Soil management is sustainable if the supporting, provisioning, regulating, and cultural services provided by soil are maintained or enhanced without significantly impairing either the soil functions that enable those services or biodiversity. The balance between the supporting and provisioning services for plant production and the regulating services the soil provides for water quality and availability and for atmospheric greenhouse gas composition is a particular concern.
6. The implementation of soil management decisions is typically made locally and occurs within widely differing socio-economic contexts. The development of specific measures appropriate for adoption by local decision-makers often requires multi-level, interdisciplinary initiatives by many stakeholders. A strong commitment to including local and indigenous knowledge is critical.
7. The specific functions provided by a soil are governed, in large part, by the suite of chemical, biological, and physical properties present in that soil. Knowledge of the actual state of those properties, their role in soil functions, and the effect of change – both natural and human-induced—on them is essential to achieve sustainability.
8. Soils are a key reservoir of global biodiversity, which ranges from micro-organisms to flora and fauna. This biodiversity has a fundamental role in supporting soil functions and therefore ecosystem goods and services associated with soils. Therefore it is necessary to maintain soil biodiversity to safeguard these functions.
9. All soils – whether actively managed or not - provide ecosystem services relevant to global climate regulation and multi-scale water regulation. Land use conversion can reduce these global, common-good services provided by soils. The impact of local or regional land-use conversions can be reliably evaluated only in the context of global evaluations of the contribution of soils to essential ecosystem services.

10. Soil degradation inherently reduces or eliminates soil functions and their ability to support ecosystem services essential for human well-being. Minimizing or eliminating significant soil degradation is essential to maintain the services provided by all soils and is substantially more cost-effective than rehabilitating soils after degradation has occurred.

11. Soils that have experienced degradation can, in some cases, have their core functions and their contributions to ecosystem services restored through the application of appropriate rehabilitation techniques. This increases the area available for the provision of services without necessitating land use conversion.

III. Guidelines for Action

12. The overarching goal for all parties is to ensure that soils are managed sustainably and that degraded soils are rehabilitated or restored.

13. Good soil governance requires that actions at all levels – from States, and, to the extent that they are able, other public authorities, international organizations, individuals, groups, and corporations – be informed by the principles of sustainable soil management and contribute to the achievement of a land-degradation neutral world in the context of sustainable development.

14. All actors and specifically, each of the following stakeholder groups are encouraged to consider the following actions:

A. Actions by Individuals and the Private Sector

I. All individuals using or managing soil must act as stewards of the soil to ensure that this essential natural resource is managed sustainably to safeguard it for future generations.

II. Undertake sustainable soil management in the production of goods and services.

B. Actions by Groups and the Science Community

I. Disseminate information and knowledge on soils.

II. Emphasise the importance of sustainable soil management to avoid impairing key soil functions.

C. Actions by Governments

I. Promote sustainable soil management that is relevant to the range of soils present and the needs of the country.

II. Strive to create socio-economic and institutional conditions favourable to sustainable soil management by removal of obstacles. Ways and means should be pursued to overcome obstacles to the adoption of sustainable soil management associated with land tenure, the rights of users, access to financial services and educational programmes. Reference is made to the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Forests and Fisheries in the Context of National Food Security adopted by the Committee on World Food Security in May 2012.

III. Participate in the development of multi-level, interdisciplinary educational and capacity-building initiatives that promote the adoption of sustainable soil management by land users.

IV. Support research programmes that will provide sound scientific backing for development and implementation of sustainable soil management relevant to end-users.

V. Incorporate the principles and practices of sustainable soil management into policy guidance and legislation at all levels of government, ideally leading to the development of a national soil policy.

VI. Explicitly consider the role of soil management practices in planning for adaptation to and mitigation of climate change and maintaining biodiversity.

VII. Establish and implement regulations to limit the accumulation of contaminants beyond established levels to safeguard human health and wellbeing and facilitate remediation of contaminated soils that exceed these levels where they pose a threat to humans, plants, and animals.

VIII. Develop and maintain a national soil information system and contribute to the development of a global soil information system.

IX. Develop a national institutional framework for monitoring implementation of sustainable soil management and overall state of soil resources.

D. Actions by International Organizations

I. Facilitate the compilation and dissemination of authoritative reports on the state of the global soil resources and sustainable soil management protocols.

II. Coordinate efforts to develop an accurate, high-resolution global soil information system and ensure its integration with other global earth observing systems.

III. Assist governments, on request, to establish appropriate legislation, institutions, and processes to enable them to mount, implement, and monitor appropriate sustainable soil management practices.