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Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
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Продовольственная и
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CONFERENCE

Thirty-ninth Session

Rome, 6-13 June 2015

Global Soil Partnership - World Soil Charter

Executive Summary

The FAO Conference adopted the World Soil Charter (WSC) at its 21st Session in November 1981. This internationally-endorsed instrument specifically addressed an essential natural resource, highlighted key principles and guidelines for action by a range of stakeholders in the fight against soil degradation and in the interest of soil conservation. Efforts were consistently made over the years to promote the substantive thrust of the Charter at all levels. After the inception of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP) at the end of 2012, subsequent to its formal establishment by the FAO Council in December 2012, it was deemed pertinent to assess whether the Charter, as originally formulated, was still reflective enough of contemporary soil issues and contexts given the time elapsed since its adoption. In fact, the main advisory organ of the GSP Plenary Assembly, the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS) recognized that the text of the Charter needed updating. Wide consultations were carried out within the international soil community in order to assist with the process and the ITPS was able to submit a revised text to the GSP Plenary Assembly at its second meeting of July 2014. After the further changes introduced by the Assembly, the revised WSC was endorsed by the 24th Session of the Committee of Agriculture (COAG)¹ and by the 150th Session of the Council (December 2014).

Suggested action by the Conference

The Conference is invited to adopt the attached draft resolution endorsing the revised WSC.

Queries on the substantive Content of this document may be addressed to:

Moujahed Achouri
Director, Land and Water Division
Tel: +39 06570 53843

¹ See document C 2015/21

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I. The process

1. The ITPS summarized its thinking in terse and telling language:

“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.”

2. In this light, the ITPS addressed in more concrete terms what a new text for the Charter should contain and fleshed out the specific aspects requiring reformulation. A sub-group was established to supervise this drafting exercise.

3. In summary, the original strong focus on land use planning and land evaluation has been adjusted; more recent key references and concepts such as the more widely understood framework of ecosystem services are now reflected; major developments in the intervening period such as the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and ensuing spate of new agreements and the work of the Committee on World Food Security have been factored in; and the guidelines for action reorganized and expanded to take account of a broader range of stakeholders.

II. The way forward

4. The reformulated WSC is before the FAO Conference for final endorsement. As was done in 1981, given its broad symbolic and political significance, a draft Resolution has been prepared and is now being submitted for Conference approval. It is worth noting that this timing coincides with the celebration of the International Year of Soils 2015 (IYS).

5. Subject to the outcome of the Conference discussions, the Secretariat will seek to ensure the broadest resonance and implementation of the revised Charter at all levels, from policy-makers down to soil practitioners in countries and regions, including through channels for communication with potential key actors provided by the GSP, in the context of the IYS and World Soil Day.

Resolution ./2015
Revised World Soil Charter

THE CONFERENCE,

Recalling its Resolution 8/81 (21st Session, November 1981) which adopted the first version of the World Soil Charter;

Noting with appreciation the timely initiative of the organs of the recently established Global Soil Partnership (GSP), namely its Plenary Assembly and Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils, to assess the continued validity of the Charter and to develop a revised text more attuned to present and challenging soil issues and contexts;

Recognizing the current threats to precious soil resources in all regions which could seriously undermine the implementation of agreed goals and objectives for hunger eradication and sustainable development, and stressing therefore the imperious need to reverse alarming trends;

Realizing that acceleration of the momentum to generate more concrete international cooperation and activities and mobilize resources to reverse soil degradation and support effective soil conservation measures, as embodied by the GSP and other initiatives, would be well served by an updated Charter, which would assist in widely disseminating solid principles and guidelines for action by all stakeholders;

Concurring with the requirement for an updated Charter to reflect also the major policy developments and conceptual advances with relevance to soils, as had occurred in the intervening period since the adoption of the first version;

Taking the opportunity of the International Year of Soils “Healthy soils for a healthy life” to advocate for sustainable management of global soil resources;

Taking account of the advice from the Committee on Agriculture at its 24th Session (29 September-3 October 2014) and the FAO Council at its 150th Session (1-5 December 2014):

1. Hereby **adopts** a revised version of the World Soil Charter;
2. **Recommends** to the United Nations system and all international organizations concerned to promote actively the principles and guidelines set out in the Charter, and to support their translation into sound policies and tangible activities at all levels: national, regional and international.

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.

(Adopted on....)