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## COUNCIL

### Hundred and Forty-fifth Session

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### Terms of Reference of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP)

#### Executive Summary

Recognizing the critical role of soils for food security and ecosystem services, on the basis of the recommendation made by the FAO High-Level External Committee (HLEC) on the Millennium Development Goals (Rome, 13-14 October 2009) to the Director-General and through conclusions reached at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Session of the FAO Committee on Agriculture (COAG) (Rome 16-19 June 2010), FAO was requested to establish a Global Soil Partnership<sup>1</sup>. After preparatory and participatory work by FAO, a meeting was convened in Rome from 7 to 9 September 2011 to present to FAO Members and key stakeholders a proposal for the establishment of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP) and to obtain reactions and recommendations on the way forward.

The meeting fully endorsed the importance and timeliness of the partnership and agreed to:

- establish a Technical Working Group, composed of soil scientists from a large number of national and international institutions, to prepare a Zero draft version of the Terms of Reference (ToRs) of the Global Soil Partnership; ii) organize the review of a draft version of the ToRs by an Open-Ended Working Group composed of Permanent Representatives to FAO.

A Technical Working Group (composed of 76 voluntary members worldwide) was established and worked for four months to prepare a draft of the ToRs for the establishment of the GSP.

Subsequently, these ToRs were reviewed and edited by an Open-Ended Working Group composed of FAO Members. This version was submitted to COAG at its 23<sup>rd</sup> Session (Rome, 21-25 May 2012). Following the expression of support by a broad range of countries COAG endorsed the initiative for the establishment of the Global Soil Partnership and suggested further review of its ToRs by an Open-Ended Working Group before its submission to the FAO Governing Bodies.

The review process by members of the Open-Ended Working Group was conducted in an inclusive manner, and after three rounds of consultations the majority of proposals were incorporated into the final version, as set out in this document.

<sup>1</sup> CL 140/3

## **Terms of Reference of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP)**

### **1. Background**

1. Soil is the thin layer of material (organic and inorganic) on the Earth's surface that has been subjected to and influenced by environmental factors (parent material, climate, organisms, topography and time) providing the basis for plant establishment and growth and the provisioning of ecosystem services. Soil is a finite natural resource. On a human time-scale it is non-renewable. Soil is the foundation of agricultural development and sustainable development and provides the basis for food, feed, fuel, fibre, water availability, nutrient cycling, organic carbon stocks, biodiversity, and a platform for construction. The area of fertile soil is limited and is increasingly under pressure due to climate change and competing, unsuitable land uses, resulting in increasing degradation. Currently, 46% of the world's land is considered to be degraded. Urgent action is needed to reverse this trend. Healthy soils are required to feed the growing world population and meet their further needs. It is considered that this can only be ensured through a strong partnership which takes into account the existing initiatives and institutions.

2. During its Twenty-third Session which took place from 21 to 25 May 2012, the FAO Committee on Agriculture (COAG) endorsed the initiative for the establishment of the Global Soil Partnership.

3. The present Terms of Reference are based on the GSP Background paper prepared by a Technical Working Group composed of soil scientists established by FAO after the GSP meeting held from 7 to 9 September 2011. The Terms of Reference have been reviewed by an Open-Ended Working Group composed of Permanent Representatives which was set up upon COAG recommendation at its Twenty-third Session.

### **2. Nature**

4. The Global Soil Partnership (GSP) is a voluntary initiative and does not create any legally binding rights or obligations for its partners or for any other entity under domestic or international law.

5. The GSP recalls Principle 2 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development which provides that States have, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law, the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental and developmental policies, and the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environments of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction.

### **3. Mandate**

6. The mandate of the GSP is to improve governance of the limited soil resources of the planet in order to guarantee healthy and productive soils for a food secure world, as well as support other essential ecosystem services, in accordance with the sovereign right of each State over its natural resources. The GSP should become an interactive and responsive partnership.

7. The GSP will also develop awareness and contribute to the development of capacities, build on best available science, and facilitate/contribute to the exchange of knowledge and technologies among stakeholders for the sustainable management and use of soil resources.

### **4. Objectives**

8. Through enhanced and applied knowledge in soil resources, the GSP will:

- a) create and promote awareness among stakeholders on sustainable soil management as a precondition for human well being;
- b) address critical soil issues that are globally and regionally relevant for sustaining the provision of ecosystem services through soils, giving due consideration to links with water and other resources;

- c) support the acquisition of relevant soil knowledge and the implementation of targeted research in accordance with national conditions and needs to address applied challenges on the ground;
- d) promote links between existing multilateral initiatives and bodies to advance knowledge and scientific understanding of soil issues, capture synergies, while taking into account the existing and ongoing works and efforts that are being undertaken at the multilateral level, and without duplicating or prejudging the work under the competent fora.
- e) develop sustainable soil management guidelines for the different soils considering their potentials and limitations, while taking into account national specificities and partners' development objectives and decisions;
- f) promote access to soil information and advocate the need for new soil surveys and data collection;
- g) promote investment and technical cooperation (including technology transfer) in all related soil matters to address fundamental issues in different regions;
- h) promote institutional strengthening and capacity development of soil institutions at local, national, regional and interregional levels; and
- i) promote the necessary public and government awareness of soils through recognition of a World Soil Day and celebration of an International Year of Soils.

## 5. Composition and Governance

9. Governance of the Global Soil Partnership is proposed to be composed of the following elements:



### 5.1 Partners

10. The GSP is a voluntary partnership, open to governments, international and regional organizations, institutions, and other stakeholders.

### 5.2 Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS)

11. The Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS) shall provide scientific and technical advice on global soil issues to the GSP.

12. Members of the ITPS shall be experts appointed by the GSP Plenary Assembly for a term of 2 years, renewable for one additional term (with agreement of the GSP Plenary Assembly). The ITPS

experts should act in their personal capacity and provide the best possible scientific and technical knowledge available. Close links should be developed between the ITPS and existing technical panels as well as new initiatives.

13. The ITPS will be composed of twenty-seven recognized experts ensuring proper regional coverage, proper scientific expertise (covering the range of scientific and practical expertise encompassed by the GSP), and gender balance. The ITPS will have the following regional distribution of experts.

- five from Africa
- five from Asia
- five from Europe
- five from Latin America and the Caribbean
- three from Near East
- two from North America
- two from South West Pacific

### **5.3 GSP-Secretariat**

14. The GSP will be assisted by a Secretariat. Its task will be to coordinate and facilitate the implementation of GSP actions through the Regional Soil Partnerships and networks. The GSP Secretariat will be hosted by FAO in view of its global mandate.

### **5.4 Regional Soil Partnerships (RSPs)**

15. Regional Soil Partnerships (RSPs) will be established among interested and active stakeholders in the regions. These RSPs will work in close coordination with FAO Regional Offices and their activities will be supported by the GSP Secretariat. The RSPs will establish an interactive consultative process with national soil entities and relevant regional institutions.

### **5.5 Plenary Assembly**

16. The GSP Plenary Assembly will embrace all the GSP partners and the ITPS experts. The Plenary Assembly will meet once a year and be in charge of reviewing and prioritizing GSP actions. Decisions will be taken by consensus by GSP partners.

## **6. Pillars of Action**

17. The GSP will be organized around five main pillars of action:

- a) Promote sustainable management of soil resources.
- b) Encourage investment, technical cooperation, policy, education awareness and extension in soils.
- c) Promote targeted soil research and development focusing on identified gaps and priorities.
- d) Enhance the quantity and quality of soil data and information.
- e) Support harmonization of methods, measurements and indicators for sustainable soil management, with a national validation that takes into account the differences of production systems and ecosystems.

## **7. Links with the Rio Conventions**

18. The GSP's five pillars of action will contribute to the "strive to achieve a land degradation neutral world in the context of sustainable development" as agreed by the Rio+20 outcome document as well as the "zero hunger challenge" proposed by the United Nations. Sustainable management of soil resources contributes directly and indirectly to all three Rio Conventions (UNFCCC, CBD and UNCCD) in terms of sustainable soil management, soil fertility and productivity, soil carbon fluxes, and soil biodiversity. To achieve the above, active participation of other institutions organizations will be required.

**8. Financial Implications**

19. Financial implications of the GSP rely on the principle of “partnership”. Each GSP partner may contribute with different inputs to the successful implementation of the GSP.

20. FAO will lead the GSP implementation process and will provide funds from its Regular Programme, to support the Secretariat by providing a full-time Professional staff member and General Service support, subject to the approval by its Governing Bodies. Extra-budgetary funds will be mainstreamed to support implementation of GSP actions, including regional and national GSP activities.