

Terms of Reference of the European Soil Partnership (ESP)

1. **Background**

1. The GSP is a global action initiative launched in 2012 by FAO¹, its member countries (132 focal points in 2015) and other governmental and non-governmental partners (203 institutions by 2015) to promote sustainable soil management, to avoid fragmentation of efforts, and to halt the increasing rate of misuse, degradation and loss of soils. The GSP consists of a global network of contributors through 9 regional soil partnerships, focusing on 5 pillars for action. One of these regional soil partnerships is the European Soil Partnership (ESP).

1. For each of the five Pillars, the GSP Plenary Assembly has developed and endorsed Plans of Action (PoA). These plans are the framework for the implementation process. While global-level implementation plans provide the framework for global-level activities (e.g. for Pillar 4 and 5), all regional partnerships will develop and implement their own regional implementation plans, focusing on regional-level priorities and conditions.

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 3: Promote targeted soil research and development focusing on identified gaps and priorities and synergies with related productive, environmental and social development actions.

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

Pillar 5: Harmonize methods, measurements and indicators for the sustainable management and protection of soil resources.

2. In general, the factors steering soil management, its effects on the state of the resource soil, and the threats affecting soil today and in the future, are region-specific and cannot sufficiently be addressed with a single global initiative. In Europe, soil sealing and soil contamination are the most prominent soil threats, while soil erosion and nutrient losses dominate in other continents; many soil-related policies exist in Europe, which support the sustainable management of soils; at the same time, large data sets and many research incentives exist as well. The variability of the natural properties of soils and how it reacts to management and environmental changes (disasters, climate change) are extremely diverse between and within regions, are often cross-border, and can only be addressed with sufficient ground-truthing of the information collected nationally, harmonized and exchanged through a regional framework.

3. The core tasks of the regional partnerships are to enable cooperation and knowledge transfer within the region, while being able to match the regional knowledge about the state of soils, its proper management (good practice), and action for awareness raising and research. Therefore, action is very often region-specific, but exchange of similarly structured and harmonized soil information shall be enabled globally for some assessments and products (e.g. Status of the World Soil Resources, SGD targets).

4. The European Soil Partnership (ESP) plays a significant role globally. The ecological footprint of every European citizen exceeds by far the land available for food production. Incentives, policies and research enabled and conducted in Europe affects many other regions in the world. For monitoring and improving soil quality in Europe, many national actions are ongoing, and the sharing of experiences, and the improvement of European-level knowledge about soil condition, and management supports regions with less progress, but also helps to improve the future formulation of actions at European level in a cooperative design.

¹ 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.

2. History of the ESP foundation

5. The Terms of Reference of the European Soil Partnership (ESP) are based on the Terms of Reference of the GSP and its Guidelines for the establishment and consolidation of Regional Soil Partnerships (RSP)² (short “Guidelines”). In their turn the Terms of Reference of GSP were 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. The Guidelines were endorsed by the Second Plenary Assembly of the GSP 22-24 of July 2014.

6. The Guidelines list the following main general functions of the RSPs:

- to facilitate interactive consultative processes (within and across borders)
- to interact with regional soil science societies and other mechanisms (e.g. in support of UN conventions)
- to discuss and provide guidance on regional goals and priorities (e.g. with regard to implementing the GSP pillars for the region)
- to catalyse cooperation within the region

7. On 31 October 2013, the European Soil Partnership (ESP) was launched during the the second Global Soil Week. The Berlin communiqué was prepared by the participating GSP partners and agreed to establish the European Soil Partnership who’s Secretariat would be temporarily hosted by the European Commission (DG JRC) in Ispra, Italy. Also, the establishment of a Sub-regional Eurasian Soil Partnership within the European Soil Partnership who’s Secretariat would be based in Moscow, Russian Federation was endorsed. An ad-hoc steering committee was set up in order to support the different activities that will be implemented for its next meeting during the first semester of 2014. The first Plenary Meeting of the European Soil Partnership (ESP) was organized by the European Commission at its Joint Research Center in Ispra, Italy from 21-23 May 2014. The meeting allowed for a first overview of needs and ideas for the future implementation of the ESP. The second Plenary Meeting of the European Soil Partnership (ESP) was held from 17-18 March 2015 in FAO HQ, Rome, Italy. It allowed for an in-depth discussion of the views by the European GSP partners on how the ESP should be organized and its main priorities for action. A full and detailed report is available at <http://www.fao.org/3/a-az890e.pdf>

2. Nature

8. The European Soil Partnership (ESP) 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.

9. The ESP 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.

10. Up until now, in relation to the GSP Pillars, various networks exist in Europe, working on soil-related topics which might become involved in the development of the ESP (e.g. European Network on Soil Awareness (ENSA), European Geosciences Union (EGU) Division on Soil System Sciences (SSS); European Confederation of Soil Science Societies (ECSSS, with the EUROSIL International Congresses), other European research networks (e.g. FACCE JPI), national soil science societies, the EIONET National Reference Centres on Soils of the EEA, European Soil Data Centre (ESDAC) (operated by JRC), the European Soil Bureau Network (ESBN) etc..

² <http://www.fao.org/3/az926e>

3. Mandate

11. The mandate of the ESP is to improve governance of the limited soil resources of the region 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 ESP should become an interactive and responsive partnership.

12. Being a voluntary endeavor, the ESP should respect existing national or EU competences in particular concerning policy issues or soil-related legislations.

13. The ESP 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

14. Through enhanced and applied knowledge and information about the soil resources in Europe, the ESP will:

a) support the implementation of the 5 Pillars in Europe, in particular:

Pillar 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– 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;– 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
Pillar 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– create and promote awareness among stakeholders on sustainable soil management as a precondition for human wellbeing;
Pillar 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– 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– 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.– promote investment and technical cooperation (including technology transfer) in all related soil matters to address fundamental issues in different regions– promote the necessary public and government awareness of soils through recognition of a World Soil Day and other soil awareness communication activities
Pillar 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– promote access to soil information and advocate the need for new soil surveys and data collection– promote institutional strengthening and capacity development of soil institutions at local, national, regional and interregional levels
Pillar 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Support the standards-based provision of harmonized soil information, indicators and methodologies across Europe, in line with global level action

The priorities will be established taking fully account of and exploiting synergies with existing activities and initiatives at national, regional and sub-regional level.

b) support activities of the International Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS), as decided by the Plenary Assembly, for example:

- revised World Soil Charter 2015
- Status of the World Soil Resources, and future updates
- Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management

c) support activities of GSP secretariat through transparent communication, summary of outcomes, and reporting about ESP action to the GSP Plenary Assembly

5. Composition and Governance

15. Governance of the European Soil Partnership is composed of the following elements:

5.1 Partners and plenary meeting

16. The ESP will be coordinated and carried by the voluntary engagement of national GSP Focal Points from Europe and representatives of the other partners registered as GSP members. Any other interested party can join this partnership upon registration as GSP member.

17. In order to avoid bottlenecks for organising participation and engagement in the ESP, it is advisable to promote the registration of as many country-level institutions as possible. If necessary they may be coordinated nationally.

18. The meeting of the partners is the main forum for discussion, reporting of action, and decision where necessary.

19. The plenary meeting of the ESP partners will be held once per year. Urgent issues will be communicated via e-consultation.

20. Tasks

- Decision making of election processes
- Endorsement of ESP outcome (e.g. reports about implementation process)
- Decision making about activities, suggested by the Steering Committee and working groups, related to the implementation plans (updates, reports to stakeholders, etc.) and ad-hoc requests

5.2 Steering Committee

21. The Steering Committee consists of:

- chair (ESP)
- vice-chair (ESP)
- representative of the secretariat
- representative for each Pillar or above-mentioned network (if this leads/represents the implementation of a pillar and is elected so by the plenary)
- representative of the Eurasian Subregional Partnership (EASP)
- all 5 European ITPS members

22. The members of the Steering Committee shall be appointed by the ESP plenary meeting for a term of 2 years. It can be extended based on suggestions by Partners and decision by the plenary.

23. The meetings of the Steering Committee are organized annually or bi-annually depending on needs related to the implementation process. The Steering Committee is led by the Chair of the ESP assisted by the Vice-Chair and facilitated by the Secretariat of the ESP.

24. Tasks:

- supports the Chair to represent the ESP
- develops briefs for stakeholders
- facilitates the implementation process (main task): develop and implementation plan with input from all working groups (see below), and feedback from all partners. National frame conditions must be considered, and capacity limits be solved through involvement of stakeholders, close coordination with governments and national GSP focal points
- prepares and conducts Plenary meetings
- prepares and conducts consultations among the ESP partners when necessary
- liaises closely with the Eurasian Subregional Partnership (EASP)
- facilitates active participation through transparent communication
- develops concept for, and implements, an expert travel fund (to allow experts participating from countries in need)

5.3 Chair and Vice-Chair of ESP

25. The ESP is led by the Chair who is appointed by the partners for a term of two years with the possibility for extension according to partner's decision during the plenary. The Chair is assisted by Vice-Chair who is also appointed for a term of 2 years with possibility to extend as well.

26. Tasks

- chairs the Plenary
- chairs the sessions of the Steering Committee
- represents the ESP, for example at actions related to the celebration of the World Soil Day.
- interacts closely the secretariat, mainly the ESP secretariat, but also the GSP secretariat

5.4 Secretariat of ESP

27. The Secretariat of ESP is endorsed by the Plenary. It should be hosted by a national or international institution that is willing to provide in-kind support for the activities of the Secretariat.

28. Tasks

- distributes information material
- invites to, and facilitates, meetings: plenary, steering committee, working groups
- implements the written official communication within ESP and between ESP and stakeholders
- manages the ESP fund
- develops and maintains the ESP web site

5.5 Working groups

29. The task setting and implementation process of the ESP follows the GSP framework provided by the five pillars.

30. For each Pillar, a working group will be established consisting of voluntary commitments of experts. Members of working groups have particular experience and great interest in the respective tasks and objectives set for the respective pillar. Participation will build on implementation progress through own action. Participation will involve travel; it is thus advisable to coordinate this participation closely with the focal points of the partners.

31. Tasks

- provide input to the ESP implementation plan
- provide recommendations and support (capacity building) to national/institutional implementation actions
- liaise with institutions not involved with the working group, but who is involved with the implementation work within the respective pillar
- monitor implementation by pillar
- report to the Steering Committee about progress, limitations and needs

6. Financial Implications

32. Financial implications of the ESP rely on the principle of “partnership”. Each ESP partner may contribute with different inputs to the successful implementation of the ESP. For example, locations of meetings (Steering Committee, Working Groups, Plenary) will be selected based on offerings by partners.

33. The ESP governance consists of voluntary commitments by partners. This includes that travel of experts to meetings is enabled (e.g. working group meetings, steering committee members, participation at the plenary).

34. ESP Fund

Some countries will not have the financial resources to allow their experts to participate in this partnership. In that case it is proposed to establish a fund. The ToR for the fund will be elaborated separately.