

## **Towards a Eurasian Soil Partnership for food security and sustainable development**

### **1. What is Global Soil Partnership?**

Global Soil Partnership (GSP) is a recent long-awaited initiative of FAO aimed at consolidation of effort of all the people interested in the preservation of soil as a finite natural resource. The fact that the soil is everywhere does not allow us understand that on a human time-scale it is non-renewable. Despite the essential role that soil plays in the life of people, there is increasing degradation of soil resources due to inappropriate practices, burgeoning population pressures and inadequate governance over this essential resource. Soil degradation leads to food insecurity, especially in the regions where agriculture is the basis for the human well-being.

The renewed recognition of the central role of soil resources as a basis for food security and their provision of key ecosystem services, including climate change adaptation and mitigation, has triggered numerous regional and international projects, initiatives and actions. Despite these numerous emergent activities, soil resources are still seen as a second-tier priority and no international governance body exists that advocates for and coordinates initiatives to ensure that knowledge and recognition of soils are appropriately represented in global change dialogues and decision making processes. At the same time, there is need for coordination and partnership to create a unified and recognized voice for soils and to avoid fragmentation of efforts and wastage of resources.

On the basis of a recommendation by FAO's High-Level External Committee (HLEC) on the Millennium Development Goals to the Director-General (13-14 October 2009) and through discussions and conclusions from the 22<sup>nd</sup> Committee on Agriculture (COAG) (Rome, 16-19 June 2010), preparatory activities were initiated by FAO to explore the possibility of establishing a Global Soil Partnership according to the recommendations by COAG. The Program was launched in September 2011, and after a long discussion and approval process the First Plenary Assembly of the Program took place 11-12 of June this year, thus it has a status of an official intergovernmental program.

The vision of the Global Soil Partnership is to improve global 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 sustain other essential ecosystem services on which our livelihoods and societies depend including water regulation and supply of clean water, climate regulation, biodiversity conservation and cultural services.

The mission of the GSP is to develop capacities, build on best available science, and facilitate/contribute to the exchange of knowledge and technologies among stakeholders, existing multilateral environmental agreements, and technical and scientific bodies of a similar nature, for sustainable management of soil resources at all levels with a view to enhancing food security, protecting ecosystem services, and in this way contributing to poverty alleviation in an era of global demographic growth and unsustainable consumption patterns.

The Global Soil Partnership is a voluntary initiative and does not create any legally binding rights or obligations between or among its members or any other entities under domestic or international law.

The GSP reinforces 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 environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction according to the Principle 2 of Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.

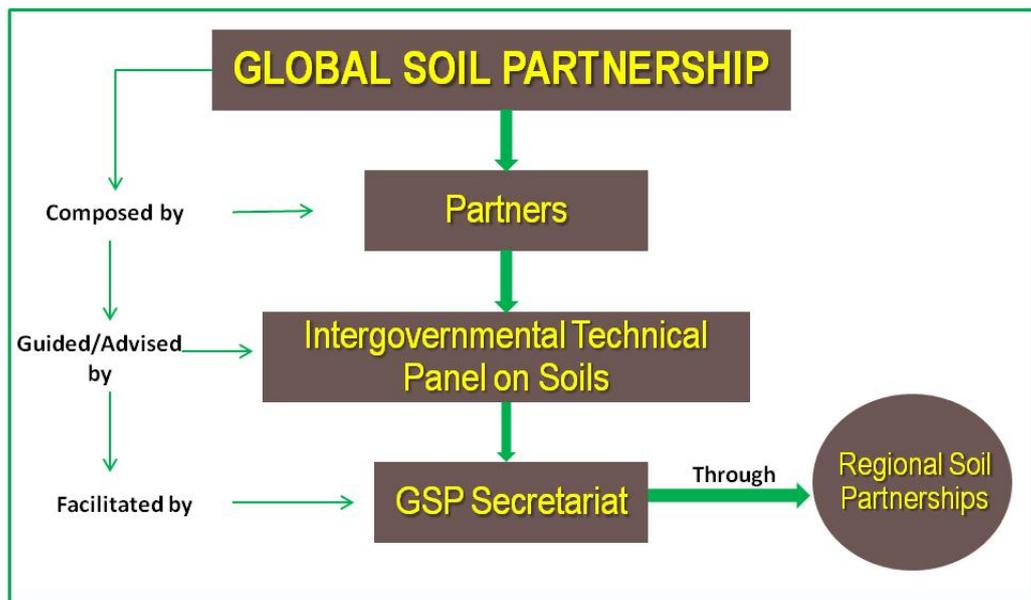
In particular, the GSP will support the process leading to the adoption of sustainable development goals for soils. The GSP will contribute to environmental wellbeing, through for example, preventing soil erosion and degradation, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, promoting carbon sequestration and promoting sustainable use of agricultural inputs for soil health and ecosystems management. It will equally contribute to human wellbeing and social equity through improved use and governance of soil resources, finding alternatives to soil degrading practices through participatory experiential processes, and being sensitive to issues of gender and rights of indigenous peoples. In order to achieve these objectives, it is proposed that the GSP should address five main pillars of action:

1. Promote sustainable management of soil resources for soil protection, conservation and sustainable productivity.
2. Encourage investment, technical cooperation, policy, education awareness and extension in soils.
3. Promote targeted soil research and development focusing on identified gaps and priorities and synergies with related productive, environmental and social development actions.
4. Enhance the quantity and quality of soil data and information: data collection (generation), analysis, validation, reporting, monitoring and integration with other disciplines;
5. Harmonization of methods, measurements and indicators for the sustainable management and protection of soil resources.

The implication of each of the pillars would depend on the regional needs and priorities.

## **2. What is the design and governance of Global Soil Partnership?**

The Global Soil Partnership is an interactive, responsive and voluntary partnership, open to governments, institutions and other stakeholders at various levels. These partners come from any kind of regional and national institutions/organizations working on soils, including governmental organizations, universities, civil institutions, research centers, soil science societies, UN agencies, NGOs, private companies, farmer associations, donors, etc. Partners by default to the GSP are the FAO member countries who determine FAOs priorities as laid out in the Strategic Framework and Program of Work and Budget of the Organization and according to the needs and priorities identified in their countries. The scheme of the structure of the GSP is presented below.



The Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS) was established at the First Plenary Assembly to provide scientific and technical advice on global soil issues. It is composed by twenty-seven recognized experts ensuring a proper regional cover, a proper scientific expertise and gender balance.

The GSP Secretariat, hosted by FAO in view of its global mandate, is the coordination and facilitation body in charge of facilitating the implementation of the GSP actions through its regional partnerships and networks. The GSP Executive Secretary coordinates the work of the Secretariat. Under the guidance of the GSP Plenary Assembly and seeking the technical and scientific advice of the ITPS, the GSP Executive Secretary is responsible for supporting implementation of GSP activities according to the pillars and strategic objectives.

The GSP Executive Secretariat will also work on governance, finance, communications, planning, and operational management of GSP programmes and administration, including communication with Regional Soil Partnerships (RSP).

Regional Soil Partnerships should be formed among interested and active stakeholders. It is expected that the RSPs will be established according to FAO classification: Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Near and Middle East, North America and Southwest Pacific. However, the establishment of Regional Soil Partnerships, although highly desirable, should be of a voluntary nature, depending on common interest to have them operate in each geographical area. Subregional Soil Partnerships may be established; any other forms of partnerships based on common language, physical location or culture of the interested countries are also allowed. These RSPs will work in close coordination with FAO Regional Offices and will establish an interactive consultative process with national soils entities (soil survey institutions, soil management institutions, scientific soil societies, etc), regional soil science societies and other relevant regional mechanisms under the various related conventions.

### 3. Why Eurasian Soil Partnership?

What we propose is a Eurasian Soil Partnership (EASP). The geographical frames of the EASP should be discussed, but it seems that a core area for this partnership should be Russia and Central Asian countries. This region has a relatively similar level of agricultural development, the same set of issues related to soil management and degradation, and also has cultural, historical and language ties. The possible issues to be promoted within the EASP can include both the strategic goals of the GSP and specific demands of the region, for example:

- Create and promote awareness among all type of stakeholders (scientists, decision/ policy makers, land managers, civil society, etc.) that healthy soils and sustainable soil management are the precondition for human well-being and economic welfare and therefore play the key role for sustainable development;
- Address critical soil issues that are regionally relevant for sustaining the provisioning services through soils, in particular towards increasing food security, enhancing climate change adaptation, preventing surface and groundwater salinization and pollution and through sustaining their regulating and supporting ecosystem services in a context of demographic growth;
- Guide soil knowledge and targeted research in accordance with national conditions and needs to address concrete challenges on the ground through a common communication platform to provide an authoritative voice on technical and scientific issues;
- Establish an active and effective network for addressing soil cross-cutting issues, including national and international soil health best practices, and ensuring synergies among relevant agricultural, forestry, environmental and human development processes;
- Develop sustainable management strategies for different soils considering their potentials and limitations for different types of uses and taking into account the wider socio-economic context as well as national needs and policies;
- Promote access to soil information and advocate the need for new soil surveys and data collection;
- Promote investment and technical cooperation in all related soil issues to address fundamental issues aimed at sustainable management of soil resources; and
- Promote institutional strengthening and capacity development of soil institutions at regional and interregional levels.

Some of the activities of the Eurasian SP could be inter alia: a) analysis of soil research and international soil-related cooperation in the region; b) compilation of existing, available data sets; c) associate experts from member countries / organizations of the regional network; d) participation and mediation for harmonization and data base building; e) organization of capacity building activities in the frame of international / technical cooperation programmes; f) advise on regional positions and prepare regional statement to the Eurasian SP (identification of issues and hot spots etc.); g) strategic networking and fund raising in the region.

Of crucial importance for the success of EASP is to what extent we shall be able to involucrate broad audience of policy-makers, managers, farmers and representatives of civil society into the discussion on the soils and their role in the human life and providing food security of the region.