Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations

Draft Speech by Mr José Graziano da Silva,
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Global Symposium on Soil Organic Carbon

Rome, Tuesday, 21st March 2017
Red Room, FAO HQ (10:00)

His Excellency Major General (Ret'd) Jioji Konousi Konrote, President of the Republic of Fiji.

Excellences,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to FAO and the Global Symposium on Soil Organic Carbon. I am impressed and encouraged by the number and diversity of participants I see before me. It confirms the relevance of this Symposium at a time when we are experiencing the impacts of a changing climate, and realize the urgency to jointly address soil organic carbon sequestration, and the associated benefits of this important task.

The carbon stored in soil organic matter is crucial to soil health, fertility and ecosystem services, including food production – making its conservation and restoration essential for sustainable agriculture development.

> We have learned that the first meter of soil across the globe holds an estimated 1,417 gigatonnes (Gt) of carbon – almost double the amount in our atmosphere and dozens of times the levels of man-made emissions each year. At greater depths, soil holds three times as much carbon as the atmosphere.

Soils with high organic carbon content are likely to be more productive, better able to purify water and provide plants with optimal moisture conditions. The water

stored in soil serves as the source for 90 per cent of the world's agricultural production and represents about 65 per cent of fresh water.

By 2050, the global population will grow to nine billion human beings, forcing farmers to produce up to 60 per cent more food under a climate which is increasingly changing, and more difficult to predict. Healthy soils can, more than ever, provide essential services for sustainable human development.

Unfortunately, the degradation of one third of the world's soils has already induced an enormous decrease in global soil organic carbon stocks and released up to 78 Gt of carbon into the atmosphere. Deforestation causes a further estimate 25 per cent of soil organic carbon loss.

Soil organic carbon is sensitive to how the soil is managed. Poor soil management practices cause soils to lose organic matter or carbon and release greenhouse gases.

For us to utilize the full potential of soils to preserve and increase their carbon stocks, we urgently need to implement sustainable soil management practices. The FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management, that have been approved by our Council last December, offer the framework for intensifying sustainable soil management in all countries.

This is especially important if we want to capitalize on the role of soil organic carbon in supporting food security, clean water supply, fostering biodiversity conservation, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing the resilience of livelihoods to the inherent risks of a changing climate.

Soil organic carbon plays a dual role in climate change, presenting both a threat and a solution. Poorly managed soils are a source of greenhouse gas emissions. Sustainably managed soils can significantly contribute to meeting the countries targets of the Paris Agreement related to agriculture and food security; and to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, especially the SDGs number 2, 6, 13 and 15.

The current political framework provide a solid basis for establishing *sustainable soil management* as the norm to protect soils and make them part of the solution to sequester more carbon.

Maintaining and increasing SOC stocks contributes to the achievement of FAO's strategic objectives, in particular, eradicating hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition; making agriculture and forestry more productive and sustainable; and building resilience to environmental threats.

FAO is committed to the cause of healthy soils for providing multiple ecosystem services for all. To this end, FAO members established the Global Soil Partnership as a mechanism to develop a strong interactive partnership and enhanced collaboration and synergy of efforts between all stakeholders, from land users through to policy makers, improving the governance and promoting sustainable management of soils.

Since its establishment in 2012, we are proud to see that GSP filled a gap by becoming the voice of a previously neglected resource. The establishment of the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils, the implementation of the International Year of Soils 2015 and UN World Soil Day on December 5th, the approval of the revised World Soil Charter and the recent Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management that I just mentioned, constitute solid contributions to foster the conservation of soil as a vital resource.

Further damage to soil carbon stocks through poor land management would hamper efforts to limit global temperature increases during this century and hinder the prevention of increased floods, droughts and other negative climate change impacts. This is especially true for SIDS countries, since they are the most vulnerable to climate change impacts. The presence of President Konrote in this event denotes this importance, and we gladly salute Fiji's leadership in this year's climate agenda.

Of particular concern are hotspots such as peatlands, black soils, permafrost and grasslands, which contain the highest amount of soil organic carbon. Because of this, we will be launching the International Network of Black Soils today to promote technical cooperation between countries that were gifted by nature with very rich organic carbons soils. This network will foster technical cooperation among them in order to promote the sustainable management of these soils.

This symposium brings together the science, policy and land-use community to build momentum for preserving soil organic carbon and restoring degraded soils. The event constitutes an impressive, tangible output of the collaboration between the GSP's Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Science Policy Interface of the UNCCD and the World Meteorological Organization. I salute this fruitful alliance and express our commitment to pursue further collaboration, as requested by our members.

I take this opportunity to thank the governments of Switzerland and Iceland, and the European Commission for providing financial support for the organization of this symposium. I trust there will be a "before" and an "after" with the outputs resulting from this milestone event.

I am sure the outputs of this symposium, particularly the Output document "Unlocking the potential of soil organic carbon", will provide us with the way forward for different stakeholders on what needs to be done to maintain current soil organic carbons tocks and, especially how to restore poor and degraded soils. On our journey towards COP23, we trust that the outcome of this Symposium will be a significant contribution to the deliberations and commitments of the parties, in order to see and use soils as a feasible vehicle to adapt to and mitigate climate change. This is also FAO's traditional contribution: Enhance the knowledge in agriculture for the whole world.

It is imperative that we further invest on sustainable soil management. We need to take into account that soil organic carbon sequestration is a slow and reversible process. In order for it to be successful, sustainable soil management practices need to be adopted over the long-term. So there is a need for a continuing commitment to support land users to implement these practices.

I invite all of us to join us in these efforts towards contributing with more healthy, carbon-rich soils to nourish this hungry and thirsty planet, and to help mitigate climate change.

I wish you a very productive symposium!