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Global Soil Partnership Plenary Assembly



Third session

Rome, 22-24 June 2015

Concept note on sustainable management of soil resources

Executive Summary

- At its 24th session (29 September-3 October 2014), the FAO Committee on Agriculture (COAG): “noted the proposal for developing a concept note on sustainable management of soil resources with support from the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils, for submission to the next GSP Plenary Assembly and the FAO Council.”
- Accordingly, a draft of this concept note was initially developed by the Secretariat and then considered by the third working session of the ITPS in April 2015. The Panel considered that the revised World Soil Charter (WSC) contains principles and guidelines for action that are quite broad and generic in nature. It was therefore, recognized that the WSC may be usefully complemented by the preparation of more detailed and technical guidelines for the sustainable management of soil resources, designed particularly for concrete application by a wide range of soil users in diverse development contexts.
- The Panel took note of the positive precedent of related “Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security” developed by FAO. In fact, the concept note outlined a process which would lead to a document entitled “Voluntary Guidelines for the Sustainable Management of Soil Resources”.
- The ITPS was strongly supportive of this initiative, observing that it would complement other key documents (e.g. World Soil Charter, Status of the World’s Soil Resources) and provide a natural framework for backing up the implementation of sustainable soil management at all levels, including implementation of GSP activities in the coming years. ITPS members reflected on a range of matters including the purpose of the voluntary guidelines, the extent of stakeholder engagement required during preparation, and the best process for developing the proposed guidelines.
- Revisions were made to the draft concept note and the resulting text is hereby submitted to the Plenary Assembly for endorsement. It will be subsequently submitted to the FAO Council in December 2015.
- Subject to the above endorsements, the ITPS would be tasked to produce the first draft of the Voluntary Guidelines in the early part of 2016, making use as required of working groups in order to ensure that the guidelines have a sound scientific basis. They would then be submitted for consideration of the GSP Plenary Assembly, COAG and ultimately the FAO

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| Council. |
| Suggested action by the GSP Plenary Assembly |
| ➤ The Plenary Assembly may wish to endorse the concept note and the process outlined therein. |

I. Background

1. At its 24th session of 29 September to 3 October 2014, the FAO Committee on Agriculture (COAG): “noted the proposal for developing a concept note on sustainable management of soil resources with support from the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils, for submission to the next GSP Plenary Assembly and the FAO Council.” The present concept note has been formulated in response to this expectation. This concept note presents a process that will lead to the development of a document entitled “Voluntary Guidelines for the Sustainable Management of Soil Resources (VGSMS)”.
2. It is pertinent to recall that the revised World Soil Charter (WSC) developed under the aegis of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP) and especially the ITPS – and which is being submitted to the June 2015 session of the FAO Conference for eventual final endorsement – already contains carefully drafted principles and guidelines for action by a broad range of stakeholders to implement sound and sustainable management of soil resources.
3. In the interest of brevity and ease of reference at policy level, the WSC principles are necessarily quite broad and generic in nature. It is, therefore, recognised that the WSC may be usefully complemented by the preparation of more detailed and technical guidelines for the sustainable management of soil resources, designed particularly for concrete application by a wide range of soil users in diverse development contexts.
4. Achieving sustainable management of soil resources will generate large benefits for all stakeholders and overall population. In some contexts, it will be a driver for economic prosperity and in others for assuring the provision of ecosystem services that enable life on earth. The achievement of sustainable development requires that sustainable soil management is a common practice at all levels. To this end, the availability of sound guidelines constitutes a very important step forward towards the widespread implementation of sustainable soil management.
5. Based on the successful precedent of the “Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security¹” developed under FAO auspices, the present concept note sets out a process for developing a similar document for sustainable soil management. While the final labelling will be up to the FAO Council to decide, they are consistently termed “voluntary guidelines” throughout this document.

II. Scope and intended use

6. The envisaged VGSMS should constitute an action-oriented framework that will guide and support sustainable soil management by all interested stakeholders, especially decision makers from national level to farmers themselves. The guidelines could be used for a variety of purposes, notably as a basis for:
 - the formulation and/or activation of adapted strategies, soil governance, laws and regulations, as well as priorities for action as related to soils and their application as an integral part of the natural resources and ecosystem management agenda;
 - the design and implementation of programmes and projects aimed at the management and conservation of soil resources, the rehabilitation/restoration of degraded soils as well as sustained ecosystem services provided by soils;
 - dialogue as appropriate for consistent and concerted actions by civil society and private sector partners including minimising negative impacts of interventions;

¹ See <http://www.fao.org/docrep/016/i2801e/i2801e.pdf>

- the awareness-building, advocacy and educational activities;
- the framing of investment decisions for the responsible use of soils, respecting government regulations on sustainable soil management so as to avoid negative effects on soil resources and sustain healthy soils and ecosystem services;
- the design of training programmes, targeted to the farming community and the range of actors engaged in agriculture, forestry and other land uses, and the development of educational curricula, from elementary schools to universities, to provide basic knowledge of the importance of soils and of sustainable soil management principles and practices for different soils and contexts;

the formulation of agreed indicators to monitor the status of soil resources and the impact of the implemented activities to guide the decision making process.

7. Among other key dimensions, the guidelines should address responsible management of soils, with respect to main uses: e.g. agriculture, including cropping, livestock management and pastoralism, forestry, mining, urban and peri-urban development, recreation and nature reserves. They should serve to maintain or enhance the many supporting, provisioning, regulating, and cultural services provided by soils. They should draw on knowledge and principles to be applied at local scales in the range of human-managed ecosystems, with diverse biophysical, socio-economic and institutional contexts. They should guide the integration and application of sustainable soil management principles and practices through existing development programmes and funding opportunities.

8. Thus, the guidelines should be as far as possible a comprehensive instrument, yet easy to access, understand and use at various levels and scales of intervention. The primary goal is to make these guidelines solidly based on internationally accepted management recommendations and fully reflective of best management practices and approaches (while also taking into account, as deemed necessary, case studies of “bad” practices).

III. Main sources of reference

9. It is clear that the guidelines should take account at least of the following important sources of reference:

- the updated World Soil Charter²,
- the agreed Plans of Action and their Implementation Plans for the five pillars³ of the GSP,
- the identified thrusts of the Healthy Soils Facility⁴,
- the Sustainable Development Goals, where specifically mentioning soils and land resources⁵,
- relevant key documents and technical publications from FAO and other agencies,
- well documented sound sustainable soil management and agro-ecological principles and practices⁶,

² http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/GSP/docs/plenary_assembly_II/WSC_EndorsedPA.pdf

³ 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 (generation), analysis, validation, reporting, monitoring and integration with other disciplines.

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

⁴ PGM/MUL/2014-2018-GSP

⁵ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/sustainabledevelopmentgoals>

⁶ International symposium on agro-ecology for food security and nutrition, Rome, 2014
<http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/afns/en/>

- Status of World's Soil Resources Report (once available).

10. As already mentioned above, they may draw upon, and complement the successful precedent of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security.

IV. Process and timelines

11. In order to ensure a broad-based consultative process, especially since the guidelines are expected to embody an inclusive framework for worldwide application (in various natural, rural and urban environments), a consultation process involving all stakeholders will be organized as the first stage of the process.

12. Considering its mandate and comparative advantages, it is proposed that the draft voluntary guidelines be developed by the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils. This drafting process will build upon the outcomes of the consultation process. This draft will be then submitted to the consideration of the GSP Plenary Assembly for its review and possible endorsement.

13. Progress is, however, dependent on the availability of additional resources.

14. Timelines:

- The draft concept note was initially drafted by the GSP Secretariat and was then submitted to the ITPS third working session for its review and endorsement.
- ITPS members reviewed the draft and after due modifications, it was finally endorsed.
- The concept note will be submitted to the third GSP Plenary Assembly (June 2015) for endorsement.
- Subject to approval by the GSP Plenary Assembly, the concept note will be submitted to the FAO Council (December 2015 session) for its consideration and endorsement.
- After endorsement by the FAO Council, the Secretariat will facilitate the process by organizing a consultation process involving all stakeholders, to be concluded by end February 2016.
- The drafting process for the Voluntary Guidelines by the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils will take place from March to end of April 2016. This first draft of the Voluntary Guidelines will then be shared with all GSP partners who will be asked to provide comments and advice during one month of active exchange (i.e, until the end of May 2016).
- A revised draft of the Voluntary Guidelines taking account of all received comments shall be prepared by the ITPS and a final draft will be submitted to the GSP Secretariat by mid-June 2016.
- Submission of the draft Voluntary Guidelines to the fourth session of the GSP Plenary Assembly (June 2016) and if endorsed, submission to the COAG and FAO Council sessions.

V. Possible draft structure

15. To be revised as needed:

- i. Preface
 - a. Justification, process, outcome, expected results.
- ii. Glossary
 - a. Key terms and concepts to be easily understood by all potential users.
- iii. Introduction

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- a. Rationale behind Sustainable Soil Management
 - b. Building a case, why voluntary guidelines for sustainable soil management?
 - c. Complementarities with the existing Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security
 - d. Objectives and scope of the guidelines in relation to wider natural resources and ecosystem management guidelines
- iv. Background on soils and land uses
 - a. Soil types and properties
 - b. Soil ecosystem functions and interrelations with the biosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere, geosphere (vegetation, water, climate, geology, etc)
 - c. Soil degradation types, processes and their drivers/causes and impacts
 - d. Soils in relation to the predominant land uses
 - v. Rights and responsibilities related to sustainable soil management
 - vi. Voluntary Guidelines
 - a. General Principles for soil conservation, the sustainable use and management of soils and the restoration/rehabilitation of degraded soils
 - b. Main practices per soil type and per land use system
 - c. Implementation (of principles and practices)
 - d. Policy, legal and organizational frameworks
 - vii. Implementation of the guidelines
 - a. Communication, outreach, advocacy, promotion, monitoring and evaluation