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Global Soil Partnership Plenary Assembly

Ninth session

Virtual, 08-10 September 2021

Status of Global Symposia: for information and decision (GSPPA: IX/2021/6)

Executive Summary

- Since 2017, the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS) has supported the organization of Global Symposia addressing the ten soil threats identified in the Status of the World Soils Resources report.
- The topics covered or planned so far are: Soil Organic Carbon (2017), Soil Pollution (2018), Soil Erosion (2019), Soil Biodiversity (2021), Soil Salinity (in October 2021) and Soils for Nutrition (2022). These symposia are successful in bringing together the science and policy dimensions under each theme, involving substantial numbers of participants who agree on and commit to an action-oriented outcome document.
- Each outcome document in effect sets out a comprehensive agenda for action addressing the pertinent theme. Under the lead of the ITPS, the GSP Secretariat facilitates the implementation process involving all co-organizers.
- To-date, all outcome documents have generated active implementation of recommended actions making use of available resources (financial and in-kind). Hence, the symposia have been able to catalyse action at national, regional and global levels, as appropriate.
- Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the Global Symposium on Soil Biodiversity was held successfully in a virtual format, with more than 5 000 participants from 160 countries. The outcome document entitled: “Keep soil alive, protect soil biodiversity” was produced.
- The Global Symposium on Salt-affected soils will also be held virtually on 20-22 October 2021.
- In 2022, the ITPS, the GSP Secretariat and interested partners will organize the Global Symposium on Soils for Nutrition.
- The ITPS proposes the following themes for the following two years’ symposia: Global Symposium on Soil and Water in 2023 and Global Symposium on Soil Sealing and urban soils in 2024.

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Suggested actions by the GSP Plenary Assembly

The Plenary Assembly may wish to:

- express appreciation for the efforts made in organizing global symposia so far and the active implementation of the related outcome documents;
- thank the resource partners who have financially supported the organization of these symposia, and encourage new resource partners to fund the upcoming ones;
- acknowledge the outstanding work done in organising the Global Symposium on Soil Biodiversity in a virtual format and encourage future symposia to be held in this format as well, thereby reaching a wider audience, saving considerable resources and reducing their ecological footprint;
- call for strong participation of interested parties to the Global Symposium on Salt-Affected Soils “*Halt soil salinity, boost soil productivity*” to be held on 20-22 October 2021 in a virtual format;
- call for strong participation to the Global Symposium on Soils for Nutrition to be held in April 2022;
- endorse the organization of two global symposia on Soil and Water in 2023 and on Soil Sealing and urban soils in 2024; and
- urge countries and other partners to join in the efforts of the ITPS, the Secretariat and co-organizers to implement the actions indicated in the outcome documents of all symposia.

6.1 Global Symposium on Soil Biodiversity

1. The Global Symposium on Soil Biodiversity was held virtually on the FAO “zoom” platform on 19-22 April 2021. Over 5 000 participants took part (49 percent women, 51 percent men) coming from more than 160 countries, including representatives of FAO Members, organizing institutions, the academia, farmers, the private sector and civil society, in particular scientists and land users working on soil biodiversity and related fields.
2. The overall aim was to gather updated scientific knowledge on soil biodiversity, review the role of soil biodiversity and ecosystem services in tackling environmental problems, and to drive actions towards the implementation of the World Soil Charter, along with the Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management and the Protocol for the Assessment of Sustainable Soil Management. Specifically, the symposium's agreed outcomes were geared to support actions to protect soil biodiversity and promote its sustainable use and management by addressing the underlying causes of soil biodiversity loss and enhancing implementation of sustainable practices.
3. The Symposium’s outcome document is entitled: ["Keep soil alive, protect soil biodiversity"](#) with the main objective to mainstreaming soil biodiversity through key recommendations.
4. In the implementation of the outcome document, the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS) and the Global Soil Partnership (GSP) Secretariat will seek to ensure due interaction with the Implementation Plan of the International Initiative for the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Soil Biodiversity as requested by the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

6.2 Global Symposium on Salt Affected Soils

5. The 7th Plenary Assembly (2019) endorsed the organization of the Global Symposium on Salt Affected Soils to be held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, as proposed by the Government of Uzbekistan. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Symposium was postponed and will be held virtually on 20-22 October 2021.
6. The Symposium will be co-organized by the Government of Uzbekistan, FAO, and ITPS, together with FAO's Global Framework on Water Scarcity in Agriculture (WASAG), FAO's International Network of Salt-Affected Soils (INSAS), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the International Union of Soil Sciences (IUSS) and the International Centre on Biosaline Agriculture (ICBA).
7. This Symposium represents a critical step toward implementing the Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management (VGSSM) and the upcoming Global Soil Salinity Map (GSSmap) in terms of minimizing the risks associated with salt-affected soils. It aims to address both science and policy aspects in reviewing the status and challenges associated with the management of salt-affected soils. In this regard, it will provide concrete examples of effective and reliable sustainable soil management (SSM) practices, techniques, instruments and mechanisms, which would ultimately expose scientific, technological and legislative gaps.
8. The Launch of the Global Soil Salinity Map that embodies the efforts of GSP partners from more than 90 countries will take place during this meeting.
9. To achieve the greatest participation of practitioners, in addition to the traditional call for Abstracts, the Symposium will invite presentations of Good Practices on sustainable management and rehabilitation of salt-affected soils.

6.3 Global Symposium on Soils for Nutrition

10. Considering the global challenges humanity faces today, including poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition, migration, environmental degradation and climate change, and the priorities regarding the One Health approach (human health, environmental health, animal health and soil health), the ITPS and the GSP Secretariat determined to name the envisaged Global Symposium on Soil Fertility, Soils for Nutrition. It aims to highlight the strong connection between food security, human nutrition and soil health. It is also intended to stress the fact that soil is where food begins, and as such is the origin of nutrients for human nutrition and health. Healthy soils (not only fertile) have a key role to play in combating malnutrition and food insecurity.
11. In response to these complex challenges, the ITPS and the GSP Secretariat, together with other partners will organize the Global Symposium on Soils for Nutrition (GSOIL4N) in April 2022. The main objective of the symposium is to fill some critical knowledge gaps and promote discussion among key stakeholders on solutions to enhance soil fertility and soil health so as to improve the quality of food without impacting negatively the environment and in reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. The symposium is a direct contribution to SDGs 2, 6, 14, 11, and 15.
12. The GSOIL4N is aligned with FAO's new strategic approach that supports the transformation of any agri-food systems to more efficient, inclusive and resilient, therefore sustainable agri-food systems encompassing *better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life*, leaving no one behind in the entire process.

6.4 Themes for future Symposia

13. As recalled above, the concept of Global Symposia has revolved around the ten major threats to soil health identified in the Status of the World's Soil Resources Report published by FAO and the ITPS in 2015.
14. However, the ITPS, at its 14th working session, sought to analyse the themes of the past and planned Global Symposia, their outreach and relevance in mobilizing the international community, as well as possible themes for future symposia.
15. Bearing in mind that: the world's food production is 95 percent dependent on soil; there is a global context of climate change in which extreme events tend to be exacerbated and become more frequent, including droughts and floods; soil is a major reservoir of water, and can provide water supply for crops during periods of water scarcity; the poor quality of water resources can lead to soil degradation and soil pollution, salinization and erosion can in turn endanger the quality of water resources; quality water and soil are essential for the maintenance of life and the preservation of biodiversity; and there is a close link between sustainable soil and water management. . The ITPS is proposing to this Plenary Assembly to endorse the convening of a Global Symposium on Soil and Water in 2023.
16. As regards the year 2024, other key background factors are that: the urban population has already exceeded the rural population and is on an upward trend: a larger urban population requires the expansion of cities and transport networks with the consequent sealing of soil and the conversion of peril-urban agricultural and forest land for construction; agriculture on urban land is gaining importance worldwide and while it may contribute significantly to food security, it can also pose health risks due to the unsafe status of food grown on contaminated urban soils; and urban soils are also a valuable resource of healthy green spaces that support the personal development and well-being of populations.
17. The ITPS would therefore like to propose to this Plenary Assembly the convening of a Global Symposium on Soil Sealing and urban soils in 2024. It should be clarified that soil sealing refers to the sealing of the surface by urbanization/infrastructure, but attention will also be paid to topsoil compaction.
18. Considering that the remaining soil threat in the list (acidification) is not widely present worldwide and that this could limit participation in future Symposia as well as in annual World Soil Day (WSD) celebrations (as the themes of WSD are generally related to those of previous Symposia), the ITPS recommends that themes of successive Global Symposia may not be strictly related to soil threats.