



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations



People & Soil- Global soil governance: Status and future perspectives

Online workshop report
25 August 2021



Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Rome, 2021

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People & Soil- Global soil governance: Status and future perspectives

Introduction

One of the core mandates of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is to improve soil governance at all levels, providing support for countries in strengthening normative and regulatory frameworks with an impact on soil management. As such, FAO's GSP organized the webinar "**Global soil governance: Status and future perspectives**" within the framework of the EUROSIL 2021 conference, which took place on 25th August 2021 in a virtual mode.

Soil governance involves policies, strategies, and the processes of decision-making by nation states and local governments on how the soil is utilized. Governing the soil requires international, national and local collaboration between governments, local authorities, industries and citizens. This is to ensure the implementation of coherent policies that encourage practices and methodologies that regulate the usage of the soil resource to avoid degradation and conflict between users.

The webinar had many eminent speakers with experience on soil governance at different levels. They addressed what was happening at the present time in terms of global and regional soil governance and proposed actions to ensure that sustainable soil management could be successfully promoted and adopted.

Opening remarks, Mr Lifeng Li, Director of the FAO's Land and Water Division

The webinar was opened by Mr Lifeng Li, Director of the FAO's Land and Water Division. Mr Li highlighted the essential role of soils for agriculture and the provision of ecosystem services. He also remarked that soil governance was often integrated into environmental and agricultural general policies and regulations without fully covering all aspects related to soil health and soil protection. Mr Li called on the audience to ensure that soil would be an integral component of future land management and governance and that soil health was considered through the lens of food and water provision, as well as through environmental and social economic sustainability access.

Mr Li recalled the original decision by FAO members to establish the GSP in order to fill the then-existing gap in soil governance and create a mechanism that would promote sustainable soil management as a soft binding instrument. Since the GSP began, the soil agenda had been elevated due to the commitment of members and partners. Soil health was now well positioned, particularly in the climate change, biodiversity and food security agendas, but Mr Li questioned whether such a voluntary mechanism would be enough and whether more could still be done to ensure adequate soil governance at national and global levels. With those questions in mind, he wished the participants a very fruitful workshop and asked for insights to advance the common goal: that of healthy soils for better production, better nutrition and better environment for a better life.

Soil governance: status and challenges, Ms Rosa Poch, Chair of the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils

Dr Rosa Poch, Chair of the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS), provided an overview on the status and challenges of soil governance. She defined soil governance as the rules, organizations and processes by which public and private actors articulated their interests, defined and prioritized those issues, and implemented monitoring systems. For soil related decisions, soil governance would consist of all the instruments, binding or non-binding, that dealt with soil management and soil threats in the world. Dr Poch highlighted the historical shift in the consideration of soils, from being seen simply as a food provider to that of being recognised as the provider of a wide range of key functions for human development and well-being. This however meant that soil users could have very different interests depending on the services they used, with some countries regulating some of those interests through laws. As a consequence, conflicts over competing interests could arise.

Furthermore, Dr Poch indicated that the main problem preventing good soil governance was the definition of soil itself. Although soil was the basis of the concept of land, many land regulations omitted this fact. That could present difficulties when making people aware of the importance of having soil as an object of management. Protecting the soil had different meanings depending on the user and the service needed. For example, should forest soils be protected to conserve biodiversity or have their use changed in order to produce food? In the case of biomass production, some conflicts could arise when applying the concept of soil protection for different stakeholders and different services.

The idea of soil governance had come about quite recently and had been led by different agencies and institutions over that time, with soil being increasingly recognised as needing to be included within policy decisions. The UN launched the Millennium Development Goals and the Global Soil Partnership in 2012, followed by the recognition of World Soil Day by the UN General Assembly a year later. This was a milestone in raising soil awareness worldwide. Then came the FAO World Soil Charter (FAO, 2015), together with the Rio declaration that included soil as a component of the environment needing protection.

More recently, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2021) were adopted, with almost all being linked in some way to soils. The most directly related goals were SDG 2 zero hunger, SDG 3 good health and well-being, SDG 13 climate action and SDG 15 life on land, through target 15.3. (SDG 15 does not specifically name soil, but it is currently the only global policy benchmark that focuses on soil). However, as the International Union of Soil Sciences (IUSS) pointed out, soil and physiogeographic variability must be considered as a local aspect to be taken into account for the sustainable realisation of these goals.

Several UN conventions and initiatives also addressed soil, either sectorally or as a component of the environment. Of particular note was the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) concept of land degradation neutrality (LDN). The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and its expert group on climate change, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), increasingly recognised soils as part of mitigation mechanisms due to the capacity of soils to sequester carbon, but also as part of adaptation mechanisms. For example, in the latest report published in August 2021, drought was defined by the change in soil moisture, ecological and agronomic growth. Such tools could be used for soil governance in the future to address challenges

occurring amongst the many conventions and agencies.

The GSP and its scientific advisory body, ITPS, were created in 2012 in response to the lack of a body dealing with soil governance as a whole. Since then, the GSP had been able to produce many important documents and maps, including the Status of the World's Soil Resources report (FAO and ITPS, 2015). Currently, the GSP was working with soils in many different areas, such as advocacy, awareness raising and also actions supported by ITPS advice.

One of the recent tools developed by the GSP was SoiLEX, a database created with inputs from FAOLEX and from national governments, bringing together all known legal tools dealing with any kind of soil protection or degradation. The database was accessible through keywords as well as geographic locations, and was now available free of charge on the FAO soil portal. The analysis of the data collected by the database showed that the regional distribution was not balanced, with documents related to soil pollution being the most frequent, followed by erosion and soil fertility. The sectoral aspects of these keywords showed that governments had already been issuing laws and regulations directly related to soil protection. However, the GSP had been instrumental in generating documents and mechanisms, awareness raising, training guidelines and reports that had been taken up by many countries as operational instruments.

Dr Poch remarked that while soil was on the international policy agenda, it had not been taken up in similar ways worldwide, or always in a holistic way. The GSP was already working as a global voice, but in many respects, as a partnership, it did not have the power to be a binding instrument. She also raised the question as to whether countries felt that global soil governance was necessary. In 2010, the EU rejected the need for a European Soil Directive. However, that need had re-emerged and in the first half of 2021 a resolution on soil protection was passed, calling for an updated soil strategy. This addressed the main threats to soil in all EU sectoral policies and specifically called for a soil convention within the UN.

In conclusion, Dr Poch spoke to the lack of general consensus that soil degradation was a problem that required international policy and governance efforts. The target on LDN in SDG 15.3 had established a global political starting point that should be supported, but it still lacked stricter definitions to implement as specific actions. The GSP could become the main UN body responsible for establishing the global soil protection policies needed to address upcoming challenges, such as mass migrations, or the consequences of climate change.

[Soil protection in the scope of the Alpine Convention, Mr Christian Steiner, Alpine Convention](#)

Mr Christian Steiner shared the work being done on soil protection in the scope of the Alpine Convention, a binding treaty signed by Austria, France, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Monaco and the European Union, which came into effect in 1995.

He explained that the Alpine Convention set out guiding principles towards a sustainable life in the Alps, and was the legal basis for safeguarding the sensitive Alpine ecosystems, the plurality of cultural identities, heritage and traditions in the region. The convention and the respective protocols had entered into force systematically, according to national ratifications.

Mr Steiner presented selected aspects of the [Soil Conservation Protocol](#). The whole protocol was

available in four alpine languages as well as English on the Alpine Convention's website. A soil protection working group was established in 2019, with the aim of working on soil data harmonisation, exchanging knowledge and experience with partners and networks, and raising awareness. The establishment of a Soil Partnership for the Alpine region was the result of this work. Mr Steiner also discussed the Youth Parliament of the Alpine Convention, and highlighted the cooperation done with other networks, including the dissemination of the FAO's Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management in the Alpine region.

In conclusion, Mr Steiner pointed out that legal frameworks, such as the one existing in the Alpine Convention, created a basic binding force, especially useful for countries where national legislation on soil protection was lacking. An international framework was therefore important. However, the importance of implementing all objectives still needed to be reiterated to the relevant actors as well as ensuring that they were fulfilling their obligations. He explained that transnational exchange allowed them to take a wider view and that national, regional and local implementation from neighbours could help inspire joint projects. Awareness was crucial, and knowledge was the prerequisite for concrete actions. All actors needed to become involved in the implementation of concrete measures to ensure a sustainable use of soils at the local level.

[Key highlights of the interactive panel discussion](#)

Mr Ronald Vargas then invited the panellists to offer any suggestions and improvements in the drive towards a global soil governance.

His Excellency Thanawat Tiensin, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Thailand to FAO and Chair of the Committee on World Food Security

"When we talk about soil, it is pretty much the same when we talk about the food system at the moment. We eat every day, we consume food every day, but people do not think about how we produce food, how we consume food, which has an impact on our planet, has an impact on climate change. We step on the ground every day. Farmers also use the soil to produce their agricultural products every day. But we forget how we can use our soil in a sustainable way."

With this powerful statement, Mr Thanawat Tiensin, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Thailand to FAO and Chair of the Committee on World Food Security started his intervention. He pointed out that many ministries of agriculture lacked a department of soil or a department of land development, whereas departments of agriculture, livestock or fisheries were usually present in the majority of countries. He highlighted the example of Thailand, where the land development department worked on soil-related issues, such as mapping and testing, to ensure that soil knowledge was passed on and services were provided to farmers. An example of Thailand's commitment to soil was the launch of their Soil Doctors Programme to ensure that farmers were trained how to use soil or how to maintain fertility.

Mr Tiensin, who was part of the GSP's founding committee ten years ago, mentioned that when it was created, most of the members had come from research institutions, giving scientific strength to the initial consolidation of the Partnership. However, more commitment was now needed from governments in order to support soil scientists in working at a country level, helping farmers and raising soil awareness. He reiterated that in the UN conventions, soils were very under-represented.

Thanks to the work of FAO's Land and Water Division, much progress had been made, but he called on more members to support the issue of soils and to help devise new ways to strengthen and expand the GSP.

Ms Carla Pascale, Ministry of Agriculture of Argentina

Ms Carla Pascale began by explaining the lack of representation both for the role of farmers and the role of the value chain in soil management decision making. She described the need for coherence and to unite with an overall vision, as well as working on the responsibilities of each of the actors involved in soil governance. This included the role of the state and its executive, parliamentary and judicial powers, as well as that of farmers, the market, the private sector and society as a whole. With such a strategic vision, it would be possible to make progress in soil governance.

Ms Pascale highlighted the role of the GSP as a natural forum for discussing these and other aspects of soil governance, as the GSP and FAO had long-term experience in this area. In order to make progress on an international soil convention, it would be necessary to maintain a coherent objective, without repeating what had gone before. This should be coupled with an awareness of the areas needing more work, with shared responsibilities among the different actors. The GSP, as a mechanism, was already working with countries and other stakeholders to promote sustainable soil management, and had made a lot of progress. This progress needed to be built upon. It had already been a long process to reach this point and no one could afford to take a step backwards in the conservation and protection of soils.

Mr Luca Montanarella, Joint Research Center, European Commission

Mr Luca Montanarella began by recognising the enormous progress that had been made in European as well as global soil awareness over the last few decades. However, there was no binding governance across the world. Members of FAO, who were, by default, also members of the GSP, and including the European Commission, could voluntarily commit themselves to soils at the global level, but this was not legally binding. The recent European Parliament resolution on soils showed that the support of European citizens for soil protection existed at the regional level, along with parliamentary concern about what was also needed at the global level.

He pointed out that if properly implemented, the conclusions of three Rio conventions: the Climate Change Convention (UNFCCC), the Biological Diversity Convention (UN-CBD) and the Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), would have added further weight behind better soil management practices worldwide. But unless there was full implementation and ratification by all members, this would not happen.

Mr Montanarella indicated that despite general optimism, previous difficulties in negotiating and implementing existing binding instruments had perhaps made it less likely that a new soil convention would be fully successful. However, he stressed the importance of not giving up, that the continuation of the debate could only help to keep the focus on soil awareness and, in the end, achieve a coalition of countries intent on pushing for better soil governance at the global level. In conclusion, Mr Montanarella stated that *"if we want to live on this planet for centuries to come, we must come to an agreement on how we want to share a limited and non-renewable resource in an equitable way"*.

Mr Alexander Mueller, ThinkTankforSustainability

Mr Mueller began by mentioning the many changes that had taken place in soil governance over the last fifteen years. However, he stressed that more still needed to be done. Mr Mueller explained that international soil governance was currently fragmented, being spread very thinly across the mandates of different organisations. As well as there being very few legally binding soil obligations globally, some organisations also lacked finances, while others were not sufficiently established. This underlined why the GSP remained so important. Eliciting technical advice from a community of people dedicated to advancing the understanding of soils and addressing critical issues was vitally important. Therefore, Mr Mueller cautioned against the strategy of turning the GSP into a convention as it would lose its role of multi stakeholder platform by becoming a governing body within the UN system.

Secondly, Mr Mueller pointed out that so far, international governance had been rather weak. He suggested that perhaps member countries had not considered the transboundary impact of land degradation to be as important as that of climate change. For many countries, land and soil were a matter of national sovereignty. Within the EU, the first soil legislation had been introduced in 2006 but was withdrawn after 8 years due to some countries not agreeing to bear the costs of degradation in other countries. Since soil governance in Europe was very often a political issue, the role of the GSP would be to generate a sufficient quantity of science-based results demonstrating the transboundary impacts of soil degradation, so that all countries would recognise the need for some kind of international agreement.

Mr Mueller pointed out that there were also new issues arising in relation to land and soil. For example, the political economics of land, with the price of land rising globally, due to speculation, together with new demands, such as the use of land for carbon offsetting. Mr Mueller spoke about the importance of countries understanding that the natural capital of soil was one of their greatest assets and that it was incumbent on them to preserve it. He suggested that a good way to convince countries to embark on stronger soil governance was to highlight the added value of better international collaboration and its benefit on natural capital.

Mr Mueller remarked that there was also a need to review national policies and further develop the means of implementation. He indicated that the international community would need to take a wider view and consider the extra demands that climate change would place on soils. It was important to build a momentum in which soils were seen as part of the solution and not just part of the problem. The GSP could play a key role, but great care had to be taken not to infringe on the mandate of other organisations.

In conclusion, Mr Mueller felt that while an International Soil Treaty might not be achievable in the short to medium term, it was possible in the long term with improved collaboration at the international level.

Ms Elena Havlicek, Federal Office for the Environment, Switzerland

On the possible establishment of a new soil convention, Ms Elena Havlicek first indicated that a solid legal framework was indeed necessary, but that it would be difficult to achieve in the near future, due to soil being a concrete resource. She pointed out that the Rio conventions on desertification, biodiversity and climate change had dealt with processes or abstract concepts but not with concrete resources. An eventual soil convention would instead be dealing with a tangible and marketable resource.

Ms Havlicek proposed to explore the possibility of establishing a soil protocol that would link to one or all three of the conventions. This effort, even if unsuccessful, would still be a step forward and a very powerful communication tool in establishing such a convention or protocol, and she offered her continued support to achieve this goal.

Ms Natalia Rodriguez, Global Soil Partnership, FAO

Ms Rodriguez began by acknowledging the efforts of all the individuals, partners and countries involved in the creation and consolidation of the GSP.

Ms Rodriguez then remarked that soil governance was not only about legal actions, but also involved the taking of action on the ground. All stakeholders needed to be involved in the decision-making process for any governance to be effective and implemented. Although the decision to create a soil convention or treaty was a decision to be made by the UN member countries, it was important to involve and listen to the needs and challenges of all actors and land users. It was also important to analyse whether any new actions would be feasible or even needed, as in some situations, simply raising awareness around soil and improving the capacity for informed decision making would be sufficient.

Ms Rodriguez highlighted the work that still needed to be done to improve legal frameworks in those countries where they were weakest and pointed to the need for more concrete actions to strengthen soil governance globally. She suggested that one way would be to set clear targets and actions that were measurable, in a similar way to the other three conventions, as well as provide clear indicators so that all countries were able to assess their progress.

Mr Ronald Vargas, Secretary of the Global Soil Partnership

Mr Vargas thanked all the speakers for their views. He noted that they all agreed on the need for more commitment and that it could take the form of a UN soil convention. Although this was very specific, it could be feasible, but it was up to all the member countries to decide what they wanted. It might be a medium to long term process, but the effort to move towards that ultimate goal would be beneficial as it would help raise awareness and commitment.

The GSP had achieved a lot, but more could be done, and be done better. Mr Vargas indicated that there was no urgent need to put a concrete label on their objective in terms of convention or treaty, for example, but that efforts should focus on creative solutions that brought all stakeholders together, being at the heart of the partnership.

Q&A session

To conclude the panel, Mr Vargas posed several final questions to the panellists from the audience.

1. Mr Montanarella, do you think there has been an imbalance between technical soil management and legal soil management? If so, how can we balance the tools?

Mr Montanarella pointed out that there was a gap between reality and the subjects discussed in the meetings. The preparatory documents for the upcoming UN Food System Summit had no references to soils. Everyone who worked in the field or who worked concretely in food production knew that soils were crucial. It was surprising that no coalition on soil had been proposed in the preparations. He suggested that perhaps, in order to fill the gap, there could be a better application of the tools already available.

2. Mr Thanawat Tiensen, how could governments be further engaged in soil governance? What steps should be made to increase soil awareness in younger generations?

Mr Tiensen stressed the importance of addressing soil protection at the global, national, and local levels, although he noted that this work was not always easy. One example was the lack of proposals considering soil at the UN Food System Summit. It depended on the commitment of member countries and all stakeholders to reach agreement on specific issues. Therefore, it was important that in terms of implementation, there was the strongest political commitment and support from governments. He reiterated that the proposal to transform the GSP to become a permanent body of FAO under Article 6 or Article 14 was another way to strengthen soil governance and further involve countries by making it a binding tool.

Mr Tiensen also pointed out that young people were the future and therefore they should be part of the process. If they were motivated to make small changes on sustainable soil management on their own land or farm, they would be the ones to bring about the necessary change. They could also influence soil governance and their voice would be heard more, not only on soil issues, but also on other issues like the food system.

3. Ms Poch and Mr Mueller, what are your views on the relationship to the value of nature in general, including protected area approaches and the social dimension of using science to address inequalities?

Ms Poch indicated that the economic value of soil was missing from technical and legal soil management. This included the factoring in of the cost of soil erosion, or the value of soil conservation, soil carbon or soil biodiversity. Once the economic value of soil was known, it could be included in the broad outlines of policy issues and shown to policymakers in a way they would be more familiar with. To achieve this goal, it was essential to foster better collaboration between policy makers, scientists and different stakeholders.

Ms Poch also wished to emphasize the last point of the previous question and acknowledged the efforts of soil scientists in recent times to address soil awareness. Soil was not present in school curricula, although necessary and therefore, all activities promoting soils were key to transmitting knowledge.

Mr Alexander Mueller pointed to the idea that natural capital was undervalued, and young people should be actively participating in decision making. He also insisted on the importance of involving soils in finding solutions to the great challenges, such as climate change.

Closing of the event

Mr Lifeng Li thanked the speakers and the audience for their support and commitment and for participating in such an interesting and lively discussion.

Key references

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