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GLOBAL SOIL PARTNERSHIP PLENARY ASSEMBLY

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Nomination of Focal Points for the GSP by FAO members

Executive Summary

- The Secretariat uses established channels of communication with FAO Members in order to transmit important GSP-related messages or information to Governmental partners, such as for instance the posting of notices and documentation for sessions of the Plenary Assembly on the Government Representatives' website.
- However, a priority need for a complementary process to enhance dissemination of information and technical exchanges at a more working level has been identified (as further described below) which could be addressed by FAO Members designating GSP focal points.
- This focal point arrangement is in no way intended to substitute for the established channels of communication with FAO Members, which will continue to be used, and would be consistent with the voluntary nature of the GSP.

Suggested action by the GSP Plenary Assembly

- The Plenary Assembly may wish to endorse the proposed procedure and invite all FAO Members to nominate such focal points in order to take full advantage of its expected benefits.

I. Background

1. As specified in section 5.1 of its Terms of Reference (ToR), the Global Soil Partnership (GSP) is: “a voluntary partnership, open to governments, international and regional organizations, institutions, and other stakeholders”. In effect, since the formal inception of the initiative in 2012, the Secretariat has been able to interact fruitfully with a broad range of constituents, either belonging to government circles or otherwise, in order to support the activities mandated by the Plenary Assembly (PA) and the work of the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS).
2. FAO Members are in essence de jure partners, while being free to decide to participate or not in the GSP work, including attendance at sessions of the Plenary Assembly (in this case having only to communicate in writing to the Secretariat the name of their representative (s) before the opening day, as stated in the GSP Rule of Procedure (RoP) III.4).
3. Other partners (non-governmental) are requested to submit an application form to be reviewed and approved by the Secretariat following FAO procedures (GSP RoP II.2), thereby formally expressing their desire to take part to the GSP and providing contact information for their designated focal point for cooperation with the GSP. The latter nomination greatly facilitates communication with these partners at all future stages.

II. Need for wider communication with FAO members

4. The Secretariat, adheres to established communication channels to transmit important GSP-related messages or information to FAO Members, such as the posting of notices and documentation for sessions of the PA on the Government Representatives’ website, the call for nominations of experts for membership to the ITPS, or other correspondence with clear policy overtones.
5. However, the experience acquired after more than a year of GSP operations indicates that there may be many other instances where it would be very useful for the Secretariat to be able to transmit information or materials (mostly of technical nature, or of more general nature but connected to soils) to the most concerned government authorities, thereby enhancing the latter’s involvement in the GSP activities. However, the Secretariat is concerned that the official communication channels should not be over-burdened for this purpose, especially when dealing with matters of no significant policy implications.
6. It may be recalled that the Secretariat posts a vast store of materials on the GSP section of the FAO’s website, in the expectation that it would be consulted by all those in government circles (as well as by the public at large) who could make profitable use of them, and in the most timely manner. However, the Secretariat has no way to know where, when and by whom information has been extracted and eventually effectively used or further disseminated at country level. In the same way, invitations to participate in some key activities (such as in working groups established for specific purposes) are posted on the website, but the responses are very much a result of chance factors or earlier knowledge of the GSP work in those who come across such notices.
7. The Secretariat also seeks every opportunity to broaden contacts with officials in governmental institutions with interest in soils, especially during meetings, including those organized by other Organizations. While this contributes to building a network of potentially keen supporters of the GSP work, it does not lead to more widespread awareness and involvement, especially in those countries which experience financial or other difficulties to take part to such meetings.
8. Hence, a more effective, wider communication and information dissemination process would be greatly facilitated if FAO Members could nominate a specific focal point (which could be the most pertinent national soil institution) to whom materials could be sent by the Secretariat, or notices about

their availability for consultation via websites or other means. In fact, the forthcoming active phase of implementation of the Plans of Action under the GSP Pillars should lead to a considerable increase of technical activities at all levels, hence requiring wide interest and involvement of governmental units and institutions dealing with soil issues and their solutions.

9. It is emphasized that this eventual focal point procedure is in no way intended to substitute for the established channels of communication with Governments, which will continue to be used, but is meant to be a complementary arrangement. It would also be consistent with the voluntary nature of the GSP, as the formula is certainly not intended to be of “compulsory” character and would not detract from the agreed principles, and spirit of the GSP ToR and RoP. However, to be truly effective, it is hoped that most, if not all FAO Members would be willing to designate such “technical” focal points.

III. Expected advantages

10. Besides serving the highly desirable objective of better sharing of information, the arrangement would clearly be beneficial to the national authorities themselves as it would obviate the risk of flooding the established channels of communication with FAO Members with non-essential messages and requests.

11. It is anticipated that the focal points would greatly assist in making the GSP work and on-going activities more widely known at country level and ensure more widespread awareness within and across various regions, of the opportunities offered by the GSP, hence enhancing national participation and inter-country exchanges which are among the main features of the initiative.

12. For the Secretariat, the system would clearly constitute an extremely valuable way to reach more effectively the national entities most concerned with soils, with the assurance that the information would be transmitted to all interested working level parties within governmental structures.

13. If the concept is agreeable to the PA, the Secretariat will transmit to all FAO Members an invitation to designate specific GSP focal points and communicate their contact information at the earliest opportunity.