Executive Summary

The Committee on Agriculture (COAG) is the parent body of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP). The main governing body of the GSP, the GSP Plenary Assembly (PA), reports to COAG. The GSP Plenary Assembly has met twice since the 27th Session of COAG (COAG 27), respectively on 8-10 September 2021 (9th Session of the GSP Plenary Assembly)\(^1\) and 23-25 May 2022 (10th Session of the GSP Plenary Assembly),\(^2\) both held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The main outcomes of the two above-mentioned meetings are set out in COAG document COAG/2022/3 Status of implementation of the recommendations of the 27th session of COAG. Several key GSP activities have been carried out by, or under the aegis of, its main technical advisory body – the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS).

During this two-year period, significant progress has been made in the publication of technical documents and reports, the launch and consolidation of the seven GSP international technical networks, the preparation of global data products following a country-driven approach, and the strengthening of national capacities on sustainable soil management and soil mapping and monitoring. Special efforts have focused on the implementation of GSP normative documents at different levels, including the Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management and the International Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Use and Management of Fertilizers. The GSP has also made progress in the execution of country projects to implement major initiatives and programmes, including the Global Soil Doctors Programme, the RECSOIL (recarbonization of global soils) initiative, and the soils for nutrition project. The regional soil partnerships have also strengthened their influence and activities in the countries of the different regions and have made progress in advocating sustainable soil management. During the 10th GSP Plenary Assembly, the Global Black Soil Distribution map was launched. Black soils constitute the most productive and fertile soils of the world and are called the food basket of the world. More details of the main outcomes of the GSP between 2020 and 2022 are included in their detailed reports.

Following the recommendations of the Global Soil Partnership: Accomplishments, Challenges and Way Forward. A stocktaking review conducted in 2020 in response to the PA request in 2019, a new GSP Action Framework 2022-2030 “Healthy soils for a healthy life and environment: from promotion to consolidation of Sustainable Soil Management” was developed by an Open-Ended Working Group. The GSP Action Framework 2022-2030\(^3\) was endorsed, with minor modifications, by the GSP Plenary Assembly at its 10th Session.\(^4\)

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In response to the COAG 27 request, reports on the legal\(^5\) and financial\(^6\) implications of a proposed institutionalization of the GSP were prepared. Five options were identified: (1) status quo (GSP remains as it is); (2) a commission or committee under Article VI of the Constitution (an Article VI Body); (3) a commission or committee under Article XIV of the Constitution (an Article XIV Body); (4) a subsidiary body of COAG (a COAG Sub-Committee) and; (5) a COAG Sub-Committee and maintaining the GSP. After considering the institutional and financial implications included in this analysis, the 10th GSP Plenary Assembly manifested its full support to maintain the GSP with all its components. In order to eventually consider option 5 (establishing a COAG Sub-Committee and maintaining the GSP), the Plenary Assembly requested further detailed information on its implications. The PA further recommended the organization of an Extraordinary Session of the GSP prior to the COAG 28 Session, to review the detailed implications of option 5 and provide a recommendation to be considered at the 28th Session of COAG.

**Suggested action by the Committee**

The Committee is invited to:

- *welcome* the reports of the 9th and 10th Sessions of the GSP Plenary Assembly, as well as all the progress made in combating soil degradation and promoting sustainable soil management at all levels;
- *support* the implementation of key normative tools and initiatives such as the *Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management*, the *International Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Use and Management of Fertilizers*, and the Protocol for the Assessment of Sustainable Soil Management, RECSOIL: recarbonization of global soils, the Global Soil Doctors Programme, among others;
- *welcome* the Global Black Soil Distribution Map and acknowledge the need for promoting the sustainable management and conservation of black soils, given their crucial importance for global food security and climate change mitigation and adaptation;
- *support* the new GSP Action Framework 2022-2030 “Healthy soils for a healthy life and environment: from promotion to consolidation of Sustainable Soil Management”, endorsed by the 10th GSP Plenary Assembly and presented in section II; and
- *consider* the recommendations of the 10th Session of the GSP Plenary Assembly, contained in this document, and of its Extraordinary Session contained in COAG/2022/23; and *provide guidance* on the five options for institutionalization, based on the analysis of legal and financial implications (as presented to the 10th GSP Plenary Assembly and to its Extraordinary Session, see footnotes 5 and 6) and summarized in section III.

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I. Update on the Global Soil Partnership (GSP)

1. Since its establishment in 2012, the GSP has made significant progress in promoting sustainable soil management and advocating the inclusion of soils in the global agenda, notably through the support of its Regional Soil Partnerships (RSPs) and the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS) that launched the ITPS Soil Letters as a mechanism to position itself on specific topics supported by the best available scientific evidence. In the period 2020-2022, the GSP continued its work focusing on the ten soil threats identified in the Status of the World’s Soil Resources report. The main actions were related to the organization of global symposia on soil biodiversity and salt-affected soils, the advancement in the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management through various actions varying from capacity development to field activities, and the implementation of the work plans of the eight GSP technical networks. The implementation of RECSOIL (recarbonization of global soils) and the Global Soil Doctors Programme in the field has started in eight countries, namely Bangladesh, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Costa Rica, the Gambia, Kazakhstan, Malawi and Mexico, with considerable expectations.

2. The implementation activities of the International Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Use and Management of Fertilizers continued during the period 2020-22, including with the preparation of a video in six languages for the dissemination of the Code and a survey on the Use and Management of Fertilizers with more than 150 participants from 60 countries. The Code was also implemented through the “Soils for Nutrition” project in three countries; the International Network on Fertilizer Analysis (INFA) was established to implement the Code in terms of fertilizers’ quality.

3. The main outputs during the reporting period 2020-2022 are:
   - observation of World Soil Day 2020 and World Soil Day 2021;
   - awarding of the Glinka World Soil Prize and World Soil Day Award;
   - establishment of the GLOSOLAN Initiative on Soil Spectroscopy (GLOSOLAN-Spec);
   - launch and implementation of the Global Soil Doctors Programme in 8 countries;
   - launch of the State of Knowledge on Soil Biodiversity report;
   - establishment of the International Network on Fertilizer Analysis (INFA);
   - launch of the SoilLEX platform;
   - launch of the Protocol for the assessment of Sustainable Soil Management;
   - organization of two global symposia on soil biodiversity and salt-affected soils;
   - establishment of national soil information systems;
   - implementation of the Soils4Nutrition project in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso and Malawi;
   - launch of the National Soil Laboratory Networks (NASOLANs) database;
   - consolidation of the International Network on Salt-affected Soils;
   - launch of the modernized Williams Soil-Agronomic Museum in Moscow;
   - launch of the Global assessment on soil pollution report;
   - launch of the Global Map of Salt-affected Soils;
   - launch of the Global Soil Organic Carbon Sequestration potential map;
   - launch of the Recarbonizing global soils: A technical manual of recommended management practices;
   - launch of the Global Soil Laboratory Assessment 2020. Laboratories capacities and needs;
   - launch of the Global Soil Spectroscopy Assessment. Spectral soil data; needs and capacities;
   - organization of a side event on salt-affected soils during the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26 of UNFCCC);
   - establishment of the International Network on Soil Biodiversity (NETSOB);
   - implementation of the International Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Use and Management of Fertilizers (Plan of Action to implement the International Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Use and Management of Fertilizers);

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8 www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mllrme8hYQQ
• launch of the Sustainable soil management in the Eurasian region report;
• implementation of RECSOIL: recarbonization of global soils in pilot sites in Costa Rica, Ecuador and Mexico;
• launch of the Global Black Soil Distribution Map;
• launch of the International Network on Soil Pollution (INSOP);
• organization of more than 100 thematic webinars bringing together a total of 40 000 participants; and
• participation in the development of the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA) Communiqué on “Sustainable land use: food security starts from the soil”.

4. Upcoming activities for the period 2022-2023 are:
• organization of the Global Symposium on Soils for Nutrition in July 2022;
• preparation of the Global Soil Nutrient Budget Map (GSNmap);
• preparation of the Global Soil Erosion Map (GSERmap);
• implementation of RECSOIL and Soil Doctors in at least 4 new countries;
• organization of the Global Symposium on Soil and water in 2023;
• roll-out of the EduSoils platform;
• development of national soil information systems;
• dissemination of the Fertilizer Code and training on sustainable fertilizer use according to the Plan of Action, including videos for the Edusoils platform (China’s South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund project), video interviews, Micronutrients Encyclopedia, and Nitrogen Webinars;
• implementation of the World Soil Day celebrations, Glinka World Soil Prize and World Soil Day Award;
• launch of the Global Assessment of Salt-affected Soils;
• implementation of the work plans of the eight International Technical Networks;
• launch of the Global Soil Biodiversity Observatory; and
• establishment of SoilSTAT and the mechanism for countries to report on key performance indicators and soil health index according to the new GSP Action Framework.

5. In view of the growing number of activities, the need to mobilize financial resources is evident, as the GSP relies on voluntary contributions. The 10th Plenary Assembly has therefore appealed to its members to increase their financial support to the GSP.

II. GSP Action Framework 2022-2030 “Healthy soils for a healthy life and environment: from promotion to consolidation of Sustainable Soil Management”

6. The 7th Session of the Plenary Assembly, held in June 2019, suggested that “after 7 years since its establishment it would be appropriate to conduct an evaluation of the GSP performance including the request of formalization of the GSP”.

7. One of the five recommendations of the stocktaking exercise stated “the Secretariat and ITPS should embark on the formulation of a revamped GSP Action Framework under the mantle: ‘Healthy Soils to meet the SDGs, Biodiversity and Climate Change Goals’, including the transformation of the current Pillars into Outcome Areas for Soil Health”.

8. The GSP Secretariat, together with the ITPS, prepared a draft GSP Action Framework 2022-2030 that was submitted to the 9th GSP Plenary Assembly. The Plenary welcomed the draft but considered that it required more inclusive work and recommended the establishment of an Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) to finalize this Action Framework and to submit it for consideration of the 10th GSP Plenary Assembly.

9. The GSP Secretariat launched a call for experts to join the OEWG on 14 December 2021. The OEWG was composed of 45 members representing FAO Members, academia, civil society, private sector, regional soil partnerships and technical networks. After two months of intensive work including different iterations in a virtual format, a final version of the GSP Action Framework was submitted to the 10th GSP Plenary Assembly. The Plenary took note of the new GSP Action Framework 2022-2030 “Healthy soils for a healthy life and environment: from promotion to consolidation of Sustainable Soil Management” (see footnote 3) and endorsed it with minor modifications, requesting the 28th Session of the COAG for its consideration and final endorsement.

10. This new Action Framework, that builds on the successful work performed by GSP members and partners in ten years, is constituted of clear actions and targets focused on addressing the different global challenges (food insecurity, climate change, pollution, land degradation, loss of biodiversity among others) through the improvement and enhancement of soil health. Robust indicators, to be developed and agreed with GSP members and partners, will allow monitoring the implementation of activities to achieve the objectives. FAO Members and partners will be supported to develop their capacity to report on progress against these indicators when needed.

11. The new vision of this Framework is “A world in which soils are healthy and resilient, ensuring the sustained provision of ecosystem functions and services for all, leaving no one behind. To this end, the GSP must work to improve and maintain the health of at least 50 percent of the world’s soils by 2030”.

The new GSP action areas, that substitute the pillars, are to:

- sustainably manage and restore soils for the provision of ecosystem services;
- strengthen soil governance;
- promote knowledge and literacy on soils;
- promote awareness raising and advocacy on soil health;
- assess, map, and monitor soil health in a harmonized way; and
- foster technical cooperation including among genders and youth.

12. The Framework includes a number of targets, while the indicators will be developed accordingly together with partners.

III. Institutionalization of the GSP as a FAO Statutory Body mechanism

13. The 7th GSP Plenary Assembly “welcomed the proposal of formalizing the Global Soil Partnership from a voluntary partnership into a formal body in the FAO’s structure. During the discussion, it was acknowledged that changing the status of the GSP to a formal body would guarantee more stability and continuity of the good progress” made so far. The stocktaking exercise recommended to “Undertake consultations with relevant departments, up to FAO senior management team, on the prospects for elevating the GSP to a more formal Statutory Body or subcommittee under the aegis of COAG, and submit the necessary background documents for consideration by COAG and other organs as appropriate”.

14. The 8th GSP Plenary Assembly supported the institutional repositioning of the GSP as an FAO Statutory Body. However, it requested the GSP Secretariat to perform a sound and detailed assessment of the legal and financial implications, including the impact on the participation on non-state stakeholders. This request was submitted to COAG 27 for consideration.

15. COAG 27 acknowledged the findings of the stocktaking exercise and requested the Secretariat to carry out a detailed analysis of the legal and financial implications of the proposed institutionalization, including on the involvement of non-state stakeholders, the decision-making process, the role of the Regional Soil Partnerships and focal points. The Committee requested the findings of the assessment be submitted to its 28th Session.

16. The Secretariat performed the requested analysis of the legal and financial implications of the institutionalization of the Partnership, and submitted these to the 10th GSP Plenary Assembly.

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17. A summary of the findings of this analysis is presented below:

- the analysis provided five different options with respect to the formalization of the GSP under the purview of a FAO Statutory Body: (1) status quo (GSP remains as it is); (2) a commission or committee under Article VI of the Constitution (an Article VI Body); (3) a commission or committee under Article XIV of the Constitution (an Article XIV Body); (4) a subsidiary body of COAG (a COAG Sub-Committee); and (5) a COAG Sub-Committee and maintaining the GSP. The key elements of the three options identified to formalize the activities of the GSP, represented by the above options 2 (Article VI Body); 3 (Article XIV Body); and 4 (COAG Sub-Committee) are provided in Annex 1;
- should FAO Members decide to transform the GSP into any of the options above, the GSP in its current structure and functioning would cease to exist. Under this scenario, it would be still possible and advisable to consider certain components of the current GSP (for instance the ITPS) to become formal subsidiary bodies of the newly-created Statutory Body;
- there is nothing that prevents the GSP from maintaining its current status as a voluntary multistakeholder platform and its structure alongside a newly-created Statutory Body. Thus, the option of keeping the current GSP while setting up a new Statutory Body is valid from a legal aspect;
- upon the formalization of the GSP as a FAO Statutory Body, non-state members of the current GSP might only participate in the meetings of the Statutory Body as observers if they meet established FAO requirements and if that option is considered during the establishment of the Body;
- in case FAO Members decide to create a new Statutory Body and maintain the status quo of the GSP as a voluntary multistakeholder platform, the GSP could provide technical input into the work of such new Statutory Body;
- the analysis of the financial implications against the Basic Texts of the Organization concludes that there are no financial implications to the Organization under any of the options. The organization would continue providing the same secretariat staff as currently done with the GSP Secretariat;
- the mobilization of extra-budgetary resources should continue to be a priority in any of the options, in particular related to securing resources to cover interpretation and translation of documents for the Plenary sessions (currently estimated at USD 100 000 per year), as well as to ensure higher participation from developing countries in technical discussions on soil. Any changes proposed to the funding foreseen to be provided by the Regular Programme for a new Statutory Body would have to be approved by the FAO Conference.

18. The 10th GSP Plenary Assembly discussed the five options, manifested its full support to maintain the GSP with all its components, and agreed not to consider options 2, 3 and 4. In order to eventually consider option 5 (establishing a COAG Sub-Committee and maintaining the GSP), the Plenary Assembly requested further detailed information on its implications. The GSP Plenary requested, in particular, further clarification on the potential overlap between the GSP and the eventual Sub-Committee in terms of financial resources, work plan, reporting lines, coordination, roles and responsibilities. The PA further recommended the organization of an Extraordinary Session of the GSP prior to the COAG session, to review the detailed implications of option 5 and provide a recommendation to be considered at the 28th Session of COAG.

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5. www.fao.org/3/nd413en/nd413en.pdf (COAG/2020/18, para 7.3.)
# Summary of options to formalize the Global Soil Partnership (GSP) under the purview of a FAO Statutory Body (Options 2, 3 and 4)

| Criteria                     | Option 2: Article VI Body                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Option 3: Article XIV Body                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Option 4: COAG Sub-Committee                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Participation of non-State actors | • Limited to observer status and technically only international NGOs are allowed to become observers but practice is more lax and allows other non-State actors as observers.                                                                                   | • Limited to observer status and technically only international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are allowed to become observers but practice is more lax and allows other non-State actors as observers.                                                                                     | • Limited to observer status and technically only international NGOs are allowed to become observers but practice is more lax and allows other non-State actors as observers.                                                                                     |
| Decision-making              | • Operations must follow FAO regulations, rules, policies and procedures.                                                                                                                                                       | • Has the most autonomy among all options (and more so, if it has a fully autonomous budget) – for instance, it may adopt regulatory measures directly binding upon its Members.                                                                 | • Activities are limited to the mandate of COAG.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                              | • Activities must be consistent with its mandate which, under the Constitution, is limited to (i) with respect to commissions, advising on the formulation and implementation of policy and coordinating the implementation of policy, and (ii) with respect to committees and working parties, studying and reporting on matters pertaining to the purpose of the Organization. | • But still under the framework of FAO and retain very close links with the Organization, even in situations where they enjoy considerable autonomy.                                                                                                                                  | • Operations must follow FAO regulations, rules, policies and procedures.                                                                                                                                                     |
|                              | • The constituent instrument of an Article VI Body with a global mandate may vest it with competence to adopt international or regional standards, guidelines and codes of practice within their areas of competence. These products are adopted by the Article VI Body as non-binding voluntary instruments, until adopted by national legislation. However, any recommendations made by the Article VI Body must nevertheless be referred to the Conference or Council, as appropriate, and their reports should be circulated to Members, through the Director-General. | • The frequency and duration of sessions would be restricted.                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | • Any recommendation adopted by COAG (and any of its sub-committees) affecting the programme or finances of the Organization or concerning legal or constitutional matters must be reported to the Council with the comments of the appropriate subsidiary committees of the Council. The reports of COAG must also be placed before the Conference. |
|                              | • The frequency and duration of sessions would be restricted. For example, CGRFA normally holds one regular session each biennium. In order to convene extraordinary sessions, approval from the Council is required.                                                                 | | • The frequency and duration of sessions would be restricted, to coincide with COAG (i.e. biennium).                                                                                                                                       |
| Regional soil partnerships    | • While there is no precedent, there seems to be no prohibition from establishing RSPs as formal subsidiary bodies of the Article VI Body, if administrative and financial implications found acceptable by the appropriate decision-making FAO Governing Body. | • While there is no precedent, there seems to be no prohibition from establishing RSPs as formal subsidiary bodies of the Article VI (XIV???) Body, if administrative and financial implications found acceptable by the appropriate decision-making FAO Governing Body. | • While there is no precedent, there seems to be no prohibition from establishing RSPs as formal subsidiary bodies of the Article VI Body, if administrative and financial implications found acceptable by the appropriate decision-making FAO Governing Body. (Is this relevant since this column is about a COAG Sub-Committee???) |
| National focal points        | • No prohibition to maintain (there are precedents) but funding for the mechanism will normally not come from the Organization.                                                                                                   | • No prohibition to maintain (there are precedents) but funding for the mechanism will normally not come from the Organization.                                                                                                   | • There are no precedents, but there is no prohibition to maintain – funding for the mechanism will normally not come from the Organization.                                                                                       |
| Others                       | • Easier to establish than an Article XIV Body but harder than a COAG Sub-committee, because of policy issues and the Governing Body with authority to establish.                                                                 | • Harder to establish than an Article VI Body or COAG Sub-committee as it requires an agreement or convention accepted by a minimum number of Member Nations before taking into effect                                                                 | • Easier to establish than an Article VI or Article XIV Body.                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                              | • GSP Plenary Assembly will cease to exist.                                                                                                                                                                                     | • GSP Plenary Assembly will cease to exist.                                                                                                                                                                                  | • ITPS cannot exist in its current form (experts acting in their personal capacity) if made a sub-body of the sub-committee.                                                                                                                                                        |

Source: Analysis of the legal and financial implications of a proposed institutionalization of the GSP (Formalization of the Global Soil Partnership into a statutory body of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations: An analysis of legal implications, Financial Implications of a potential institutionalization of the Global Soil Partnership ).