

Guidelines for the establishment and consolidation of Regional Soil Partnerships

Definition¹

Regional Soil Partnerships (RSPs) comprise interested and active stakeholders in various regions or sub-regions (specific geographical areas, if not coinciding with entire regions) willing to contribute to the GSP objectives (as stated in section 4 of the GSP Terms of Reference - ToRs).

¹ The present guidelines have been endorsed by the Plenary Assembly of the Global Soil Partnership at its 2nd session of 22-24 July 2014. They are to be applied flexibly, taking into account of locally specific circumstances.

1 Structural and governance arrangements

The RSPs may not necessarily mirror the more elaborate arrangements applying to the GSP as a whole.

In light of the experience accrued so far in several regions or sub-regions, a recommended approach – at least at the initial stages – could include the following elements:

- selection of a Secretariat of the RSP (governmental entity or institution – either national or international) to provide a modicum of secretariat support services; partners participating in the RSP may agree on an eventual rotation formula for such functions, with well-defined timeframes; the chosen partner would of course need to designate an official who could devote sufficient time to deal with RSP matters in coordination with the GSP Secretariat;
- appointment of a Steering Committee and a Chair. The Steering Committee could be envisaged to be the highest governance body, tasked to provide strategic direction to the RSP and advise the Chair in connection with decision-making on important operational steps (calls for meetings, e-mail consultations, formulation of cooperation agreements on specific tasks, finding sources of financing, etc). The Chair could belong to one of the most representative regional institutions with interest in soils in the same geographical area. Members of the Steering Committee should be GSP partners of the region and be selected through an open and transparent process, taking account of balanced representation of geographic areas (i.e. within the region), gender as well as stakeholder groups. The Chair should be ready to participate at sessions of the GSP Plenary Assembly to report on regional activities.
- Working groups related to the five GSP Pillars, may be set up to contribute to the intensive process of developing detailed implementation plans for the regions.

Should there be interest in having also a “Plenary” or general meeting embracing all partners at regional level, modalities for such an arrangement can be explored. It should be borne in mind that general meetings of such nature would not serve their purpose if they are not well attended (either because of the cost implications or excessive work pressures on potential participants). Possible venues for meetings and logistical requirements should also be taken into account.

It would be highly desirable that any annual (or any other frequency) meeting should focus on significant developments in relation to soils, and on reviewing progress on major RSP activities (cf. below section on resources). The opportunity of having “back-to-back” sessions with other important regional meetings directly or indirectly related to soils should be actively explored.

2 Main functions and operational tasks of the RSPs

The RSPs are expected to nurture interactive consultative processes involving national soil entities and relevant regional institutions. This should normally include the identification and discussion of regional priorities in terms of prevailing soil related problems and issues and possible solutions and mechanisms.

It may be borne in mind, however, that the GSP covers all dimensions of soils (information, awareness, policy, research, implementation of conservation measures, etc.). Some regional associations may be “mono-dimensional” (e.g. dealing only with soil information), but if selected as “anchors” of the RSPs, they should be prepared to deal with the whole range of GSP concerns.

Terms of Reference for a given RSP may be derived from the overall ToRs of the GSP, if there is a wish to define responsibilities and guide joint work under its aegis. These ToRs may also allude in general terms to agreed priorities specific to the region.

An implicit key feature of the GSP is to ensure *synergy*, i.e. to build on existing cooperation arrangements, and not detract from them. Hence, RSP should take account of existing regional networks or collaborative processes, and encourage them to join the initiative as active partners.

Indicative summary

The main functions expected of an RSP may be summarized, as follows:

- to facilitate interactive consultative processes (both within and across borders) involving a range of entities and stakeholders: e.g. national authorities and programmes in charge of soil management, soil survey institutions, scientific societies, and groups of soil scientists working on important issues related to e.g. food security, climate change and ecosystem services;
- to interact with regional soil science societies and other mechanisms established under various conventions;
- to discuss and provide guidance on regional goals and priorities as regards soils, and the required implementation mechanisms, including regular reviews of progress in reaching common objectives and targets;
- to catalyze cooperation within the region.

Examples of concrete areas of cooperation

Areas in which RSPs are particularly well placed to make substantial progress include:

- technology transfer, especially in terms of sharing information on successful sustainable soil management measures where countries face similar soil conditions and issues; and
- capacity building, including the identification of opportunities for “in-kind” contributions to the organization of training events (facilities, south-south exchanges of experts, etc).

In addition, the following concrete operational requirements are expected to be responded to by the RSPs:

- Development of regional implementation plans, expanding on the Plans of Action under the five Pillars of the GSP, and involving other regional partners and coordinators.
- Advocacy activities in line with the principles of the World Soil Charter.
- Mobilization of resources to support the implementation of regional implementation plans.
- Implementation of activities as set out in the regional implementation plans.
- Engagement with the ITPS on knowledge management, as appropriate.
- Provision of technical and financial support to the implementation of the activities at country level.
- Broadening participation of potential GSP Partners in the respective region.

In terms of monitoring and evaluation:

- Preparation of progress reports to the general organs of the GSP.
- Preparation of financial reports and annual work plans.
- Monitoring of outcomes and effectiveness of the activities in the implementation plans.

3 The importance of good communications

Good communications will be key to the effective operational life of the RSPs. While this is a well recognized requirement in present times, it also involves costs. The Chairs and the eventual Steering Committees may decide to use preferably e-mail based consultation methods, wherever possible, hence the need to keep regularly updated address lists. The importance of keeping historical records should not be overlooked.

It may be recalled that the RSPs are one of the main rubrics of the FAO website dedicated to the GSP. Hence, well known developments, activities or events in various regions should be posted there in order to share this information with wide audiences in each region. RSPs Partners are

invited to send materials to the Secretariat on a regular basis, so that the information on the work of the RSPs in the FAO website is as comprehensive and up-to-date as possible. RSPs are also invited to develop mirror websites in their respective regions, with considerably more information than at central level, provided that facilities are available. The GSP Secretariat may facilitate RSPs in the use of appropriate communication tools in this context.

4 Resources

The RSP may receive funds for implementation of activities within the region, e.g. through the GSP Secretariat directly or through a resource partner.

In addition, RSPs Partners and the eventual Steering Committees are encouraged to explore funding opportunities from local, national or international sources. Through in-kind contributions, the RSP should be able to support joint activities. These in-kind contributions are normally offered preferably for use within the region, but they could also be used for cross-regional purposes.

5 The difficulties of generating commitments

As desired by its founders, the GSP is of a “voluntary” nature. Therefore, actions depend on the support and resources by partners (including participation to meetings). There is, however, some risk of dwindling enthusiasm, especially if direct tangible benefits are not perceived to accrue from participation over the immediate to longer-term horizons (e.g. improved information, additional resources to address critical gaps in capacities, etc...). The eventual lead partners and steering committees should be attentive to such risks.

6 Interactions with FAO – role of the central GSP Secretariat

As stated in section 5.4 of the GSP Terms of Reference, RSPs are to work in close coordination with FAO Regional Offices, and their activities are to be supported by the GSP Secretariat. The latter Secretariat, hosted at FAO headquarters, will continue to facilitate, support and monitor closely developments in the various regions and provide assistance to RSPs, as required.