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Global Soil Partnership Plenary Assembly



Eighth session

Virtual, 03-05 June 2020

Global Soil Partnership: accomplishment, challenges and way forward. A Stocktaking review (GSPPA: VIII/2020/2)

Executive Summary

- 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. The GSP Secretariat pledged to perform such evaluation provided funds will be provided for such assessment”.
- This evaluation was expected to serve in the first instance as a guiding input regarding the future status of the Global Soil Partnership. Indeed, the 7th PA also “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 today. Furthermore, this will ease the administrative issues including the mobilization of financial resources and engagement of FAO regional, sub-regional and national offices. It was concluded that the proposal should be presented to the 27th Committee on Agriculture in 2020 (COAG 27) for its endorsement”.
- In response to the suggested actions from the Plenary Assembly, the Secretariat - given the limited financial resources available - has commissioned this stocktaking exercise (close to a fully-fledged evaluation) to two international consultants as recommended by the FAO’s office of Evaluation. A major aim was to assess progress against the key objectives of the partnership. The analysis in effect addressed in particular four specific areas: 1. GSP’s value addition and key achievements at the global, regional and national levels; 2. the efficacy of its structural arrangements and procedures; 3. success in the enhancement of partnerships and resource mobilization; and 4. Major challenges and constraints experienced in seeking to support key international development objectives of direct pertinence to soils, in particular those in “Agenda 2030”. The consultants sought to obtain views from stakeholders through surveys, despite the heavy constraints of the current international context.

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- Special attention was given to the challenges that the partnership is facing and how this could be overcome, particularly by addressing the pros and cons of an institutionalization process as requested by the plenary assembly.
- The evaluation report is available in [Annex 1](#).

Suggested action by the GSP Plenary Assembly

The Plenary Assembly may wish to:

- Express appreciation for the efforts made to perform this evaluation despite the limited financial resources and the severe constraints stemming from the COVID19 pandemic.
- Welcome the findings of this exercise and agree on the recommendations made.
- Endorse the recommended enhanced institutional recognition of the Global Soil Partnership as an FAO statutory body and request the Secretariat to forward it for consideration to the 27th session of the COAG.
- Invite the Secretariat, with inputs from the ITPS and RSPs, to prepare a plan to implement the main recommendations made by this evaluation. This would clearly need to take into account the outcomes of the COAG session regarding the institutionalization of the GSP.
- Invite the Secretariat to further analyse and facilitate the implementation of those considerations in the report of the consultants that are of a more straightforward nature, in order to enhance the performance of the partnership.
- Invite partners, the national focal points, and all working group members involved in GSP activities to take note of the comments and recommendations made regarding their roles in the GSP structure.

Main findings and recommendations

1. Since its coming into operation in late 2012, it appears clearly that the GSP has established itself as a major platform where global soil issues and solutions are concretely addressed by multiple stakeholders. There was strong agreement that the Global Soil Partnership was instrumental in bringing soils back into the international development agenda.
2. The GSP's knowledge products and advocacy briefs are deemed to have consistently emphasized the economic, social and environmental consequences and costs of neglecting soils management and the need for policy actions at national and international level.
3. The 27-member ITPS was confirmed as the main foundation of GSP's technical standing, while being at the core of numerous global knowledge products and guidance materials developed under the GSP auspices. The expertise and neutrality vested in the ITPS, via its widely representative selection process and its independence (members serving on a three-year term with pro bono engagement) bring due credibility to the GSP initiatives and outputs.
4. Besides providing the necessary scientific and technical underpinnings to the GSP work, the ITPS also serves as a bridge with other relevant mechanisms of direct relevance to soils, especially the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD) and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).
5. However, although due efforts have been made to engage with other key actors with interest in soils, it has not always been easy for the GSP and the ITPS to maximize synergies. There are,

at times, challenges in finding a common ground or in agreeing on mutually supporting approaches.

6. Beyond the ITPS itself, it must also be stressed that for virtually any dimension of the GSP work, the ‘voluntary’ feature of the Partnership does put limits to the extent of engagement and accountability for participants, and this needs to be addressed through appropriate changes, including possible consideration of an enhanced statutory recognition of the GSP.
7. As regards the Secretariat, the present review has ascertained that stakeholders were unanimous in their high appreciation for its effectiveness, to the extent that the Secretariat is often being perceived as the prime driver of the Partnership.
8. Although the GSP embodies a potentially large partnership, the task of resource mobilization has primarily rested so far with the Secretariat. FAO’s Technical Cooperation Projects (TCPs) and some donor-supported initiatives have provided so far the financial resources to support the GSP, besides in-kind contributions from partners and countries.
9. Although the basic documents which led to GSP establishment duly stress that each partner should contribute with different inputs to the successful implementation of activities, there is insufficient clarification on resource mobilization responsibilities of partners, especially modalities of ensuring due accountability and utilization of resources raised from various channels, as the GSP is not a legal contracting entity.
10. In considering the GSP-induced work at regional and national levels, there is widespread agreement that the good results at the global level (for instance in developing knowledge products, standards and guidance for sustainable soil management) have not yet been translated into sufficient action at those levels.
11. The footprint of the RSPs through concrete activities and projects in respective geographical areas is very heterogeneous, as some RSPs are more active than others. This is undoubtedly related to the availability of some financial support and in no small measure to the proactive roles of the Chairperson and the regional Secretariats, which is a situation regrettably not prevailing in other RSPs.
12. In effect, a major design weakness of the RSPs was probably the expectation of substantial pro bono engagement. However, the RSP structures need to have firm resources and budgets at their disposal to implement agreed work programmes, and activities specified in these programmes cannot be expected to be carried out solely on a voluntary basis.
13. The evaluation stressed in a nutshell that the GSP has come a long distance since its formal establishment by the FAO Council at the end of 2012, while reaching a juncture where it needs to recalibrate its strategy moving from what could be called a global positioning phase highly justified thus far, to full priority to concrete actions (including use of tools developed in this early phase) on the ground to assist countries in reaping full benefits from sustainable soil management practices.
14. Recommendation 1: The Secretariat and ITPS should embark on the formulation of a revamped GSP Action Framework under the mantle: ‘Healthy Soils to meet SDGs, Biodiversity and Climate Change Goals’, including transforming the current Pillars into Outcome Areas for Soil Health.
15. Recommendation 2: Recognize two distinct functions within the Secretariat: a Programme unit and a Resource Mobilization unit in order to formulate and support implementation of a portfolio of cogent projects and interact with resource providers more systematically.
16. Recommendation 3: Undertake consultations involving the relevant departments up to the senior leadership of FAO, 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 further organs as appropriate.

17. Recommendation 4: Revamp the present regional and national structural arrangements, building closer links to FAO's own decentralized structures, and establish Centres of Excellence.
18. Recommendation 5. The GSP should also prepare firmer Partnership Framework Agreements with key international conventions and organizations, especially UNCCD, UNEP, UNCBD and UNFCCC.