

European Commission on Agriculture (ECA)

36/2 Meeting of the Executive Committee 15 June 2016

Agenda item 4 – Background note Eurasian Soil Commission

Background

The extent and intensity of soil degradation in Europe and Central Asia is high, with soils being over-exploited, degraded and irreversibly lost. As such, soil degradation is a growing threat to food security and ecosystem services in the region. The Status of the World's Soil Resources Report established that 33 percent of global soils are degraded. In the framework of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP), an action-oriented initiative was established under the auspices of the FAO Committee on Agriculture (COAG). This was formally launched at the end of 2012. Since approval of its Terms of Reference by the FAO Council, members of the whole European region and of the Eurasian sub-region have been actively promoting sustainable soil management at national level, as well as inter-country cooperation on this crucial issue through the establishment of the European (ESP) and Eurasian Soil Partnerships (EaSP). Regional or sub-regional Soil Partnerships have (RSPs) also been established in other geographical areas (e.g. Africa, Near East and North Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean) constituting an effective and coherent overall network to serve the objectives of the GSP.

Progress in the Eurasian sub-region

The EaSP in particular has made a lot of concrete progress since its inception, amongst other things by putting in place firm structural arrangements and by developing and adopting a five-year Implementation Plan. This Plan is currently under effective execution, with a number of ongoing or planned activities. Due to the voluntary and non-binding nature of the GSP, there has been some thinking about how to strengthen this positive cooperation and adopt more formal arrangements. In light of this, during the second Plenary Meeting of the EaSP (16-18 June 2015), the possible establishment of a Eurasian Soil Commission, as a regional statutory body under the umbrella of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) was mentioned.

The European Commission on Agriculture (ECA), during its 39th Session in Hungary (22-23 September 2015), strongly agreed with the need to halt and reverse soil/land degradation. Noting the progress made under the EaSP, including the development of the EaSP Implementation Plan, it also requested that the implications of establishing a Eurasian Soil Commission (ESC) under the appropriate articles of FAO Constitution be explored.

More recent feedback from EaSP partners

The GSP Secretariat raised the issue of the possible establishment of a Eurasian Soil Commission during the International Forum on Eurasian Food Security and Nutrition held under the auspices of the Eurasian Soil Partnership (29 February to 2 March 2016 in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic). Following careful consideration, EaSP partners concluded that the establishment of an ESC would be premature and involve implications, which decision makers in the sub-region were not yet prepared to address and rule upon.

Instead, the Bishkek Communiqué (<http://www.fao.org/3/a-bl211e.pdf>) was issued at the conclusion of this important meeting. This stated that the existing EaSP should be strengthened and urged decision makers and other international organizations and resource partners to support the full implementation of already agreed activities under existing arrangements. In addition, the 30th ERC 2016 in Antalya, Turkey confirmed that no further efforts in forming a Eurasian Soil Commission should be undertaken.

Challenges

After the International Year of Soils, the main challenge consists in maintaining the soil momentum in the development agenda. The Global Soil Partnership and its Regional Soil Partnerships are currently using the IYS legacy in order to transform it into catalytic actions to promote sustainable soil management at all levels.

However, past trends demonstrate that soil science is a resource that fluctuates greatly in the policy-action arena; sometimes it is high on the agenda but many times it is completely overlooked. The voluntary nature of the GSP, as stressed in its Terms of Reference, may be considered to reduce the responsibility and accountability of partners in contributing to joint activities. Indeed, this was the major driver for suggesting an alternative approach to formalizing the current voluntary setting of the Global Soil Partnership, especially the Eurasian Soil Partnership.

In fact, it is up to members of the GSP to consider when they deem changes appropriate to move towards more binding arrangements that could institutionalize the IYS legacy and the GSP momentum.

Strengthening the Eurasian Soil Partnership

Based on the recommendations of the Bishkek Communiqué, the Eurasian Soil Partnership will be strengthened and consolidated. In light of this, further suggestions for strengthening it are listed below:

- While still “young” as an institution, it has already held two Plenary Meetings, while an EaSP Implementation Plan has been finalized without major difficulties and is already under execution. So the flexible philosophy inherent in the GSP initiative has so far not proven to be an obstacle to the willingness to act and cooperate within the sub-region in addressing the major issues of soil degradation and loss.
- Nevertheless, members should pursue greater awareness among decision makers in and outside the sub-region about the current achievements and ongoing challenges of the EaSP. The World Soil Day (5 December) could be an important platform for such an objective.

- The EaSP is currently facing a consolidation problem. There is a need to foster active participation by all members from the sub-region. In some cases, there is still a need to nominate focal points from some countries, while in others, nominated focal points need to play a more active and effective role.
- The execution of the EaSP Implementation Plan relies on voluntary contributions from resource partners. The availability of resources is crucial for fully achieving the priorities identified by all focal points from the region. Currently, this is one of the most advanced Regional Soil Partnerships from the GSP network thanks to the availability of some resources that triggered regional actions, engaging multiple stakeholders that see this as a very innovative venue for soils.
- Although of voluntary nature, it is important that the EaSP – along with soils in general – are mainstreamed in the various policies and regional initiatives related to food security, climate change and sustainable development. This will guarantee that the current soil momentum is maintained over time, as soil is keys for providing multiple benefits for all.