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PARTNERSHIP

Global Soil Partnership Plenary Assembly

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Information note on the background and process for the establishment of a United Nations Decade on Soil Health (GSPPA: XII/2024/11)

Executive summary

- Building on the successful achievements of the International Year of Soils (2015) and the outstanding achievements over the past 11 years by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)'s Global Soil Partnership (GSP), at the 11th Plenary Assembly of the GSP, the Government of Thailand proposed to work towards a proposal for a United Nations (UN) Decade on Soil Health. This would be with the intent of continuing to raise awareness on the importance of sustainable soil management as the basis for food security, farmers' livelihoods, essential ecosystem services, and better adaptation and resilience to climate change.
- In response to the 11th GSP Plenary Assembly request, the Secretariat prepared this document to present the background, regulations governing the proclamation of UN decades and the process for an eventual proposal of a UN Decade on Soil Health with FAO's support, for consideration by the 12th Plenary Assembly.
- Should the Plenary Assembly agree with pursuing the proposal for the establishment of a UN Decade on Soil Health, a comprehensive document including a detailed action plan, operational requirements, and financial implications would be prepared and submitted for consideration by the Committee on Agriculture (COAG) at its 30th Session.

Suggested actions by the GSP Plenary Assembly

The Plenary Assembly may wish to:

- review and comment, as appropriate, on the background information set out herein for establishing a UN Decade on Soil Health; and
- consider the information provided in this document and propose next steps as appropriate for consideration by the COAG at its next sessions.

Background

1. Soil health and sustainable soil management have gained increased global attention over the past decade. On one hand, there has been a growing amount of scientific research highlighting the importance of soil health for sustainable agriculture, food security, climate change mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and One Health. The findings of such research have contributed to raising awareness among policymakers, agricultural practitioners, and the general public about the critical role of soils in supporting life on Earth.
2. On the other hand, soils have been gaining attention in the international and national policy fora. In 2013, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) declared 2015 as the International Year of Soils (IYS) and designated 5 December as World Soil Day (WSD). FAO, within the framework of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP), was invited by the UNGA to facilitate the implementation of both WSD and the IYS in collaboration with governments and relevant partners. The IYS was officially launched on 5 December 2014 at the United Nations (UN) headquarters in New York.
3. The main objective of the IYS was to raise awareness of the importance of sustainable soil management as the basis for food systems, fuel and fibre production, essential ecosystem services and better adaptation to climate change for present and future generations. Throughout the year, UN agencies, governments, civil society, the private sector, academia and soil science societies, research institutions, and other actors joined efforts to raise awareness on the many contributions of healthy soils at all levels, from global to local, through more than 900 events hosted in over 90 countries. The IYS was concluded with a closing event, hosted by FAO in Rome on the occasion of WSD on 5 December 2015.
4. The IYS undoubtedly marked a tipping point in terms of global awareness of the role of soils for food security, human and environmental health, and sustainable development. Soils gained visibility and were well reflected in the approved Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda. Four out of the 17 SDGs endorsed by the international community directly address soils and their role in enabling life on Earth and ensuring human well-being. These are SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing), SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 15 (life on land).
5. Soils are also being included progressively in the three Rio Conventions on climate change, biological diversity and combating desertification. For example: the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) addresses soil degradation, including erosion, salinisation and loss of fertility, and considers soil organic carbon as a proxy for estimating the percentage of degraded land; the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) adopted the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework in 2022, which includes soil biodiversity; and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) recognises the important role of soil in the global carbon cycle (acting as a source or sink of greenhouse gases depending on its health status) and indicates that sustainable soil management is one of the most cost-effective solutions to mitigate climate change and increase ecosystem resilience.
6. It is worth mentioning the final Communiqué 2022, *Sustainable Land Use: Food Security Starts with the Soil*, adopted by 68 nations at the fourteenth Berlin Agriculture Ministers' Conference on the occasion of the 2022 Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA), which sets ambitious goals and targets to enhance soil health and halt soil degradation in all its forms.

7. The International Union of Soil Sciences (IUSS), key partner of the GSP and supporter of the IYS, called on all its members to continue the activities initiated during the IYS to increase the momentum and scope of contributions of the role of soil in addressing the major environmental, health and social challenges facing humanity and to showcase these achievements during the centennial of the formation of the IUSS in 2024. During the conference *Celebrating the International Year of Soils 2015 - Achievements and Challenges Ahead*, Rainer Horn, IUSS President, proclaimed the International Decade of Soils 2015-2024. Detailed information on the activities led and conducted by soil scientists all over the world can be found on the [dedicated website](#).
8. In addition, several international initiatives and campaigns have focused on soil health and conservation promoted by governments, academic institutions, and civil organizations as a way to promote sustainable soil management and raise awareness of the importance of soils for food security and ecosystem services. One notable initiative is the “4 per 1 000” Initiative, launched by the Government of France in 2015 to support the Paris Agreement, with a vision of healthy, carbon-rich soils worldwide to combat climate change and end hunger by 2050. Another significant effort is the *Coalition of Action for Soil Health (CA4SH)*, launched in 2021 as part of the UN Food Systems Summit, which advocates addressing critical implementation, monitoring, policy and investment barriers that prevent farmers from adopting and scaling up healthy soil practices, among others.
9. Seven years after the establishment of the GSP, an evaluation of its performance and impact was carried out and, as a result of the evaluation recommendations, the tenth Plenary Assembly adopted the new GSP Action Framework 2022-2030 – *Healthy soils for a healthy life: from promotion to consolidation of sustainable soil management*. A key area of work of the GSP within the Action Framework is advocacy and awareness raising on soil health and sustainable soil management. These efforts have helped mobilize public support and encourage action at the local, national, and international levels. World Soil Day remains the best platform to engage people of all ages and backgrounds in these awareness campaigns. Over the years, WSD has experienced a growing success, with increasing engagement from various stakeholders. Initially marked by just over 50 events in 2014, the latest WSD celebration held in 2023 under the theme *Soil and water: a source of life*, witnessed great participation, with over 10 000 events organized across more than 180 countries. Media coverage extended to over 1 billion individuals, including the publication of 600 online articles in the press. The success of WSD underscores its capacity to mobilize support and inspire action across various sectors, from government bodies and businesses to non-governmental organizations and youth groups.
10. In recent years, there has also been growing recognition within the private sector of the importance of soil health for sustainable supply chains, corporate social responsibility, and risk management. Many companies are implementing soil conservation measures and investing in sustainable agricultural practices to enhance soil health and resilience. It is worth mentioning the consideration given to soils at the World Economic Forum held in Davos in January 2024 and many other private sector-driven initiatives that are emerging around the world.
11. The awareness-raising efforts conducted since 2015 have successfully reached a wide range of stakeholders. Several GSP Members and partners have recognised the important role of the IYS and the actions promoted by the International Decade of Soils 2015-2024 proclaimed by the IUSS, and consider that formalizing this decade as part of the UN actions could ensure the full involvement of Members and the upscaling of actions beyond the awareness raising and outreach carried out by academia.

12. Building on this successful engagement, the IYS, and the extensive work done over the past 11 years by the GSP, the Government of Thailand, at the 11th Plenary Assembly of the GSP, proposed the adoption of a UN Decade on Soil Health. This proposal was intended to further enhance awareness of the importance of sustainable soil management as the foundation of food systems, farmers' livelihoods, essential ecosystem functions and better adaptation to climate change. Moreover, it sought to use it as a mechanism for the continued support and engagement of Members and partners beyond the GSP Action Framework 2022-2030.
13. Representatives from Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Kenya, Mexico, Palestine, the Philippines, and Zambia supported Thailand's proposal and seconded the recommendation to move towards a declaration of UN Decade on Soil Health. The Plenary Assembly welcomed this proposal and requested the Secretariat to prepare a document for consideration by the 12th Plenary Assembly and further submission to the Committee on Agriculture (COAG) (see [report](#)).

Policies governing United Nations decades

14. The UN designates specific days, weeks, years, and decades as occasions to mark particular events or topics in order to raise awareness and promote actions. At the UN level, international decades are assessed according to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Resolution 1989/84, with similar criteria being used for international years (according to ECOSOC Resolution 1980/67).
15. Within FAO, there is no defined policy for proposing decades in the Organization, although the procedure would reflect the *FAO Policy on Proclamation and Implementation of International Years* (the "Policy") adopted by the FAO Council at its 144th Session.¹ While the Policy is limited to International Years, some of the criteria set out in the Policy apply by analogy to other international observances related to FAO's mandate.
16. According to the Policy, "adequate time should be allowed for full consultations, including the fact that a final decision on a proposal is taken by the United Nations General Assembly [...] to allow a thorough assessment of the proposal by the competent organs. In general, there should be a period of two years between the proclamation and the beginning of an International Year."
17. It is also important to note that as per the Policy, an international year (and by analogy, a UN Decade) "will not be proclaimed unless full financing (which in principle should be based on voluntary contributions) and all organizational arrangements are confirmed." Therefore, enough funding from extra-budgetary contributions must be secured by Members and partners before submitting the full proposal for consideration.
18. In recent years, the number of proposals for international observances has increased. Since 1995, a total of 38 international days, years or decades have been held or are being proposed with FAO as the leading organization. This should be an aspect to be considered by the Plenary Assembly when considering this proposal.

¹ CL 144/13. FAO Policy on Proclamation and Implementation of International Years (Appendix D). **FAO**. 2012. *Report of the Council of FAO, 2012. Hundred and Forty-fourth Session, Rome, 11-15 June 2012*. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/4/me323e/me323e.pdf>

Process to be followed and other considerations

19. On the assumption that the Plenary Assembly considers that a UN Decade on Soil Health is consistent with the purposes and principles enumerated in the main constitutional instruments of the relevant entities of the UN system (i.e. the UN Charter and the FAO Constitution) and wishes to encourage its Members to promote the proclamation of a UN Decade on Soil Health, there are a number of considerations that Members should take into account, as follows:
 - a. Considering the time needed to prepare a sound proposal, including operational modalities and financial implications, and reflecting the views of Members, as well as submitting it for consideration by the GSP Plenary Assembly, COAG, FAO Council and FAO Conference, it is suggested that the UN Decade on Soil Health be proposed for the period 2031–2040. This would allow for sufficient preparatory, consultative, and advocacy steps to be taken and could serve as a continuation of the momentum generated by the GSP since its inception and, in particular, could constitute the follow-up to the GSP Action Framework 2022-2030.
 - b. It is necessary to have the support of a champion country or countries advocating for the promulgation of the Decade in FAO technical committees (COAG, in this case) and by the FAO Council and Conference, as well as in the UN General Assembly. To this end, the champion country or countries should express their formal interest to the FAO Director-General and request its inclusion for consideration in the agendas of the various governing bodies (COAG, Council, and Conference).
 - c. In this respect, a group of “Friends of Soils” countries could be established to advocate for soils in the various regional and international fora to gain widespread support and mobilize resources prior to the formalization of the proposal.
 - d. The UN Decade on Soil Health, if endorsed, should involve concrete action at the international and national levels and should be expected to generate significant follow-up at both levels in the form of new activities or the strengthening of existing ones.
 - e. Full financing must be ensured for the entire implementation period of the Decade, which in principle should be based on voluntary contributions (extra-budgetary funds).
20. Partnerships will be key for implementing the UN Decade on Soil Health as the range of relevant stakeholders is broad, and each could contribute within their available means towards successful outcomes. The GSP Members and partners could play a pivotal role in the facilitation and implementation of the UN Decade on Soil Health, given that it could be used as a mechanism to implement and upscale the activities of the GSP.
21. Moreover, there should be effective coordination of the activities with other UN organizations and bodies concerned so as to build on inherent synergies and avoid duplication. Fostering partnerships and collaboration with other international initiatives, farmer organizations, and private sector entities would enhance resource mobilization and facilitate knowledge exchange and capacity-building efforts. This collaborative approach would enable the sharing and scaling up the adoption of best practices, technologies, and innovations in sustainable soil management.
22. In the case of the UN Decade on Soil Health being established, endorsed by the UN General Assembly and its implementation entrusted to FAO, Members could use the already well-established capacity in the GSP Secretariat to coordinate the implementation of the Decade, including functions of secretariat, communication, and fundraising, among others.

23. A dedicated advisory committee comprising representatives from FAO Members, international organizations, farmer organizations, academia, civil society, members of the GSP technical networks and private sector stakeholders could be established to provide strategic advice throughout the Decade. The advisory committee role could be covered by the GSP Plenary Assembly to avoid an additional layer of implementation and reporting.
24. Existing platforms such as the WSD, the Glinka World Soil Prize, and the King Bhumibol World Soil Day Award can be leveraged as effective mechanisms for raising awareness and mobilizing support for soil health initiatives.