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Implications of the establishment of a Sub-Committee on Soils under FAO's Committee on Agriculture (COAG) and maintaining the GSP in its current structure (GSPPA: XI/2023/3)

Executive summary

- The Committee on Agriculture (COAG) at its 27th session, requested the Secretariat to carry out a detailed analysis of the legal and financial implications of a proposed institutionalization of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP). This analysis resulted in the identification of five options that were further discussed at the 10th GSP Plenary Assembly : 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 on soils); and 5) a COAG sub-committee on soils and maintaining the GSP with all its components. The 10th GSP Plenary Assembly manifested its full support to maintain the GSP with all its components, and requested further detailed information on the fifth option (establishing a COAG Sub-Committee on Soils and maintaining the GSP with all its components) and its implications. Following the recommendation of the 10th Plenary Assembly, an additional assessment was discussed during the GSP extraordinary session.
- COAG, at its 28th Session, taking into account the recommendations made by the 10th GSP Plenary Assembly and its Extraordinary Session regarding the institutionalization of the GSP, recommended FAO prepare an in-depth analysis of option 5 (establishing a Sub-Committee on Soils and maintaining the GSP in its current structure), working transparently and collaboratively, with the analysis to be submitted to the 11th GSP Plenary Assembly for discussion, and with its recommendations to be provided to the 29th Session of COAG.
- This document presents a detailed analysis of implications of an eventual establishment of the Sub-Committee on Soils while maintaining the GSP in its current structure. The main implications are:
 - Institutional: the GSP will focus on the technical matters involving non-state stakeholders, while a COAG Sub-Committee on Soils will focus on the institutional and policy aspects around sustainable soil management. With soils being addressed in the Organization by a

governing body in addition to the voluntary technical partnership – GSP, this will help increase the visibility of soils on related policy agendas and mobilize political leadership towards sustainable soil management in the future.

- Financial: in case both GSP and Sub-Committee on Soils exist, extra-budgetary resources should be mobilized to support the work of the GSP and the organization of a biannual session of the Sub-Committee on Soils.
- Governance and decision making: a common Secretariat will serve both the GSP and the Sub-Committee on Soils. The GSP will keep its independence but shall report to the Sub-Committee on Soils, who will report to COAG.
- Focal points, non-state stakeholders and regional soil partnerships: the focal points will continue to play their role in the GSP. Current non-state GSP partners will continue to be partners of the GSP, but they cannot be members of the Sub-Committee on Soils. The Regional Soil Partnerships will continue to operate under the new GSP Action framework.

Suggested actions by the GSP Plenary Assembly

The Plenary Assembly may wish to:

- make a recommendation to the 29th session of COAG whether to support or not the establishment of a Sub-Committee on Soils while maintaining the Global Soil Partnership in its current status.

2.1 Implications of the establishment of a Sub-Committee on Soils and maintaining the GSP in its current structure

Background

After ten years since the establishment of the Global Soil Partnership, its partners (both FAO Members and non-state partners) agreed on the success of the partnership in bringing soil health into the global agenda ([Global Soil Partnership: Accomplishments, Challenges and Way Forward: A Stocktaking review](#)).

While considering efforts made by all partners of the GSP, including significant investment at the national level in adopting sustainable soil management and halting soil degradation, the 8th GSP Plenary Assembly¹ recognized that changing the status of the GSP into an FAO statutory body would facilitate the engagement of governments and support the implementation of soil protection in developing countries where soil is currently not a priority. The Assembly therefore supported the institutional repositioning of the Global Soil Partnership as an FAO statutory body, and requested the Secretariat to perform a sound assessment of the legal, and financial implications of such institutionalization including the impact on the participation of non-state actors.

The Secretariat presented the requested [assessment of implications](#) to the [10th GSP Plenary Assembly](#). The assembly welcomed the assessment and, considered that more information was required, and recommended the organization of an extraordinary session of the 10th GSP Plenary Assembly.

The GSP Plenary Assembly, at this extraordinary session, confirmed the need to maintain the GSP with all its components to consolidate the adoption of sustainable soil management at all levels. The GSP Plenary Assembly recommended the 28th Session of COAG² to request the Secretariat, to prepare an in-depth analysis of the potential benefits or shortcomings and practical implications of option 5 (establishing a Sub-Committee on Soils and maintaining the GSP in its current structure), working transparently and collaboratively, and submit it to the 11th GSP Plenary Assembly to discuss it and provide a recommendation to the 29th Session of COAG.

The detailed analysis should include the following issues:

- Financial implications of maintaining the GSP and creating the Sub-Committee on Soils to avoid competition for resources between the GSP and the Sub-committee;
- Composition and process of nomination of members of the Sub-Committee on Soils;
- Description of roles and work plans of the GSP and the Sub-Committee on Soils to avoid overlap and duplication;
- Role of the GSP focal points, governmental partners, and the Plenary Assembly;
- Coordination mechanisms between the GSP and the Sub-committee on Soils;
- Decision making process between the GSP, the Sub-committee on Soils and COAG;
- Impact to non-state stakeholders, including farmers.

Subsequently, COAG at its 28th Session³, taking into account the above recommendations made by the 10th GSP Plenary Assembly and its Extraordinary Session regarding the institutionalization of the GSP, recommended FAO to prepare an in-depth analysis of option 5 (establishing a Sub-Committee on Soils and maintaining the GSP in its current structure), working transparently and collaboratively, with the analysis to be submitted to the 11th GSP Plenary Assembly for discussion, and with its recommendations to be provided to the 29th Session of COAG.

¹ <https://www.fao.org/3/ca9726en/ca9726en.pdf>

² <https://www.fao.org/3/cc0787en/cc0787en.pdf>

³ <https://www.fao.org/3/nj925en/nj925en.pdf>

This document presents the requested assessment on the implications of the establishment of a Sub-Committee on Soils and maintaining the GSP in its current status.

Institutional framework

The relevant provisions governing the establishment of a statutory body at FAO are found in the basic texts and read as follows:

- Rule XXXII.12 of the General Rules of the Organization provides that COAG may, “*on an exceptional basis*” establish subsidiary bodies.
- In the same vein, Resolution No. 13/97 of the FAO Conference refers to the continuous need “*to limit the creation of new [Statutory] Bodies to those that are strictly needed*” (basic texts, Section O, Addendum IV).
- Finally, in its Resolution No. 11/2015 (basic texts, Section O, Addendum V), the FAO Conference decided:

that any proposal to establish a new body under Articles VI or XIV of the Constitution shall be accompanied by a document setting forth in detail:

(...)

d) a specific assessment of whether the objectives of the proposed statutory body could be met through a different type of working arrangement, such as the organization of ad hoc technical consultations or other task-oriented and time-bound arrangements; and

e) whether there are any existing statutory bodies covering the same, similar or related fields as those to be addressed by the proposed new statutory body.

Concrete benefits of creating a Sub-Committee on Soils while maintaining the GSP

After 10 years of great collaboration with all GSP partners and FAO Members, the GSP has become the mechanism to promote sustainable soil management at all levels. Its voluntary nature allowing the participation of non-state stakeholders constitutes a very important added value, while being hosted in FAO under an intergovernmental platform gives the partnership a unique comparative advantage.

Because of the importance of soils for food security and the provision of ecosystem services, the soil agenda will benefit from the full engagement of FAO Members into the topic, recognizing that sustainable soil management should not be an option but a shared responsibility.

Under this option, the GSP will focus on the technical matters involving non-state stakeholders, while a COAG Sub-Committee on Soils will focus on the institutional and policy aspects around sustainable soil management. The Sub-Committee would benefit from the scientific and technical work of the GSP. Together, the GSP and the Sub-Committee on Soils could ensure a concrete science–policy interface with higher participation of FAO Members. With soils being addressed in the Organization by a governing body in addition to the voluntary technical partnership – GSP, it helps to increase the visibility of soils on related policy agenda and mobilize political leadership towards sustainable soil management in the future.

Financial implications

At the tenth GSP Plenary Assembly, a document portraying the [financial implications](#) of an eventual institutionalization of the GSP (including on option 5) was presented.

The terms of reference (ToRs) of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP) approved by the Council are specific about [the partnership nature of the limits of FAO's contributions](#):

“19. Financial implications of the GSP rely on the principle of “partnership”. Each GSP partner may contribute with different inputs to the successful implementation of the GSP. 20. FAO leads the GSP implementation process and will provide funds from its Regular Programme, to support the Secretariat by providing a full-time Professional staff member and General Service support, subject to the approval by its Governing Bodies. Extra-budgetary funds will be mainstreamed to support implementation of GSP actions, including regional and national GSP activities”.

The GSP relies on voluntary contributions by resource partners to implement its various activities. Through its [Healthy Soils Facility](#) the GSP was able to mobilize approximately USD 50 million since its establishment in 2012. Efforts for resource mobilization shall continue to advance the implementation of activities under the new GSP action framework.

The establishment of a Sub-Committee on Soils implies costs associated with the organization of a biannual meeting. A three-day meeting of the proposed Sub-Committee on Soils would incur the following estimated costs:

Item	Cost	Number per session	Total cost
Interpretation	1 day with two sessions of 3 hours in 6 languages = 14,000 USD	3	42,000
Preparation of documents	1 document approximately = 2,000 USD	10	20,000
Translation	USD 728x1000 words	55,000	40,000
Total cost			102,000

Therefore, the estimated total cost for running a three-day meeting would be about USD 102,000. It is expected that these costs would be covered by extra-budgetary contributions from resource partners. When it comes to human resources, the existing GSP Secretariat is composed of a full-time professional staff under the regular budget and General Service support as per the GSP ToRs⁴, complemented with an additional professional staff member supporting the growing technical work on soils in the organization. The GSP Secretariat is expected to also manage the Secretariat work of the eventual Sub-Committee on Soils, thus not imply any additional financial implication to the Organization.

It is evident though that the Secretariat will need to make more efforts to mobilize additional resources in order to guarantee sufficient funds for organizing both the Meetings of the GSP Plenary Assembly and the biannual meeting of the eventual Sub-Committee on Soils.

Composition and process of nomination of members of the Sub-Committee on Soils

The composition and nomination process for the Sub-Committee on Soils will follow the rules of the Committee on Agriculture (COAG). Thus, the membership of the sub-committee would be open to all COAG Members. It would also welcome applications for participation as observers from civil society and other organizations.

⁴ <https://www.fao.org/3/mf277e/mf277e.pdf>

Description of roles, governance and decision making of the GSP and the Sub-Committee on Soils to avoid overlap

The GSP would continue to be governed by its Plenary Assembly, but would report and provide technical support through the GSP Secretariat to the Sub-Committee on Soils, which would report to COAG. Thus, the GSP would no longer report to the COAG directly, but to the proposed sub-committee.

As mentioned above, the GSP and the proposed Sub-Committee on Soils would convene alternately one session every two years⁵. It is proposed that the current GSP Secretariat would provide secretariat services to both of them.

The proposed Sub-Committee on Soils under FAO's Committee on Agriculture (COAG) would guide the Organization on soil related matters. The GSP will remain in its current status: a global voluntary technical platform composed of both FAO Members and non-state stakeholders to promote sustainable soil management, for which FAO hosts the Secretariat.

Considering the roles of both bodies, the GSP would liaise, through the GSP Secretariat, with the Sub-Committee on Soils, while the latter would report directly to COAG.

The GSP work would be guided by the recently endorsed Action Framework 2022-2030 and would focus on technical matters. The Sub-Committee on Soils would focus on institutional and policy aspects of soils, benefiting from and supported by the work of the GSP. All activities that require decision-making by FAO Members would be firstly discussed by the Sub-Committee on Soils (one session every two years).

The Sub-Committee on Soils would also develop a biennial work plan focused on soil governance. The GSP workplan, with more focus on technical aspects, will be complementary to the workplan of the Sub-Committee on Soils.

Role of the GSP focal points, governmental partners, and non-state actors

The GSP focal points will continue their important role in the GSP implementation. However, it is expected that FAO Members could strengthen their engagement on soil related issues in the Organization.

Non-state stakeholders involvement in the GSP would remain the same.

Coordination mechanisms between the GSP and the Sub-Committee on Soils

The GSP would maintain its independence and existing components, governed by the Plenary Assembly, and would link through GSP Secretariat to the proposed COAG Sub-Committee on Soils (currently GSP reports to COAG through the GSP Secretariat).

While it could be considered that another layer is added to the current structure on soils in the Organization, given that the GSP directly reports to COAG, the main benefit will be that soils will be addressed in the Organization by a specific governing body on soils in addition to the voluntary technical partnership - GSP.

The common Secretariat's task is to ensure that both mechanisms have a clear and complementary work agenda, one focused on the soil governance while the other being the technical arm of the Organization when it comes to soils. The workplans of the Sub-Committee on Soils and the GSP will be defined by their respective constituency during the biannual session and the plenary assembly respectively.

⁵ The Rules of Procedure provide that "The Plenary Assembly shall hold one regular session every year". This rule may have to be amended if the GSP Members agree to hold a Plenary Assembly every two years.

Decision-making process between the GSP, the Sub-Committee on Soils and COAG

As stated above and as per the Rules of Procedure, the main decision-making platform for the GSP will continue to be the Plenary Assembly. Currently, the GSP reports to the COAG. However, if a Sub-Committee on Soils is established, the GSP, through the GSP Secretariat, will be reporting to the Sub-Committee on Soils, and this will inform the COAG regarding soil matters.

Impact on non-state stakeholders, including farmers

The potential establishment of a Sub-Committee on Soils and the continuity of the Global Soil Partnership will not imply a direct impact for non-state stakeholders given that: a) the Sub-Committee on Soils will be a FAO Members constituency with occasional observers; b) the GSP will continue to allow non-state stakeholders as partners according to the GSP [Rules of Procedure](#), including farmer associations. When it comes to the direct impact on farmers, the work of the GSP aims to support farmers in adopting sustainable soil management through different projects and activities.