

Eighth Session of the Global Soil Partnership Plenary Assembly

Rome, Italy, 3-5, June 2020



**Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations**



REPORT OF THE EIGHTH SESSION OF THE
GLOBAL SOIL PARTNERSHIP PLENARY ASSEMBLY

Rome, 3-5, June 2020

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Opening of the Session

The eighth-session of the Plenary Assembly (PA) of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP) was held virtually from 3 to 5 June 2020 (the list of participants is attached as Annex I).

The session was chaired by Ms Floria Bertsch (Costa Rica), the Vice-Chair was Mr Thanawat Tiensin (Thailand) and the Rapporteur was Mr Hans Brand (The Netherlands).

Ms Maria Helena Semedo, Deputy Director-General for Climate and Natural Resources at FAO, welcomed participants to the virtual Plenary Assembly and acknowledged the commitment of the GSP and its partners to promote sustainable soil management (SSM) at all levels to contribute to climate change adaptation and mitigation, food security and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). She stressed the central role of the GSP Plenary Assembly as a decision platform to review, set priorities and take strategic decisions for the global soil agenda. In view of the COVID19 pandemic, Ms Semedo also stressed that new challenges must be met to produce more while reducing our impact on the environment. Ms Semedo presented some of the progress made among the GSP activities, including the global soil salinity map, the International Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Use and Management of Fertilizers Fertilizer Code, the global assessments on soil pollution and soil biodiversity, the RECSOIL programme, and pointed out that the evaluation report of the GSP could provide interesting ways to move forward. Ms Semedo acknowledged the extensive work done by the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS) and its scientific support to the GSP. Ms Semedo also expressed her gratitude to the resource partners without whom the GSP would not have carried out its various projects. Lastly, she encouraged the implementation of the Fertilizer Code and other tools on the ground.

Mr Eduardo Mansur, Director of the Land and Water Division at FAO, expressed his gratitude to the large number of participants at the Plenary Assembly, which reflected a great commitment to the soil agenda. Mr Mansur stressed the need for the Plenary Assembly to take place, even virtually despite the current global situation, as the decisions of the Assembly will need to be reported to the Committee on Agriculture in September 2020. Then, Mr Eduardo Mansur introduced the agenda and emphasized the need for a decision by the GSP Partners on various GSP initiatives such as the Measurement, Reporting and Verification of Soil Organic Carbon Protocol (GSOC-MRV), the Protocol for the Assessment of Sustainable Soil Management practices. Finally, Mr Mansur encouraged FAO Members to support the Global Soil Salinity and Soil Organic Carbon Sequestration Potential maps as well as the global assessments on soil pollution and soil biodiversity.

Item 1: Adoption of the Agenda (GSPPA: VIII/2020/1)

Although there was a suggestion to amend the agenda to allow more time for FAO members and partners to address the Protocol for the Assessment of Sustainable Soil Management practices, the agenda was adopted as it was.

Item 2: Global Soil Partnership – Accomplishment, Challenges and Way Forward: A Stocktaking Review (GSPPA: VIII/2020/2)

The Assembly expressed its appreciation for the efforts made to carry out the evaluation despite the COVID19 pandemic and welcomed the findings of the report on the GSP and its many achievements in placing soils on the global agenda. The PA supported recommendation 1 to transition from the pillars to outcome areas for soil health. During the discussion, it was acknowledged that bridging the gap between soils and issues such as biodiversity, climate change under the SDGs umbrella, could ease the mobilization of financial resources.

While the PA also endorsed recommendations 2, 4 and 5 of the report, Members stressed the need for further discussion on Recommendation 3.

In principle, the Assembly supported the institutional repositioning of the Global Soil Partnership as an FAO statutory body, however requested the Secretariat to perform a sound assessment of the legal, and financial implications of such institutionalization including the impact on the participation on non-state actors. This request should be submitted to the 27th session of the COAG for consideration.

During the discussion, the PA recalled the importance of non-State actors in the success of the GSP and requested more details on the impact of the institutionalization of the GSP on those partners. Finally, it was 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 PA requested the Secretariat, with inputs from the ITPS and RSPs, to prepare a plan to implement the main recommendations made by this evaluation. Such a requested should be submitted to the attention of the 27th session of the COAG

The Assembly invited the Secretariat to further analyze and facilitate the implementation of those recommendations of the evaluation that are of a more straightforward nature, in order to enhance the performance of the partnership.

Finally, the PA invited 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.

Item 3: Report on the financial status of the GSP (GSPPA: VIII/2020/3)

The PA took note of the efforts made to mobilize the necessary resources for the implementation of the GSP activities and reiterated its appeal to all partners, and in particular to those partners that have not yet contributed to the GSP.

The PA requested the Secretariat to enhance its efforts towards having a more active resource mobilization strategy so that countries and regions can be financially supported to implement soil actions.

Item 4: ITPS main achievements (GSPPA: VIII/2020/4)

The PA appreciated the overview presentation made by the ITPS Chairperson, Ms. Rosa Poch, who informed the PA members of the numerous activities and publications in which the ITPS has participated since the seventh session of the GSP Plenary Assembly. The PA expressed its appreciation for the wide range of relevant activities carried out, particularly the extensive work done on soil organic carbon.

The PA endorsed the work plan for 2020-2021 and welcomed the commitment of the ITPS to work on soils and Small Island Developing States (SIDs). However, the Assembly expressed some concerns about the feasibility of the ITPS to review all GSP documents given the increasing number of publications and topics covered by the Secretariat. During the discussion, it was suggested to increase the number of ITPS Members to respond effectively and in a timely manner to the increasing workload of the ITPS and the limited financial and time resources. The PA urged countries and partners to encourage their national experts to participate in the different activities lead by the ITPS and suggested the establishment of a database of soil experts for each region to strengthen partnerships among regional scientists and support the ITPS. Finally, the recommendation made at the previous Plenary Assembly to carry out an economic assessment to encourage farmers to implement soil conservation measures was recalled.

Item 5: World Soil Day theme for 2021 (GSPPA: VIII/2020/5)

5.1. Report on the Glinka World Soil Prize

The PA took note of the successful organization of the 2019 Glinka World Soil Prize, sponsored by the Russian Federation. The award ceremony was held at FAO Headquarters on World Soil Day and the Glinka World Soil Prize 2019 went to Xu Minggang, Director and Professor from the South Subtropical Crops Research Institute, Chinese Academy of Tropical Agricultural Sciences (CATAS) and Professor (Soil Science) and Research Leader from the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences (CAAS). The GSP invited partners to disseminate the call for nominations for 2020 to ensure a more inclusive contest with entries from the different regions of the world.

5.2. Report on the King Bhumibol World Soil Day Award

The PA noted the success of the King Bhumibol World Soil Day Award in 2019, sponsored by the Kingdom of Thailand. The award ceremony was held in Bangkok, Thailand, and the King Bhumibol World Soil Day Award Prize 2019 from the Honorable Minister of Agriculture and Cooperative of Thailand went to the Association of soil from Costa Rica (Asociación de la Ciencia del Suelo ACCS) with its programme Manos al Suelo.

5.3. Report on the implementation of World Soil Day 2019 and its celebration in 2020

The PA recognized the successful celebration of World Soil Day (WSD) on 5 December 2019 and the steady increase in the number of countries organizing events each year and the popularity of the celebration at the global level. The GSP renewed its call to members and partners, and new stakeholders to organize WSD celebrations using the 2020 theme "Keep soil alive, protect soil biodiversity".

The theme for WSD 2021 was amended at the request of the delegation of Colombia and supported by Members and Partners. The PA endorsed the amended theme for the WSD 2021: "Halt soil salinization, boost soil productivity". During the discussion however, some partners pointed out that some countries do not face such a threat, which may complicate the implementation of activities on this topic.

Item 6: Status of Global Symposia (GSPPA: VIII/2020/6)

6.1. Follow up Global Symposium on Soil Organic Carbon

The PA noted the extensive work done on the implementation of the recommendations resulting from the Global Symposium on Soil Organic Carbon (GSOC'17). The PA recalled the importance of the development of the Global Soil Organic Carbon Sequestration Potential Map (GSOCseq) and acknowledged the work done by the GSP to update the Global Organic Carbon Map (GSOCmap) annually. During the discussion, the need to continue fostering cooperation between the GSP, and the World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies (WOCAT) was expressed regarding the sustainable soil management database and protocol. Support was also expressed on the full implementation of RECSOIL.

6.2. Follow up Global Symposium on Soil Pollution

The PA acknowledged the progress on the implementation of the outcome document that resulted from the Global Symposium on Soil Pollution (GSOP'18), including the Technical Guidelines for Assessing, Mapping, Monitoring and Reporting on soil pollution, and the Database of Best Available Techniques for Managing and remediating polluted soils. The Global Assessment of Soil Pollution will be presented separately under *Item 9.1*.

6.3. Follow up Global Symposium on Soil Erosion

The PA appreciated the progress made on the implementation of the outcome document that resulted from the Global Symposium on Soil Erosion (GSER'19). The PA took note that most of the erosion work, including the Global Soil Erosion map (GSERmap), will take place in 2021 as the GSP is currently focusing on Salinity and Carbon Sequestration maps.

6.4. Global Symposium on Soil Biodiversity

The PA appreciated the progress in the preparation of the Global Symposium on Soil Biodiversity and acknowledged the work of the GSP to maintain the momentum despite the postponement of the event due to the COVID19 pandemic, through the organization of a webinar on soil biodiversity, the launch of a photo and video contest on soil biodiversity and the World Soil Day campaign. The Report on the State of Knowledge on Soil Biodiversity will be presented separately under *Item 9.2*.

The PA encouraged the Secretariat to find options to either make the Global Symposium fully virtual or partially allow virtual attendance to the participants who will not be able to physically attend due to financial or travel restrictions resulting from the COVID19 pandemic.

6.5. Global Symposium on Salt Affected Soils

The PA appreciated the organization of the Global Symposium on Salt Affected Soils and underlined its great relevance for many members facing soil salinization. Similarly to the Global Symposium on Soil Biodiversity, it was suggested to find options to either hold the Symposium virtually or available online for the participants who may not be able to attend due to financial or travel restrictions resulting from the COVID19 pandemic.

The PA endorsed the convening of the Global Symposium on Soil Fertility to be held in March 2022 at FAO Headquarters after the Global Symposium on Soil Biodiversity and the Global Symposium on Salt Affected Soils.

Item 7: Feasible and regionally contextualized guidelines for monitoring, reporting and verification of SOC stocks and SOC changes (GSPPA: VIII/2020/7)

The PA recognized the significant work done by the GSP on the GSOC-MRV Protocol for Measurement, Reporting, Verification and Monitoring of Soil Organic Carbon in Agricultural Landscapes. The PA endorsed the GSOC-MRV Protocol and requested the Secretariat to include a note clarifying that this is a technical document in support of the SOC work and that its use is not mandatory but voluntary. During the discussion, it was recommended to start with pilot projects as soon as possible to better understand the applicability of the Protocol and to continue its evolution. The PA encouraged members and partners to make full use of this GSOC-MRV as a voluntary tool for measuring soil organic carbon change in agricultural landscapes.

Item 8: Highlights on the work of the GSP Pillars (GSPPA: VIII/2020/8)

8.1. International Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Use and Management of Fertilizers

The PA commended the efforts made to disseminate and raise awareness on the issues and principles covered by the International Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Use and Management of Fertilizers, and recognized the gap that currently exists in this regard. The PA invited members to apply the Fertilizer Code, where appropriate, at the national level. The PA endorsed the Plan of Action to implement the International Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Use and Management of Fertilizers. The PA recommended strengthening cooperation with other institutions working on similar issues, such as UNEP, which is currently working on the UNEA-4 report addressing pesticides and fertilizers.

8.2. Protocol for the Assessment of Sustainable Soil Management Practices

The PA recognized the extensive work done by the ITPS and the GSP Secretariat to refine the Protocol for the Assessment of Sustainable Soil Management practices. They clarified that the Protocol should be a

technical tool in support of the Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management that can be used on a voluntary basis to assess the sustainability of applied soil management practices. The PA endorsed the original version of the protocol in principle on the condition that a further interactive and inclusive process be launched over a two-month period and that consensus on the Protocol be reached. An ad-hoc virtual session of this Assembly will then be organized in September 2020 for final approval of the Protocol.

During the discussion, it was emphasized that the Protocol for the Assessment of Sustainable Soil Management Practices will fill an important gap and provide a comprehensive framework for the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management that can be complemented at national level. The PA suggested establishing a pilot project to explore the applicability of the Protocol.

Finally, it was strongly suggested to develop a protocol for the field level to allow farmers to also be able to measure the success and impact of the sustainable soil management practices they implement, as the current Protocol will be mainly applied by soil specialists and laboratory technicians rather than farmers.

8.3. Development of SoILEX database

The PA recognized the important work done to develop SoILEX, a global online database on legal instruments related to soil. The PA supported the use of SoILEX as a living tool that will help raise awareness of the importance of legal frameworks for soil protection and conservation and invited members to review the legal frameworks available for each country under SoILEX. During the discussion, it was recalled that SoILEX should be considered as a core activity linked to all the different areas of the GSP work as a science-policy interface.

8.4. Status of Pillar 4 and global maps

The PA recognized the importance and progress made on the Global Soil Organic Carbon Sequestration Potential Map (GSOCseq) and the Global Soil Salinity Map (GSSmap). The Assembly invited countries to fully engage into these initiatives by preparing national maps in accordance with the respective technical specifications and country guidelines.

The PA commended the development of GloSIS and further encouraged the GSP Focal Points to carry out the necessary consultations and ensure the nomination of national soil information institutions to be part of INSII and to participate in the development of GloSIS. The PA endorsed the extension of the current Pillar 4 Implementation period and the mandate of the GSP Soil Data Facility until the 9th GSP Plenary Assembly.

8.5. Global Soil Laboratory Network

The PA welcomed the substantive work done by the Global Soil Laboratory Network (GLOSOLAN) and its Regional Soil Laboratory Networks (RESOLANs), in the field of soil analysis and soil data harmonization. The Assembly invited members to support all GLOSOLAN ongoing activities and to encourage soil laboratories to join the networks.

The PA endorsed the establishment of the International Network on Fertilizers Analysis (INFA) within the framework of GLOSOLAN to work on the harmonization of fertilizer analysis methods. The PA noted the launch of the INFA initiative to be organized in September 2020.

Item 9: Status of Global assessments (GSPPA: VIII/2020/9)

9.1. Global Assessment of Soil Pollution

The Plenary Assembly expressed its appreciation for the efforts made in conducting the Global Assessment on Soil Pollution, prepared by scientists from around the world, despite the difficulties associated with the limited financial resources available. The Assembly supported the completion and wide dissemination of the Global Assessment of Soil Pollution, called on countries to implement actions at the national level to address soil pollution, while the ITPS and the GSP Secretariat are encouraged to use this opportunity to seek resources and promote actions to fill identified gaps on the soil pollution full cycle, from assessment and quantification to remediation at field level.

9.2. Assessment of the State of Knowledge of Soil Biodiversity: Status, challenges and potentialities

Likewise, the PA commended the process of producing the report on the State of Knowledge of Soil Biodiversity: Status, challenges and potentialities and urged countries to promote the sustainable use and conservation of soil biodiversity by supporting long-term monitoring and the development of standard protocols, as well as the implementation of on-the-ground policies of soil biodiversity. The PA called on countries to implement vigorous actions at the national level following the publication of the report to address critical issues that require attention.

Item 10: Report on Regional Soil Partnerships (GSPPA: VIII/2020/10)

The PA reiterated the need for strong support to the RSPs by mobilizing resources (financial, expertise, hosting of meetings, etc.) and also by facilitating key regional activities, including active networks and soil information systems. The Assembly further encouraged the full participation of focal points in regional activities and the development of strong networks of experts in each region.

Item 11: Date and venue of the next Plenary session

The PA noted that the dates and venue for the next ad-hoc virtual meeting of the 8th Plenary Assembly (September 2020) and the 9th Plenary Assembly (2021) will be communicated as soon as FAO and Rome-based Agencies will have restructured the calendar of events given the COVID19 pandemic.

ANNEX I - List of Participants**FAO members**

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