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# Global Soil Partnership Plenary Assembly

## Twelfth session

Hybrid, 3-5 June 2024

**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: XII/2024/3)**

### Executive summary

- Taking into account the recommendations made by the 10th Global Soil Partnership (GSP) Plenary Assembly and its Extraordinary Session regarding the institutionalization of the GSP, the Committee on Agriculture (COAG), at its 28th Session 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.
- A detailed analysis was prepared and presented to the 11th GSP Plenary Assembly for discussion (GSPPA: XI/2023/3). It was agreed that the Plenary Assembly will recommend the 29th Session of COAG to maintain the GSP in its current form and to discuss further the possible establishment of a Sub-Committee on Soils during the next GSP Plenary Assembly.
- The Plenary Assembly requested the Secretariat to prepare a document outlining, albeit hypothetically, the financial and governance implications of a Sub-Committee and to present this analysis to the 12th GSP Plenary Assembly.
- This document presents the analysis of mandate, governance and financial implications of an eventual establishment of a Sub-Committee on Soils while maintaining the GSP in its current structure.

### 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.

### 3.1. Background

1. After ten years since the establishment of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP), its partners (both FAO Members and non-state partners) agreed on the success of the partnership in promoting sustainable soil management at all levels and bringing soil health into the global agenda ([Global Soil Partnership: Accomplishments, Challenges and Way Forward: A Stocktaking review](#)). Its voluntary nature allowing the participation of non-state partners constitutes a very important added value, while being hosted in FAO under an intergovernmental platform gives the Partnership a unique comparative advantage.
2. While considering efforts made by all partners of the GSP, including significant investment at the national level in adopting sustainable soil management, improving soil governance, and halting soil degradation, the 8th GSP Plenary Assembly<sup>1</sup> 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. Because of the importance of soils for food security, sustainable development and the provision of ecosystem services, the soil agenda will benefit from the full engagement of FAO Members into the topic. However, the progress of countries in the knowledge and monitoring of soils, their protection and the adoption of sustainable management is uneven and there are large differences. The voluntary nature of the GSP does not facilitate the adoption of new regulatory frameworks that promote sustainable soil management or the allocation of national resources for its monitoring and preservation.
3. The 8th GSP Plenary Assembly therefore supported in principle the institutional repositioning of the GSP 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 partners.
4. The Secretariat presented the requested [assessment of implications](#) to the [10th GSP Plenary Assembly](#). The Assembly welcomed the assessment and expressed full support for maintaining the GSP with all its components. Although there was some support for the option of maintaining the GSP in its current form and creating in parallel a Sub-Committee on Soils to deal with governance and policy issues (so called option 5), the Plenary Assembly did not reach consensus on the recommendation to be forwarded to the Committee on Agriculture (COAG) and recommended the organization of an extraordinary session of the 10th GSP Plenary Assembly.
5. The 10th GSP Plenary Assembly, at its 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 COAG<sup>2</sup> 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).
6. Subsequently, COAG at its 28th Session<sup>3</sup>, 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, working transparently

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

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

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

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.

7. The GSP Secretariat prepared an in-depth analysis of the [implications of the establishment of a Sub-Committee on Soils under COAG and maintaining the GSP in its current form](#) that was presented to the 11th GSP Plenary Assembly. The Plenary expressed concern about the role of the Regional Soil Partnerships and non-state partners in the Sub-Committee, the financial implications of maintaining both bodies and the possible competition for resources, as well as the possible overlapping of functions and difficulties in coordinating the two bodies. To provide a recommendation to the 29th Session of COAG, the Plenary Assembly requested the GSP Secretariat to prepare a document outlining, albeit hypothetically, the financial and governance implications of the creation of a Sub-Committee and present it at the 12th Plenary Assembly.
8. Considering that the GSP would be maintained in its current structure, as consensually agreed by the Plenary Assembly in its two previous sessions, the role of the Regional Soil Partnerships, the GSP technical networks and non-governmental actors would remain intact and would continue to support and promote GSP activities as it has been done in the previous 12 years. This document therefore presents the assessment of the mandate, governance and financial implications of establishing a COAG Sub-Committee on Soils and maintaining the GSP in its current status, as well as FAO's proposal to overcome potential resource competition and coordination problems.
9. This document can be considered as a complement of the document [GSPPA: XI/2023/3](#) presented at the 11th Plenary Assembly and information included therein will not be repeated here, except for the applicable 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 provided this action “*is conducive to facilitating its own work*”.
  - The 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 necessary*”. The Conference also decided “*that in future, Statutory Bodies should be established only where strictly necessary and where the work to be undertaken cannot be carried out by ad hoc groups, and that the Terms of Reference of all new Bodies created should provide for a periodic review of their usefulness*” (Basic Texts, Section O, Addendum IV).
  - Finally, in Resolution No. 11/2015, the FAO Conference “[*reaffirmed*] the validity and relevance of Resolution 13/97, in particular the procedures set forth therein relating to the establishment and abolition of statutory bodies” (Basic Texts, Section O, Addendum V).

### **3.2 Mandate of the Sub-Committee on Soils and the GSP**

10. The proposed Sub-Committee on Soils would have the mandate to discuss and build consensus on issues and priorities in soil governance, and advise COAG and, through it, the FAO Council and the FAO Conference, on the technical and policy matters needed to optimize the contribution of sustainable soil management to the realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including in poverty alleviation, food security and nutrition, biodiversity conservation, and climate change mitigation and adaptation.
11. The Sub-Committee would therefore have a normative character, focused on developing guidelines for Members' legislative and institutional development and guiding the Organization and its

Members in promoting sustainable soil management for *better production, better nutrition, a better environment, and a better life*, leaving no one behind.

12. At the 10th Session, the GSP Plenary Assembly adopted a new GSP Action Framework 2022-2030 with a vision to improve and maintain the health of at least 50 percent of the world's soils by 2030 and to achieve a series of targets for each of its six action areas. The GSP is currently working on the development of the key performance indicator (KPI) reporting system and the Global Soil Health Index (GSHI) (see document GSPPA: XII/2024/2).
13. As currently configured, reporting progress on each of these targets and indicators will be voluntary, given the nature of the GSP, so many efforts may go unnoticed or problems of soil degradation and loss with serious impacts on biodiversity, climate change or ecosystems may go unrecognized.
14. The GSP will continue to operate as at present and will focus on the implementation of the GSP Action Framework 2022-2030, aimed primarily at developing knowledge, awareness, and capacity building in soil health assessment, monitoring, and maintenance. It will build on the best available scientific knowledge supported by the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS) and will facilitate/contribute to the exchange of knowledge and technologies among stakeholders for the sustainable management and use of soil resources through its technical networks and regional soil partnerships.

### **3.3 Governance of the Sub-Committee on Soils and the GSP**

15. In addition to the details provided in the [previous assessment](#) presented at the 11th Plenary Assembly, further details on the governance of the GSP and the Sub-Committee on Soils are provided here.
16. The Sub-Committee on Soils would be composed of COAG Members and would be open to all Members of the Organization. Participation of non-member nations of the Organization and international organizations is regulated by the provisions set in the Basic Texts, Volume II, Sections I and N.
17. The Sub-Committee would elect, from among the representatives of its Members, a Chairperson and six Vice-Chairpersons (Bureau), each coming from one of the following geographic regions: Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Near East, North America, and Southwest Pacific. In electing the Chairperson, the Sub-Committee would have due regard to the principle of rotation. The Chairperson and the Vice-Chairpersons remain in office until the next session of the Sub-Committee and should be eligible for re-election for no more than one term. The Chairperson, or a Vice-Chairperson in the absence of the Chairperson, would preside over the meetings of the Sub-Committee and exercise such other functions as may be required to facilitate its work.
18. Should the Sub-Committee on Soils be established, rules of procedure should be developed in conformity with the rules of procedure of COAG and the General Rules of the Organization and be approved by COAG.
19. The GSP will remain in its current status: a global voluntary technical platform composed of both FAO Members and non-state partners to promote sustainable soil management, for which FAO hosts the Secretariat. The GSP would continue to be governed by its Plenary Assembly. However, the GSP would no longer report to COAG directly but to the proposed Sub-Committee on Soils, which would subsequently report to COAG on all soil related activities, both technical and normative ones.

20. As previously mentioned, the GSP and the proposed Sub-Committee on Soils would be supported by a joint Secretary. The task of the joint Secretary is to ensure that both mechanisms have a clear and complementary work agenda following their respective mandates as stated above. The workplans of the Sub-Committee on Soils and the GSP will be defined by their respective constituency during the biennial sessions.
21. Both bodies, the GSP Plenary Assembly and the Sub-Committee on Soils would convene alternately one session every two years<sup>4</sup>. The sessions shall be held with timing that enables the Sub-Committee to take into consideration the report of the GSP Plenary Assembly and the COAG to take into consideration the report of the Sub-Committee.

### **3.4 Financial implications of the establishment of a COAG Sub-committee on Soils**

22. Should a COAG Sub-Committee on Soils be established, extra-budgetary resources should be mobilized to support the organization of biennial sessions of the Sub-Committee on Soils, including the preparation and the translation of documents as well as interpretation of the sessions in the six FAO languages.
23. It is important to note that, as the GSP Plenary Assembly would also be held every two years, the costs incurred for the organisation of the Sub-Committee meetings would be similar to those currently incurred, as a Sub-Committee meeting would be held in the year in which there is no GSP Plenary Assembly. Therefore, the eventual creation of the Sub-Committee would not entail an increase in expenses for the Organization or its Members in this respect, apart from the costs of translation of documents and interpretation during the sessions.
24. Concerning human resources, the existing GSP Secretariat is composed of a full-time professional staff under the regular budget (RB) acting as GSP Secretary and a General Service support as per the GSP ToRs<sup>5</sup>, complemented since 2020 with an additional professional staff member supporting the growing technical work on soils in the Organization.
25. It is proposed that the GSP Secretary serves both the GSP and the Sub-Committee on Soils. However, an additional FAO staff member, ideally P-3 level, would be needed to support the functioning of the Sub-Committee and its interactions with the FAO Governing and Statutory bodies as well as with other UN agencies.
26. The Organization would therefore incur the following estimated costs for the maintenance of staff to cover both the GSP Secretariat and the Sub-Committee on Soils:

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.fao.org/3/mf277e/mf277e.pdf>

Item	Unit cost (USD)	Total cost/year (USD)
GSP/Sub-Committee Secretary (P5, already covered by RB and included in the GSP ToRs)	19 233	230 796
GSP Technical staff (P3, already covered by RB)	13 458	161 496
General Service staff G4 (already covered by RB and included in the GSP ToRs)	7 554	90 648
Additional Sub-Committee Technical Staff (P3)	13 458	161 496
Total cost		644 436

27. Given that the cost of the GSP Secretary (P5), GSP Technical staff (P3), and the General Service staff (G4) is already covered by FAO regular budget, only the additional technical staff (P3) should be covered by extra-budgetary contributions from resource partners (about USD 161 500/year).
28. Based on the costs currently incurred for the annual GSP Plenary Assemblies, a three-day meeting of the proposed Sub-Committee on Soils would incur the following estimated costs for the preparation of documents and interpretation services:

Item	Cost	Number per session	Total cost
Interpretation for additional day	USD 14 000 per day	1 day	14 000
Translation	USD 2 184 per document per language (maximum cost)	10 documents, 5 languages	109 200
Total cost			123 200

29. Therefore, should the Sub-Committee on Soils be established and the GSP be maintained in its current form, the additional cost would include USD 161 500 for technical staff (P3) per year., plus USD 123 200 for the translation cost of all documents into six languages and additional interpretation cost for the Sub-Committee biannual session.
30. Clearly, the Secretariat would have to increase its efforts to mobilize additional resources to cover the activities of the GSP and those of the eventual Sub-Committee on Soils.