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COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE

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Report of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP)

Executive Summary

The Committee on Agriculture (COAG) is the parent body of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP). The main GSP governance organ, the GSP Plenary Assembly (PA), reports to COAG.

The PA has met twice since the last session of COAG, respectively on 05-07 June 2019 (7th meeting) and 03-05 June 2020 (8th meeting, held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic). The main outcomes of the two above-mentioned meetings are set out in COAG document COAG/2020/3 *Status of implementation of the recommendations of the 27th session of COAG*, while the full reports can be consulted online (7th Meeting of the GSP PA¹ and 8th Meeting of the GSP PA² respectively). It may be emphasized that several key GSP activities have been carried out by, or under the aegis of, its main technical advisory body – the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS).

This has been a very busy period and it is important to highlight the launch of RECISOIL: recarbonization of global soils, the global assessments of soil pollution and soil biodiversity, and the mapping activities on soil salinity and soil organic carbon sequestration potential following a country-driven approach. One of the most significant activities during this reporting period was the stocktaking assessment (quasi evaluation) of the GSP. The main recommendation of this report³ was the repositioning of the GSP as a statutory body of FAO, but the PA recommended that detailed information on the implications of such a proposal should first be made available. Members recognized the importance of inter-laboratory comparisons to assess the performance of soil laboratories and to monitor the progresses of the Global Soil Laboratory Network (GLOSOLAN). However, it was recognized that there were international barriers to the exchange of soil samples for research purposes and that these could hinder the efficient conduct of inter-laboratory comparisons within the framework of GLOSOLAN. Members therefore supported the submission of the “Resolution for the international exchange of soil samples for research purposes under GLOSOLAN” to COAG.

Suggested action by the Committee

The Committee is invited to:

- Take note of the reports of the 7th and 8th meetings of the GSP Plenary Assembly, as well as the progress made in combating soil degradation and promoting sustainable soil management.

¹ Report of the 7th Meeting of the GSP PA <http://www.fao.org/3/ca5983en/ca5983en.pdf>

² Report of the 8th Meeting of the GSP PA <http://www.fao.org/3/ca9726en/ca9726en.pdf>

³ Global Soil Partnership: Accomplishments, Challenges and Way Forward. A stocktaking review.2020. http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/GSP/eighth_PA/GSP_Stocktaking_Final.pdf

- Request the Secretariat to provide further information on the legal and financial implications, including the impact on the participation of non-state actors, of the proposal by the Evaluation of the GSP to institutionalize the GSP as a FAO Statutory Body, for further consideration.
- Consider the endorsement of the “Resolution for the International Exchange of Soil Samples for Research Purposes under GLOSOLAN” (Annex 1), as requested by the 7th GSP Plenary Assembly.
- Support the implementation of key tools and initiatives such as the International Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Use and Management of Fertilizers, the GSOC-MRV Protocol for measuring, reporting, verification and monitoring of soil organic carbon in agricultural landscapes, the RECISOIL: recarbonization of global soils, and the Global Soil Doctors Programme, among others.

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I. Update on the Global Soil Partnership (GSP)

1. Since its establishment in 2012, the GSP made significant progress in promoting sustainable soil management and advocating the inclusion of soils in the global agenda, notably through the support of its Regional Soil Partnerships and the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS). In the period 2018-2020, the GSP consolidated its work by focusing on the ten soil threats identified in the Status of the World's Soil Resources report, the organization of global symposia on soil organic carbon, soil pollution, soil erosion, soil biodiversity, providing solutions through the Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management, the International Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Use and Management of Fertilizers (Fertilizer Code) and the implementation of key activities by the ITPS. In addition, the GSP is working on the development of tools to facilitate the exchange of information and experiences between all stakeholders, such as SoiLEX, a platform for soil-related legislation and policy that will contribute to better soil governance at national and global level and EduSOILS, an e-learning platform where all training materials developed by the GSP or one of its partners, will be made available free of charge in different languages. The different activities have triggered national actions, with various Members having established national soil institutions and partnerships, soil programmes or new soil legislation, indicating that the partnership is triggering the desired action.

2. The main outputs during the reporting period 2018-2020 are:

- Preparation of the Global Salt Affected Soils Map⁴;
- Organization of two symposia, one on soil erosion⁵ in 2019 and one on soil biodiversity⁶ (postponed to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic);
- Implementation of the outcome documents from past symposia on soil organic carbon⁷, soil pollution⁸ and soil erosion;
- Establishment and implementation of the Glinka World Soil Prize⁹ and World Soil Day Award¹⁰;
- Implementation of the activities of the Global Soil Laboratory Network (GLOSOLAN¹¹) and its regional branches;
- Establishment of the Global Soil Doctor Programme¹², the International Network of Black Soils¹³ and the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management¹⁴;
- Implementation of the International Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Use and Management of Fertilizers (Plan of Action to implement the International Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Use and Management of Fertilizers¹⁵);
- Organization of webinars on the Fertilizer Code¹⁶, soil biodiversity¹⁷ and soil organic carbon¹⁸;
- Launch of RECSOIL: Recarbonization of global soils;
- Preparation of the Global Assessment on Soil Pollution report;
- Preparation of the report on the State of Knowledge of Soil Biodiversity;

⁴ <http://www.fao.org/global-soil-partnership/areas-of-work/soil-salinity/en/>

⁵ <http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/soil-erosion-symposium/en/>

⁶ <http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/soil-biodiversity-symposium/en/>

⁷ <http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/soil-organic-carbon-symposium/en/>

⁸ <http://www.fao.org/about/meetings/global-symposium-on-soil-pollution/en/>

⁹ <http://www.fao.org/global-soil-partnership/pillars-action/2-awareness-raising/glinka-world-soil-prize/en/>

¹⁰ <http://www.fao.org/world-soil-day/world-soil-day-award/en/>

¹¹ <http://www.fao.org/global-soil-partnership/pillars-action/5-harmonization/glosolan/en/>

¹² <http://www.fao.org/global-soil-partnership/pillars-action/2-awareness-raising/soil-doctor/en/>

¹³ <http://www.fao.org/global-soil-partnership/inbs>

¹⁴ <http://www.fao.org/3/a-bl813e.pdf>

¹⁵ http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/GSP/eighth_PA/Fertilizer_Code_Plan_Action.pdf

¹⁶ <http://www.fao.org/global-soil-partnership/resources/events/detail/en/c/1273404/>

¹⁷ <http://www.fao.org/global-soil-partnership/resources/events/detail/en/c/1275159/>

¹⁸ <http://www.fao.org/global-soil-partnership/resources/events/detail/en/c/1277609/>

- Preparation of an action plan for the International Initiative for the Sustainable Management of Soil Biodiversity;
 - Establishment of the International Network of Salt Affected Soils (INSAS); and
 - Launch of SoiLEX platform
3. Upcoming activities for 2020-2021 are as follows:
- Finalization of the Global Salt Affected Soils map and the associated global assessment report;
 - Launch and implementation of the Global Soil Doctors Programme;
 - Training on Global Soil Organic Carbon sequestration potential mapping in countries and launch of the map;
 - Roll-out of RECISOIL;
 - Organization of the Global Symposium on Soil Biodiversity;
 - Organization of the Global Symposium on Salt Affected Soils;
 - Launch of the Global Assessment of Soil Pollution and Soil Biodiversity reports;
 - Implementation of the Fertilizer Code;
 - Implementation of the Glinka World Soil Prize and World Soil Day Award; and
 - Establishment of EduSOILS.
4. In view of the growing number of activities, the need to mobilize financial resources is evident as the GSP relies on voluntary contributions. The PA has therefore appealed to its members to increase their financial support to the GSP.

II. Evaluation of the Global Soil Partnership

5. The 7th session of the Plenary Assembly held in June 2019 suggested that “after 7 years since its establishment it would be appropriate to conduct an evaluation of the GSP performance including the request of formalization of the GSP. The GSP Secretariat pledged to perform such evaluation provided funds will be made available for such assessment”.
6. This evaluation was to serve as a first step in guiding the future status of the GSP. Indeed, the 7th PA also “welcomed the proposal of formalizing the Global Soil Partnership from a voluntary partnership into a formal body in the FAO’s structure. During the discussion, it was acknowledged that changing the status of the GSP to a formal body would guarantee more stability and continuity of the good progress made today. Furthermore, this will ease the administrative issues including the mobilization of financial resources and engagement of FAO regional, sub-regional and national offices. It was concluded that the proposal should be presented to the 27th Committee on Agriculture in 2020 (COAG 27) for its endorsement”.
7. The evaluation highlighted in a nutshell that the GSP has come a long way since its formal establishment by the FAO Council at the end of 2012, while reaching a point where it needs to recalibrate its strategy by moving from what could be called a phase of global positioning, highly justified so far, to the full priority given to concrete actions (including the use of tools developed in this early phase) on the ground to assist countries reap the full benefits of sustainable soil management practices.
1. *Recommendation 1.* The Secretariat and ITPS should embark on the formulation of a revamped GSP Action Framework under the mantle: ‘Healthy Soils to meet the SDGs, Biodiversity and Climate Change Goals’, including the transformation of the current Pillars into Outcome Areas for Soil Health.
 2. *Recommendation 2.* Recognize two distinct functions within the Secretariat: a Programme unit and a Resource Mobilization unit in order to formulate and support the implementation of a portfolio of cogent projects and to interact more systematically with resource providers.
 3. *Recommendation 3.* Undertake consultations with relevant departments, up to FAO senior management team, on the prospects for elevating the GSP to a more formal statutory body or

subcommittee under the aegis of COAG, and submit the necessary background documents for consideration by COAG and other organs as appropriate.

4. *Recommendation 4.* Revamp current regional and national structural arrangements, building closer links with FAO's own decentralized structures, and establish Centres of Excellence.
5. *Recommendation 5.* The GSP should also prepare stronger Partnership Framework Agreements with key international conventions and organizations, especially UNCCD, UNEP, UNCBD and UNFCCC.

III. Resolution for the international exchange of soil samples for research purposes under GLOSOLAN

8. The Seventh Plenary Assembly (PA) of the Global Soil Partnership acknowledged the importance of inter-laboratory comparisons to assess the performance of soil laboratories and monitor the progresses of the Global Soil Laboratory Network (GLOSOLAN). However, the PA recognized that there are international barriers to the exchange of soil samples for research purposes and that these could hinder the efficient execution of inter-laboratory comparisons under GLOSOLAN. In this regard, the PA supported the submission of the "Resolution for the international exchange of soil samples for research purposes under GLOSOLAN" to the 27th Committee on Agriculture in 2020 (COAG 27). The PA requested FAO to help develop a simplified procedure for the exchange of samples at the international level.

9. In the framework of the Global Soil Partnership's Pillar 5, the Global Soil Laboratory Network (GLOSOLAN) was established in 2017 to build and strengthen the capacity of laboratories in soil analysis and to respond to the need for harmonizing soil analytical data. Harmonization of methods, units, data and information is critical to (1) provide reliable and comparable information between countries, regions and projects; (2) allow the generation of new harmonized soil data sets; and (3) support evidence-based decision making for sustainable soil management.

10. Inter-laboratory comparisons (also called "external quality control" or "proficiency testing") are a periodic assessment of the performance of individual laboratories and groups of laboratories. The assessment is carried out by an independent testing body such as GLOSOLAN by distributing typical materials for unsupervised analysis by the participants. Inter-laboratory comparisons are used as a tool to assess and improve analytical standards, and assist in the standardization of soil analytical methods between laboratories, leading to more reliable and interoperable soil data. Laboratories can use the results obtained in the inter-laboratory comparison to identify areas where improvements may be needed. The Resolution is presented in Annex 1 as follows.

Annex 1

Resolution for the international exchange of soil samples for research purposes under GLOSOLAN

The 7th GSP Plenary Assembly,

Recalling the importance of soil resources for the provision of ecosystem services essential for life on Earth and human well-being,

Highlighting that evidence-based decisions taken using harmonized and reliable data and information are critical to the achievement of sustainable soil management and food security and nutrition, a key objective of FAO's mandate,

Stressing the need for coordinated actions to harmonize and standardize soil analytical data and soil analysis methodologies globally,

Recognizing the potential of the Global Soil Laboratory Network (GLOSOLAN) to go beyond laboratory boundaries, with data generated by harmonized soil laboratories methods and procedures assisting countries to (1) improve or establish national monitoring systems, (2) improve or establish National Soil Information Systems that can feed into the planned Global Soil Information System (GLOSIS), (3) report on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and other international programmes, (4) support decision-making at field and policy level, (5) contribute to the development of international standards and indicators, (6) assess and monitor degraded lands and/or lands affected by climate change and other threats, as identified in the Status of the World Soil Resources report, (7) interpret soil resources for best use and management, (8) improve the link between soil chemistry, physics and biology, (9) contribute to and improve soil classification and description, (10) assist companies manufacturing laboratory equipment to improve their products, (11) expand opportunities for technical and scientific cooperation, (12) strengthen the capability of extension services, (13) identify research needs, and (14) increase investments in research.

Acknowledging the significant and growing participation of laboratories in GLOSOLAN, the many achievements of the network since its establishment in November 2017, and its well-defined and challenging work plan,

Recalling the difficulties encountered by GLOSOLAN in the exchange of soil samples for the execution of inter-laboratory comparisons in Latin America and Asia,

Having considered that GLOSOLAN provides laboratories participating in inter-laboratory comparisons with phytosanitary safe soil samples and detailed guidelines on how to handle the soil samples, minimizing the risk of any type of contamination,

Takes note of the need for GLOSOLAN to have a simplified procedure for the international exchange of soil samples for research purposes,

Welcomes the proposal of the GSP Secretariat and laboratories in GLOSOLAN to submit the request for the establishment of such a procedure to FAO Members at the 27th session of the Committee of Agriculture.

7th GSP Plenary Assembly

05 June 2019 GSPPA: VII/2019/4 21