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# Global Soil Partnership Plenary Assembly

## Ninth session

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**Implementation of the Recommendations of the GSP Evaluation:  
from pillars to global topics (GSPPA: IX/2021/2)**

### Executive Summary

- The 7<sup>th</sup> session of the Plenary Assembly (PA) held in June 2019 suggested that after 7 years since its establishment it would be appropriate to conduct an evaluation of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP) performance to guide its future development.
- The evaluation underlined the extensive development of the GSP since its formal establishment by the FAO Council at the end of 2012, and the need to recalibrate its strategy from what could be called a global positioning phase, highly justified so far, to the full priority given to concrete actions (including the use of the tools developed in this first phase) on the ground to help countries take full advantage of sustainable soil management practices.
- As part of these efforts to recalibrate the GSP, five recommendations were made, including the following: “The Secretariat and ITPS should embark on the formulation of a revamped GSP Action Framework under the mantle: ‘Healthy Soils to meet SDGs, Biodiversity and Climate Change Goals’, including transforming the current Pillars into Outcome Areas for Soil Health”.
- Several reasons explain this need to move towards global themes. Firstly, the pillars have not received sufficient interest and momentum from partners and donors due to their complexity and some overlap between them on certain themes. Thus, the 5 pillars were highlighted as an obstacle to resource mobilisation, which is more oriented towards known and concrete themes, such as the 10 soil threats identified in Status of the World’s Soil Resources<sup>1</sup> or the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- In effect, the pillars were established before the adoption of the SDGs. Reviewing the structure of the GSP work to be more linked to these well-organized goals is seen as an opportunity to put

<sup>1</sup> FAO & ITPS. 2015. [Status of the World’s Soil Resources \(SWSR\)](#) – Main Report. Rome, FAO. p. 650.

soil higher on the global agenda and attract due attention by linking the outputs of the GSP with the progress made by each country in their achievement.

- Finally, with the comprehensive body of knowledge produced by the GSP and the increased awareness of soils, there is a natural shift from the GSP's role of advocacy and agenda setting at the global level to an implementation support role to countries, in addressing specific threats and concrete themes.
- The Secretariat has prepared "The GSP action framework: healthy soils for a healthy life: from promotion to consolidation of Sustainable Soil Management: a GSP Action Framework 2021-2030" for consideration of this Plenary Assembly (PA).
- The [8<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly](#) supported the institutional repositioning of the Global Soil Partnership as an FAO statutory body, while it requested the Secretariat to perform a sound assessment of the implications.
- The 27<sup>th</sup> Session of FAO's Committee on Agriculture (COAG) acknowledged the findings of the evaluation of the GSP and requested - in case of an institutionalization of the GSP as a FAO statutory body- that the Secretariat carry out a detailed analysis of the legal and financial implications, including on the involvement of non-state stakeholders, the decision-making process, the roles of the Regional Soil Partnerships (RSPs) and Focal points. The Committee requested that the findings of this assessment be submitted to its 28<sup>th</sup> Session.
- The Secretariat is putting a team to prepare such an assessment and will submit it to the 28<sup>th</sup> Session of COAG in 2022 for consideration.
- Some important developments towards the conservation and sustainable management of soils that have emerged internationally should be considered. For instance, recently, the European Parliament has issued a resolution [2021/2548(RSP)] on soil protection, calling on the European Union (EU) Member States to lead by example and to consider initiating a soil convention within the United Nations (UN).

### **Suggested actions by the GSP Plenary Assembly**

The Plenary Assembly may wish to:

- recognise that the pillars have well supported the organisation of the GSP work since 2012, but that, with the substantial expansion of such work, the pillars are becoming somewhat restrictive and require reshaping;
- express its appreciation for the efforts made by the Secretariat, the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS) and the RSPs to implement the recommendation made in the evaluation with a view to reshaping the GSP structure and making it move forward in challenging contexts;
- endorse the proposed "GSP action framework: healthy soils for a healthy life: from promotion to consolidation of Sustainable Soil Management: a GSP Action Framework 2021- 2030";
- invite FAO Members and partners to adopt this new GSP action framework at national/local level in order to set clear targets for reducing soil degradation and enhancing soil health through sustainable soil management;
- invite all GSP partners to move from the use of Pillars and their Implementation Plans into a framework of Soil Threats and Targets. For example, work under Pillar 4 would no longer use the rigid structure of its Implementation Plan, so that GSP soil information activities would focus on successful global maps and the national soil information systems in order to build the Global

Soil Information System (GloSIS). There should, however, be a bridging phase till the time the new arrangements are fully in place;

- welcome the work done by the Secretariat in order to perform the assessment of the implications of an eventual institutionalization of the GSP into a statutory body, taking note of ongoing developments such as the resolution of the European Parliament inviting EU Member States to establish a UN Soil Convention. This assessment shall be submitted to the 28<sup>th</sup> Session of COAG.

## 2.1 New GSP Action Framework: healthy soils for a healthy life

1. 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 provided for such assessment”.
2. The [8<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly](#) expressed its appreciation for the efforts made to carry out the evaluation despite the COVID-19 pandemic constraints and welcomed the findings of the report on the GSP’s 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 putting work on soils and related issues such as biodiversity and climate change under the SDGs umbrella, could ease the mobilization of financial resources.
3. The Plenary Assembly 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 request should be submitted to the attention of the 27th session of the COAG.
4. The Assembly invited the Secretariat to 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.
5. Accordingly, the Secretariat together with ITPS have addressed these requests and provide a brief on the actions taken per recommendation:
  - Recommendation 1: The Secretariat and ITPS should embark on the formulation of a revamped GSP Action Framework under the mantle: ‘Healthy Soils to meet SDGs, Biodiversity and Climate Change Goals’, including transforming the current Pillars into Outcome Areas for Soil Health.

The Secretariat has prepared the “The GSP action framework: healthy soils for a healthy life: from promotion to consolidation of Sustainable Soil Management: a GSP Action Framework 2021- 2030” for consideration in Annex 1.

- Recommendation 2: Recognize two distinct functions within the Secretariat: a Programme unit and a Resource Mobilization unit in order to formulate and support implementation of a portfolio of cogent projects and interact with resource providers more systematically.

The Secretariat has sought to reinforce both Programme and Resource mobilization activities by creating a project-post assisted by a General Service staff who can handle all issues related to project formulation and implementation following FAO's project cycle. It is not possible to have more staff members in this area as this would require financial resources currently not available.

- Recommendation 3: Undertake consultations involving the relevant departments up to the senior leadership of FAO, 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 further organs as appropriate.

The Secretariat is organising due in-house consultations and this will be further discussed once the assessment of the implications is performed.

- Recommendation 4: Revamp the present regional and national structural arrangements, building closer links to FAO's own decentralized structures, and establish Centres of Excellence.

The Secretariat has sought to organize meetings with FAO technical officers associated with soils in the Regional and Sub-regional offices to ensure maximum awareness of the GSP at all levels. Furthermore, concrete collaboration is taking place with the regional offices in areas where sustainable soil management is getting major interest and joint projects were/are under preparation/implementation. It is also worth mentioning that the Asian Soil Partnership has established the Centre of Excellence on Soil Research in Asia (CESRA) as the first regional Center of excellence on soils.

- Recommendation 5: The GSP should also prepare firmer Partnership Framework Agreements with key international conventions and organizations, especially UNCCD, UNEP, UNCBD and UNFCCC.

Currently, the GSP particularly through its ITPS has very strong collaboration links with these conventions. Indeed, many joint activities were organized with quite successful results. Establishing formal agreements beyond this solid collaborative spirit is somehow challenging given the current institutional setting.

## 2.2 Assessment of the implications of an eventual institutionalization of the GSP

6. The [8<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly](#) supported the institutional repositioning of the Global Soil Partnership as an FAO statutory body. However, it requested the Secretariat to perform a sound assessment of the legal and financial implications, including the impact on the participation on non-state stakeholders. This request had to be submitted to the 27th session of the Committee on Agriculture (COAG) for consideration.
7. The [27<sup>th</sup> session of COAG](#) acknowledged the findings of the evaluation of the GSP and requested the Secretariat to carry out a detailed analysis of the legal and financial implications of this eventual institutionalization, including on the involvement of non-state stakeholders, the decision-making process, the roles of the Regional Soil Partnerships and Focal points. The Committee asked that the findings of the assessment be submitted to its 28th Session.

8. Accordingly, the GSP Secretariat is arranging for a team to prepare such an assessment in due course, and will submit it to the 28<sup>th</sup> Session of COAG in 2022 for consideration.
9. In doing so, some important developments towards the conservation and sustainable management of soils that have emerged should be considered. For instance, the European Parliament has recently issued a resolution [\[2021/2548\(RSP\)\]](#) on soil protection “The EU Parliament understands the importance of cooperation at all levels to effectively address all soil threats; calls on the Member States, therefore, to lead by example and to consider initiating a soil convention within the UN”.
10. The GSP Secretariat and the ITPS are organizing a workshop during the European Soil Congress (EUROSOIL21) to review the status of soil governance, with particular attention to giving sustainable soil management a more formal status.

## ANNEX 1. GSP Action Framework 2021- 2030

### Healthy soils for a healthy life: from promotion to consolidation of Sustainable Soil Management

#### Introduction

The Global Soil Partnership was officially established in December 2012 when FAO's Members endorsed its Terms of Reference at its 145<sup>th</sup> Session of the Council. However, the preparation for this establishment started at the beginning of 2011.

The aim of the partnership in the initial period focused on raising awareness and advocating for the importance of sustainable soil management for the provision of ecosystem services and the urgent need for action to reverse soil degradation, as well as engaging all relevant stakeholders in achieving its mandate. Indeed, the first actions of the Partnership were the proposal and associated work for the designation of World Soil Day on 5<sup>th</sup> December by the United Nations General Assembly and to declare 2015 as the International Year of Soils. Both proposals were submitted by the Kingdom of Thailand and were fully supported by FAO and UN Members.

During the period 2012-2020, the work of the Global Soil Partnership aimed to position soils in the global agenda. Efforts were made to establish the structure and components of the GSP and to ensure that the partnership becomes a global mechanism that advocates the cause of sustainable soil management. This was accompanied by actions in different fronts, including awareness raising and advocacy of soil governance, capacity building, development of normative tools, resource mobilization, development of technical tools, establishment of soil information systems at all levels, organization of global symposia, preparation of global assessments, and field activities, all under the scientific guidance of the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils and the commitment of both FAO Members and partners.

In view of the progress made to 2019, partners requested an Evaluation of the GSP in order to identify gaps to be addressed in turn to move into a consolidation phase. The Secretariat endeavored to perform such an [evaluation](#) in 2020 and the report provided the key findings and recommendations. One of the recommendations suggested that the GSP should move from pillars to an Action Framework addressing global challenges. The present document constitutes the proposed new GSP Action Framework 2021-2030.

#### Global issues and the role of healthy soils

The Anthropocene era is characterized by massive global changes such as urban sprawl, food insecurity and malnutrition, poverty, climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation, pollution and widespread disease outbreaks. The challenge for the future is for society to adapt to and mitigate these changes, including working to restore agri-food and natural systems.

Healthy soils provide and regulate key ecosystem services that enable life on Earth. Soil is the foundation of the food system and the medium in which nearly all food-producing crops grow; about 95 percent of the food we eat comes from the soil. After the oceans, soil is the largest active store of carbon, thus soil is an important part of the climate system. Soils also store and filter water. One cubic metre of soil can store up to 600 litres of water, allowing crops to grow even during dry periods. Being absorbent, soil also acts as a buffer against flooding. Above and belowground biodiversity is vital to ensure healthy soils and the ecosystems upon which we depend. Soil biodiversity contributes to the cycling of nutrients and carbon, regulates the occurrence of pests and diseases, and serves as a source of pharmaceuticals that contribute to boost our health. Soils also provide building materials, fuel and fibre. They underpin human infrastructure and preserve our cultural heritage.

However, the world's soils are at risk: about one third of the world's soils are in poor or very poor condition and are in some process of degradation. In addition, soils are under increasing pressure from rising demand for food and raw materials for a growing population. Climate change and extreme weather events are exacerbating soil degradation processes.

To address the current global challenges facing both humanity and the planet –including the COVID–19 outbreak, efforts are needed to halt soil degradation and scale up investment in sustainable soil management. Healthy soils can contribute greatly to addressing (through prevention, mitigation, adaptation and restoration) these challenges and to enhancing the provision of ecosystem services. This is possible due to the crosscutting nature of soils and the associated co-benefits they provide. The objective of this new GSP Action Framework is indeed focused on unlocking the potential of healthy soils to respond to the global challenges.

### **Global responses**

Now more than ever, civil society is playing a role in calling for action to address the global challenges facing humanity, for example the latest civil society movements to address climate change and healthier food production. The different country responses and commitments are highlighted as important decisions towards sustainable development for all. In this scenario, FAO Members have designed the new FAO Strategic Framework, which seeks to support the 2030 Agenda through the transformation towards MORE efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agri-food systems for better production, better nutrition, better environment and better lives, leaving no one behind.

The following constitute important international and regional commitments that will be incorporated into the GSP Action Framework 2021-2030:

- Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
- The Paris Agreement
- Land Degradation Neutrality
- The Global Biodiversity Framework
- The Basel, Rotterdam, Stockholm and Minamata Conventions
- Koronivia Joint work on Agriculture
- One Health approach
- UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030)
- Global Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance
- UN Global Campaign on Sustainable Nitrogen Management
- UNEA Declaration towards a Pollution-Free Planet
- The EU Green Deal

### **From GSP Pillars to GSP Action Framework**

The Recommendation 1 of the GSP evaluation advises that the GSP should move from a pillar-based organization to a more action-oriented strategy. The basis for this recommendation is as follows:

- the work of the GSP is currently organized around the ten soil threats (identified by the Status of the World's Soil Resources report in 2015), covering all aspects included in the pillars (sustainable management, awareness raising, education and governance, research, information and data, and harmonization of soil analysis and nomenclature);
- there is a need to connect soils and global issues more clearly and forcefully, thus triggering significant investment;
- the opportunity to connect soils and the SDGs not only from a theoretical point of view, but also from a pragmatic perspective of scaling up investment for sustainable soil management.

The Terms of Reference of the Global Soil Partnership state that its work will be based on five pillars of action covering all soil-related areas of work. Taking note that the GSP Terms of Reference were endorsed by the FAO Council, any changes to them require Council endorsement. At the same time, it is important to note that eliminating the pillars is not a strategic step in the short term, as the core of the GSP work is organised in the cross-cutting issues they cover, particularly when it comes to the more technical ones (Pillars 4 and 5) that have a more concrete work plan and outcomes. In addition, most Regional Soil Partnerships are successfully organized by pillars. However, the rigid structure of the pillars and their implementation plans have proven to limit the implementation of activities and the mobilization of resources, and a transition towards a more flexible structure in line with international agendas and targets in the short to medium term would be necessary.

It should be noted that this work organized by key topics has already been underway since the launch of the Status of the World's Soil Resources report, as the main work of the GSP has focused on addressing soil threats from symposia, through global assessments and mapping to action on the ground.

Therefore, the approach suggested by the GSP Secretariat and its Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils is not to eliminate the pillars immediately (to avoid unnecessary modification of the Terms of Reference and to give continuity to the foundational work of the GSP), but to develop the GSP Framework for Action 2021-2030 that allows for a better alignment of the work of the GSP with global agendas. This means a strategic workplan of the GSP for a ten-year period with clear targets and indicators that will set out the ambitions of the GSP and its members/partners. The work of the GSP will therefore be channeled towards achieving the objectives and targets of the new GSP Framework, building on the legacy of the work done under the pillars.

### **Ambition, targets and indicators**

The overall ambition of this Action Framework is to **improve the health of at least 50 percent of the world's soils by 2030**.

Targets and indicators are essential to monitor progress towards this ambition. It is proposed to develop a Soil Health<sup>2</sup> Index based on the indicators of the Sustainable Soil Management Protocol agreed by all stakeholders.

It is important to note that the intention is not to spend time in target setting as this has proven to be an endless process in other constituencies. The objective is to set feasible targets that the GSP and its members/partners will strive to achieve using their means in a consolidated mode.

Specific targets and indicators to be included in the Action Framework are the following:

1. By 2030, soil productivity in 25 percent of world's agricultural land is enhanced through the adoption of SSM in compliance with the Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Soil Management (VGSSM) and other normative documents.
  - a. Portion of agricultural land under SSM over total agricultural land area
  - b. Number of individuals among technical staff and soil users taking part in capacity building activities on SSM
  - c. Number of countries adopting the VGSSM within national legislation
  - d. Number of countries adopting sustainable fertilizer management according to the principles of the International Code of Conduct for the Sustainable Use and Management of Fertilizers.
2. By 2030, at least 20 million Ha of degraded agricultural soils are restored in line with the SDG target 15.3.1.
  - a. Number of hectares of degraded agricultural soils restored
3. By 2030, awareness about the importance of healthy soils are recognized by at least 30% of global population.
  - a. Number of participants in global, regional and national awareness-raising events, including World Soil Day
  - b. Number of countries celebrating World Soil Day
  - c. Number of countries that organize awareness-raising event
4. By 2030, GHG emissions from managed soils, particularly CO<sub>2</sub> and NO<sub>2</sub>, are reduced by 40% worldwide in line with the NDCs of the Paris Agreement.
  - a. Number of countries with national GHG reduction strategies including soil management options

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<sup>2</sup> The Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS) defines soil health as "the ability of the soil to sustain the productivity, diversity, and environmental services of terrestrial ecosystems".

- b. Agricultural GHG emissions
  - c. Number of countries with national strategies to manage nitrogen fertilizers
5. By 2030, soil carbon sequestration in agricultural systems is enhanced through the adoption of SSM according to the theoretical and economic potential as indicated by the GSOCseq map.
  - a. Number of countries developing/updating the Soil Organic Carbon map
  - b. National carbon stocks (Pg)
  - c. Number of countries using the GSOC-MRV Protocol
  - d. Portion of agricultural land under SSM oriented to conserve and enhance SOC content according to the Technical Manual on SOC Management (hectares)
6. By 2030, at least 5 million Ha of polluted soils are sustainably managed including remediation or adaptation measures.
  - a. Portion of polluted soils under remediation
  - b. Portion of polluted soils under adaptation measures to reduce human and environmental risk
  - c. Number of countries developing national inventories of polluted soils
7. By 2030, soil erosion has been reduced in at least 5 million Ha of agricultural soils
  - a. Portion of agricultural land under water erosion control measures
  - b. Portion of agricultural land under wind erosion control measures
  - c. Portion of agricultural land under no-till or reduce tillage
  - d. Number of countries developing/updating National Soil Erosion Maps
8. By 2030, soil biodiversity loss is reduced at least by 10%
  - a. Number of countries in which soil biodiversity indicators have been included in national soil information and monitoring systems
  - b. Portion of agricultural land under SSM practices oriented to enhance soil biodiversity
9. By 2030, good practices for saline soils management are adopted in at least 5 million Ha
  - a. Number of countries developing/updating the National Soil Salinity map
  - b. Portion of salt-affected agricultural land under SSM practices oriented to boost productivity and preserved ecosystem services of salt-affected soil
  - c. Portion of agricultural land under integrated irrigation systems oriented to reduce secondary salinization
10. By 2030, at the latest, green water management is enhanced through the adoption of good practices in at least 5 million hectares of drylands.
  - a. Portion of agricultural land in which green water management practices are applied
  - b. Number of countries including strategies and planning processes for green water recovery and use
11. By 2030, at the latest, GloSIS is available as a federated system that includes 100 national soil information systems and is connected to GLOSOLAN.
  - a. Number of countries with National Soil information Systems contributing to a fully operational federated GloSIS
  - b. Number of countries contributing to the Global Soil Statistics Platform (SoilSTAT) for indicator monitoring

Importantly, the GSP Secretariat will facilitate the data collection work at national, regional and global levels, but all members are expected to report every two years on progress made at the national level to achieve these targets. Reporting at global, regional and national levels will take place during the GSP Plenary Assembly.

It is important to note that the work of the previous Pillar 4 will focus on supporting this process through indicators and will be built in the successful experiences when building global maps following a country driven approach. The experience has proven that emerging needs from members in terms of global soil information is the way to go as it helps populate GloSIS, instead of a fixed plan that is not feasible to execute at all.

Tools for supporting reporting and monitoring:

- GLOSIS and National Soil Information Systems
- GLOSOLAN
- GSOC-MRV
- SSM Protocol
- INSII, INFA, INSAS, INBS

Linkages between SDGs and soil targets of the GSP Action Framework 2021- 2030:

<b>Global issue</b>	<b>SDG (*under FAO mandate)</b>	<b>Indicator</b>	<b>GSP soil targets</b>
Poverty	SDG 1	1.5.2. Climate change resilience	1.soil productivity 3. soil awareness
Food insecurity and malnutrition	SDG 2*	2.4.1. Agricultural area under productive and sustainable agriculture	1.soil productivity 2. soil restoration
Human health and well-being	SDG 3	3.9.3. Mortality rate attributed to pollution	6. reduction of soil pollution
Clean water and sanitation	SDG 6*	6.3.2. Good ambient water quality 6.4.2. Water stress level	9. saline soils management 10. green water management
Urban sprawl	SDG 11	11.3.1. Land consumption rate	1. soil productivity
Climate change	SDG 13	13.1.1. Climate change resilience	4. GHG reduction 5. SOC sequestration
Life Below Water	SDG 14*	14.1.1. Marine pollution from land-based activities	1. fertilizer management 7. soil erosion reduction

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Terrestrial ecosystems degradation	SDG 15*	15.3.1. Degraded land	2. soil restoration 8. soil biodiversity loss reduction
Partnerships to achieve the Goal	SDG 17	17.16.1. Partnership and cooperation agreements	11. GloSIS development