

Global Soil Week 2012: The Way Forward

Chairman's Conclusions

Without fertile soils, food security, poverty alleviation and climate change mitigation and adaptation will not be achieved. The Global Soil Week 2012, being the first of its kind, requests politicians, land managers and civil society to address soils and land management as a core priority area now. Concerted action must take place at all levels. Success cases should feature more prominently and be up-scaled. Global processes of the post-2015 Development Agenda and on Sustainable Development Goals urgently need to put soils high on their agenda. Soils and current land use systems are being challenged by a range of non-sustainable features like urbanisation, overexploitation and malpractice, desertification and the legacy of soil contamination. For participants of the Global Soil Week soil related Sustainability Goals were a striking focus. Held in Berlin, Germany, more than 400 participants representing 65 countries recognized the need for urgent action to reverse all forms of soil and land degradation. Several options to address soils in a global science-policy interface surfaced as a result of the intense debate: Striving to achieve zero soil and land degradation was one of the options. Discussions called for action-oriented and concise next steps. This document presents the conclusions by the chairman of the Global Soil Week, Prof. Dr. Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director, Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS), Potsdam. The partners of the Global Soil Week collated the core results of the Global Soil Week in the Outcome Paper.

1 The Situation

The state of our soils threatens sustainable development. Particularly, food security will not be achieved immediate and consolidated action towards sustainable soil management. Soils provide a range of essential functions and are of high cultural significance. However, over the last 50 years the amount of arable land per person has decreased by half. Much of the remaining area suffers from degradation.

Each year, we loose more than 20 billion tons of soil because on croplands because of erosion. This is more than 3 tons per earth inhabitant per year. Added to this is soil that is contaminated, sealed, seriously compacted or otherwise degraded. At the same time, the irrigated area, for example, has increased. Taking into account the combined challenges of scarce water and soil resources, there cannot be any doubt that coherent and immediate action against land and soil degradation is essential to feed our population and 9 billion people in 2050.

Soil is pivotal in mitigating climate change, as they store 4,000 billion tons of carbon. This is several times more than the world's forests. This applies to adaptation as well: Without sound land use management, people will be left more vulnerable to the impact of climate

change. There are further highly important ecosystem services provided by soils, such as water storage. To safeguard all these services, protection of fertile soils and rehabilitation of degraded soils are of vital importance.

The first Global Soil Week gave a clear signal: Consolidated and integrated responses to soil and land degradation cannot be postponed further. There is the need to act now.

2 Responses

Responding to these challenges requires urgent and consolidated action in:

- **Strengthening science and technology:**

Soil science and broader interdisciplinary studies created a wealth of knowledge. However, the complex links between soils and other elements of the ecosystem and the need to develop integrated responses to address the challenges posed by land and soil degradation require science for sustainability with a focus on soil. It is necessary to join forces for an updated full assessment at global scale of the current soil degradation processes.

- **Capacity building:**

Soil and land degradation is a global phenomenon which requires adapted responses all over the world. Particular emphasis should be given to those areas where land and water resources are under high stress. At the same time, areas with high productivity should serve as a potential learning ground in this regard.

- **Partnerships for change:**

It is imperative to join forces to arrive at integrated responses to land and soil degradation addressing all three pillars of sustainability: economy, ecology and society. Effective pathways for implementing policies for the sustainable and equitable use of soil resources are urgently needed.

- **Soil awareness raising:**

It is pivotal to raise awareness about soils. In this regard, innovative tools need to be developed enabling participation of civil societies.

3 Way Forward

Building on the discussions at the first Global Soil Week, the following steps on the way forward were considered crucial:

- **Facilitate the Science-Policy-Public Interface:**

We need science of sustainability with regard to soils exploring the complex interactions between the economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainability. There is, however, sufficient knowledge available to develop integrated solutions to land and soil degradation to act upon it. The available knowledge needs to be communicated in an adapted way so that it becomes more relevant to decision-makers and the broader public.

- **Global Soil Week as a continuous process:**

There is strong recognition of the need to have a global integrated network open to all actors which will also contribute to the Global Soil Partnership. In this regard, participants encouraged holding a second Global Soil Week in one year's time.

- **Towards an Agenda for Action:**

As a first step, this continuous process needs to consolidate the findings of the First Global Soil Week. The partners of the Global Soil Week agreed to collaboratively develop an Agenda for Action. This process is open to contributions by all. The Agenda for Action may focus on:

- Multi-level governance for Zero Net Land and Soil Degradation:** Governance responses need to rest on the three pillars of sustainability and begin with the local and national level where soil and land use decisions are being taken. Governance responses will also need to guarantee that relevant soil functions are sustained. In this context an assessment of the effectiveness of international, including voluntary, agreements is recommended.
- Sustainable Land and Soil Management:** Sustainable land and soil management is essential and proven practices need to be scaled up. These practices (i) must take the nexus between resources and human demands into account; (ii) need to go beyond rural areas and be systematically expanded to urban areas as well.
- Communication for change:** All actors need to share best practises and support efforts for better extension services.

Encouraged by the positive and inspiring atmosphere during the First Global Soil Week, numerous panels and important contributions made, I am looking forward to our continuous collaboration. Your suggestions and comments on the Global Soil Week are most welcome so that we jointly and successfully tackle the great challenges for fertile soils for better lives for all.

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