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CONFERENCE

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Evaluation of the International Year of Soils 2015

Executive Summary

The main objective of the International Year of Soils (IYS) was to raise awareness of the importance of sustainable soil management as the basis for food systems, fuel and fibre production, essential ecosystem services and better adaptation to climate change for present and future generations.

Within the framework of the Global Soil Partnership, FAO was asked by the United Nations General Assembly to facilitate the implementation of both World Soil Day (5 December) and the IYS, in collaboration with governments and various partners. The IYS either generated or catalyzed major achievements which could be summarized as follows: a broad range of awareness raising material produced and widely distributed, the launch of the first version of the Status of the World's Soil Resources report, the endorsement of the revised World Soil Charter, and soils being well reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals. The Year greatly contributed to improved knowledge and information, and public perception of the importance of soils, while establishing a solid momentum for sustainable soil management practices being promoted and adopted by various stakeholders in the future. The International Year of Soils also triggered the strengthening of existing national soil programmes, the launching of new national soil institutions and soil science societies, and the development of national soil related policies and laws.

Lastly, the effective involvement of schools, resulted in an unprecedented dissemination of the advocacy messages and the scaling up of several of the IYS activities at national level.

Suggested action by the Conference

The Conference is invited to:

- a) endorse the present evaluation report, noting the substantial achievements made at all levels in the context of the International Year of Soils (IYS) 2015;
- b) highlight the importance of soils for contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030;
- c) encourage FAO Members and other relevant stakeholders to pursue the acquired momentum in terms of concrete actions against soil degradation and for promoting sustainable soil management through various initiatives, including the Global Soil Partnership.



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I. Background

1. In 2013 the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) declared 2015 as the International Year of Soils (IYS), designating as well 5 December as World Soil Day. FAO, within the framework of the Global Soil Partnership (GSP), was invited by the UNGA to facilitate the implementation of both the Day and the Year in collaboration with governments and various partners. The International Year was officially launched on 5 December 2014 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York.
2. FAO, within the framework of an established Global Soil Partnership (GSP), set up a Secretariat team consisting of three units (i.e. the Partnerships, Advocacy and Capacity Development Division (OPC); the Land and Water Division (CBL), where the GSP Secretariat is hosted; and the Office for Corporate Communication (OCC)).
3. The Secretariat facilitated the establishment of an IYS Steering Committee (IYS-SC) chaired by the Kingdom of Thailand and with participation of representatives from Member Countries and other key partners from academia, civil society, farmer's organizations, private sector, research centres and other UN organizations.
4. The main objective of the IYS was to raise awareness of the importance of sustainable soil management as the basis for food systems, fuel and fibre production, essential ecosystem services and better adaptation to climate change for present and future generations. Throughout the year, UN agencies, governments, civil society, the private sector, academia and soil science societies, research institutions and other actors joined efforts to spread awareness on the many contributions of healthy soils at all levels, from global to local. The IYS was concluded with a closing event, hosted by FAO in Rome on the occasion of World Soil Day, on 5 December 2015.
5. Professor Claire Chenu (France) and Professor Tekalign Mamo (Ethiopia) were appointed as Global Ambassadors for the IYS. Their contributions throughout 2015 were key to raise awareness on the importance and value of soils.
6. The activities in connection with the IYS fell in broad terms under the following categories:
 - a) Normative work and key publications
 - b) Development and dissemination of awareness raising materials
 - c) Organization of scientific events
 - d) Organization of informal events/campaigns for the general public
 - e) Contests via video and movie festivals
 - f) Training sessions
 - g) Social media participation
 - h) Targeted actions.

II. Financial contributions

7. The Russian Federation, Switzerland, the Kingdom of Thailand, the European Commission, the International Association of Agriculture Production Insurers, the International Fertilizer Industry Association and the Austrian Hail Insurance Company provided financial resources to support at least in part the implementation of the IYS plan of action.

III. Outcomes

8. The Secretariat collated information on the numerous events and activities which took place in all regions and countries in connection with IYS celebrations throughout the year and at all levels, from global to local. These activities involved a very wide range of stakeholders and interested parties, including government entities and civil society organizations, as well as the media and the general public, in particular large numbers of students in schools and other teaching institutions.

9. More than 900 (as registered by the Secretariat) events were organized in more than 90 countries under the umbrella of the IYS. They ranged from art exhibitions to high level meetings, symposia, regional consultations, local workshops and activities in schools. The financial resources entrusted to FAO were invested primarily in the production of education materials (i.e. infographics, fact sheets, posters, animations on soils, videos, booklets for children, and gadgets such as T-shirts, bags, USB sticks and caps). In order to facilitate effective impact on global awareness, new highlights on soils were released every week, the IYS website was made available in the six FAO official languages, initiatives such as competitions, quizzes, movie festivals were organized, and a strong presence of the IYS in social media was ensured. More than 150 articles focusing on the IYS were given to the press. Additionally, donations helped in organizing regional and national workshops with governmental involvement.

10. These activities dovetailed with those carried out by the GSP for the purpose of boosting soil health worldwide. From March to October, consultations took place in seven out of the nine areas where regional soil partnerships (RSPs) are active. With regard to the five Pillars of the GSP, regional implementation plans were, or started to be prepared with a view to be executed as soon as possible. The GSP also supported various events worldwide, including in Algeria, Austria, Belgium, Bolivia, Cabo Verde, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, France, Germany, Ghana, Hungary, Jordan, Namibia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Peru, Switzerland, Thailand and Turkey. Global and regional events (e.g. the Global Soil Week) and consultations were also supported. Additionally, due attention was given to highlight soils in the context of major international events such as EU meetings, COP12 in Ankara, meetings of the FAO Committee on World Food Security, and EXPO 2015 Milano.

11. In coincidence with the IYS 2015, the World Soil Charter was revised and approved by the FAO Conference, and the first edition of the Status of the World's Soil Resources report was released. In addition, soils were well reflected in the approved Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Four out of the 17 SDGs endorsed by the international community directly address soils and their role in enabling life on Earth and ensure human well-being.

12. While certainly not exhaustive of what happened in connection with the IYS, some interesting numbers can be provided as follows:

- a) gadgets produced and distributed in all regions: 7324 IYS bags; 3000 USBs; 5000 pens; 3380 t-shirts; 1000 caps;
- b) regional workshops: 7
- c) national workshops/events: 450
- d) videos/animations: 7
- e) more than 50 videos on good practices
- f) factsheets: 6
- g) infographics: 12
- h) posters: 18.

IV. Sustaining the Momentum beyond the IYS

13. The IYS undoubtedly generated an impressive momentum of sustained interest, and embodied an important historical turning point in the cause for soil conservation and sustainable management. By making good use of the legacy of the International Year, all stakeholders, including from civil society, governments, institutions and academia were expected to continue to serve this cause most actively. The GSP in particular has actively pursued its mission since the closure of the Year, building on the heightened awareness generated, and is ensuring continuity through two main awareness raising platforms, the World Soil Day celebration and the establishment of the Glinka World Soil Prize.

14. The inclusion of the relevance of soils in the SDGs provides a solid base for improving sustainable soil management by 2030.