



Food and Agriculture Organization  
of the United Nations

# Revised World Soil Charter



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June 2015



## Foreword

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Healthy soils are a basic prerequisite to meeting varied needs for food, biomass (energy), fiber, fodder, and other products, and to ensuring the provision of essential ecosystem services in all regions of the world. However, humankind is facing unprecedented pressures on soil resources. In particular, soil degradation of various types including sealing due to fast urbanization are taking their heavy toll, threatening food security and ecological balance. With the Sustainable Development Goals currently under consideration and soon to be implemented, it is fundamental to ensure sustainable management of soils in order to make these goals a reality.

Fortunately, there is recognition of the need to act more forcefully at all levels, nationally, regionally and internationally in order to reverse alarming trends and to maintain the healthy soils required for feeding growing populations. Most symbolically, the General Assembly of the United Nations has formally endorsed the celebration of World Soil Day on every 5th December and declared 2015 as the International Year of Soils (IYS), both platforms leading to much enhanced awareness among policy makers and the public at large beyond 2015.

As the conservation of soil resources is at the core of FAO's mandate, its Governing Bodies have sought to address this major issue and mobilize the energies of all stakeholders through novel instruments and approaches. One of them is the Global Soil Partnership (GSP), which was established by the FAO Council in December 2012 and has been in operation since then. Being of a voluntary nature, the GSP is a coalition of willing partners with the challenging mission of improving governance of limited soil resources and ensuring healthy and productive soils for a food secure world.

Under the aegis of the GSP and its scientific advisory body, the Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils, the revision of the World Soil Charter (WSC), a policy instrument adopted by the FAO Conference as far back as November 1981 was carried out. Indeed, 30 years is a long period of time in a fast evolving world. Therefore, it was particularly opportune to update the vision and guiding principles as spelled out in the original WSC, especially with respect to new issues that emerged or were exacerbated during the last decades, like soil pollution and its consequences for the environment, climate change adaptation and mitigation and urban sprawl impacts on soil availability and functions.

The reformulation process involved extensive consultations and culminated in the unanimous endorsement of the revised World Soil Charter by the FAO Conference at its 39th session in June 2015. It was most fitting that this landmark decision took place during the IYS. The Charter contains a number of key principles and general guidelines for the benefit of major stakeholder groups so as to chart the required policy measures and action programmes to guarantee sustainable management of soils in all regions and countries.

The adoption of this revised Charter is clearly not an end in itself. In fact, I trust it will greatly assist in consolidating the momentum of increased priority to soils and foster concrete actions to promote their sustainable management, conservation and restoration in cases where they are severely degraded or under threat.

Undoubtedly, there will be a need to supplement the inspiring principles and guidelines for action which the new Charter embodies, with more technically orientated ones to be used at field level in different contexts. A process to do that is in fact under consideration by the appropriate GSP and FAO organs.

I commend the work that went into producing the revised World Soil Charter and am proud to present it to the attention and use of decision-makers and soil practitioners in all countries and regions.

**JOSE GRAZIANO DA SILVA**

Director-General

# Revised World Soil Charter

## Fao Conference Revised Charter Adoption

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The 39th session of the FAO Conference, recalling its resolution 8/81 (21st Session, November 1981) which adopted the first version of the World Soil Charter;

Noting with appreciation the timely initiative of the organs of the recently established Global Soil Partnership (GSP), namely its Plenary Assembly and Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils, to assess the continued validity of the Charter and to develop a revised text more attuned to present and challenging soil issues and contexts;

Recognizing the current threats to precious soil resources in all regions which could seriously undermine the implementation of agreed goals and objectives for hunger eradication and sustainable development, and stressing therefore the imperious need to reverse alarming trends;

Realizing that acceleration of the momentum to generate more concrete international cooperation and activities and mobilize resources to reverse soil degradation and support effective soil conservation measures, as embodied by the GSP and other initiatives, would be well served by an updated Charter, which would assist in widely disseminating solid principles and guidelines for action by all stakeholders;

Concurring with the requirement for an updated Charter to reflect also the major policy developments and conceptual advances with relevance to soils, as had occurred in the intervening period since the adoption of the first version;

Taking the opportunity of the International Year of Soils Healthy soils for a healthy life to advocate for sustainable management of global soil resources;

Taking account of the advice from the Committee on Agriculture at its 24th Session (29 September-3 October 2014) and the FAO Council at its 150th Session (1-5 December 2014):

- 1.** Hereby adopts a revised version of the World Soil Charter;
- 2.** Recommends to the United Nations system and all international organizations concerned to promote actively the principles and guidelines set out in the Charter, and to support their translation into sound policies and tangible activities at all levels: national, regional and international.

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## Preamble

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**1.** Soils are fundamental to life on Earth but human pressures on soil resources are reaching critical limits. Careful soil management is one essential element of sustainable agriculture and also provides a valuable lever for climate regulation and a pathway for safeguarding ecosystem services and biodiversity.

**2.** The outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) in June 2012, “The Future We Want”, recognizes the economic and social significance of good land management, including soil, particularly its contribution to economic growth, biodiversity, sustainable agriculture and food security, eradicating poverty, the empowerment of women, addressing climate change and improving water availability.

## Principles

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**3.** Soils are a key enabling resource, central to the creation of a host of goods and services integral to ecosystems and human well-being. The maintenance or enhancement of global soil resources is essential if humanity’s overarching need for food, water, and energy security is to be met in accordance with the sovereign rights of each state over their natural resources. In particular, the projected increases in food, fibre, and fuel production required to achieve food and energy security will place increased pressure on the soil.

**4.** Soils result from complex actions and interactions of processes in time and space and hence are themselves diverse in form and properties and the level of ecosystems services they provide. Good soil governance requires that these differing soil capabilities be understood and that land use that respects the range of capabilities be encouraged with a view to eradicating poverty and achieving food security.

**5.** Soil management is sustainable if the supporting, provisioning, regulating, and cultural services provided by soil are maintained or enhanced without significantly impairing either the soil functions that enable those services or biodiversity. The balance between the supporting and provisioning services for plant production and the regulating services the soil provides for water quality and availability and for atmospheric greenhouse gas composition is a particular concern.

**6.** The implementation of soil management decisions is typically made locally and occurs within widely differing socio-economic contexts. The development of specific measures appropriate for adoption by local decision-makers often requires multi-level, interdisciplinary initiatives by many stakeholders. A strong commitment to including local and indigenous knowledge is critical.

**7.** The specific functions provided by a soil are governed, in large part, by the suite of chemical, biological, and physical properties present in that soil. Knowledge of the actual state of those properties, their role in soil functions, and the effect of change – both natural and human-induced—on them is essential to achieve sustainability.

**8.** Soils are a key reservoir of global biodiversity, which ranges from micro-organisms to flora and fauna. This biodiversity has a fundamental role in supporting soil functions and therefore ecosystem goods and services associated with soils. Therefore it is necessary to maintain soil biodiversity to safeguard these functions.

**9.** All soils – whether actively managed or not - provide ecosystem services relevant to global climate regulation and multi-scale water regulation. Land use conversion can reduce these global, common-good services provided by soils. The impact of local or regional land-use conversions can be reliably evaluated only in the context of global evaluations of the contribution of soils to essential ecosystem services.

**10.** Soil degradation inherently reduces or eliminates soil functions and their ability to support ecosystem services essential for human well-being. Minimizing or eliminating significant soil degradation is essential to maintain the services provided by all soils and is substantially more cost-effective than rehabilitating soils after degradation has occurred.

**11.** Soils that have experienced degradation can, in some cases, have their core functions and their contributions to ecosystem services restored through the application of appropriate rehabilitation techniques. This increases the area available for the provision of services without necessitating land use conversion.

## Guidelines for Action

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**12.** The overarching goal for all parties is to ensure that soils are managed sustainably and that degraded soils are rehabilitated or restored.

**13.** Good soil governance requires that actions at all levels – from States, and, to the extent that they are able, other public authorities, international organizations, individuals, groups, and corporations – be informed by the principles of sustainable soil management and contribute to the achievement of a land-degradation neutral world in the context of sustainable development.

**14.** All actors and specifically, each of the following stakeholder groups are encouraged to consider the following actions:

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## Actions by Individuals and the Private Sector

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- I. All individuals using or managing soil must act as stewards of the soil to ensure that this essential natural resource is managed sustainably to safeguard it for future generations.
- II. Undertake sustainable soil management in the production of goods and services.

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## Actions by Groups and the Science Community

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- I. Disseminate information and knowledge on soils.
- II. Emphasise the importance of sustainable soil management to avoid impairing key soil functions.

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## Actions by Governments

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- I. Promote sustainable soil management that is relevant to the range of soils present and the needs of the country.
- II. Strive to create socio-economic and institutional conditions favourable to sustainable soil management by removal of obstacles. Ways and means should be pursued to overcome obstacles to the adoption of sustainable soil management associated with land tenure, the rights of users, access to financial services and educational programmes. Reference is made to the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Forests and Fisheries in the Context of National Food Security adopted by the Committee on World Food Security in May 2012.
- III. Participate in the development of multi-level, interdisciplinary educational and capacity-building initiatives that promote the adoption of sustainable soil management by land users.
- IV. Support research programmes that will provide sound scientific backing for development and implementation of sustainable soil management relevant to end-users.
- V. Incorporate the principles and practices of sustainable soil management into policy guidance and legislation at all levels of government, ideally leading to the development of a national soil policy.



**VI.** Explicitly consider the role of soil management practices in planning for adaptation to and mitigation of climate change and maintaining biodiversity.

**VII.** Establish and implement regulations to limit the accumulation of contaminants beyond established levels to safeguard human health and wellbeing and facilitate remediation of contaminated soils that exceed these levels where they pose a threat to humans, plants, and animals.

**VIII.** Develop and maintain a national soil information system and contribute to the development of a global soil information system.

**IX.** Develop a national institutional framework for monitoring implementation of sustainable soil management and overall state of soil resources.

## Actions by International Organizations

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**I.** Facilitate the compilation and dissemination of authoritative reports on the state of the global soil resources and sustainable soil management protocols.

**II.** Coordinate efforts to develop an accurate, high-resolution global soil information system and ensure its integration with other global earth observing systems.

**III.** Assist governments, on request, to establish appropriate legislation, institutions, and processes to enable them to mount, implement, and monitor appropriate sustainable soil management practices.

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