



Principles for Sustainable Soil Management

Soil is the most significant medium for agriculture. Being the chief conduit for feeding and nourishing everyone on earth makes soil one of the world's most important economic and environmental assets. Despite its essential role, soil has long been misunderstood as a critical resource, and its quality tends to be taken for granted. There is a weak understanding of what constitutes and affects 'soil health' among policy makers, businesses, commentators, farmers and the general population.

As a result, poor soil management practices persist in many regions of the world. Deforestation has led to soil erosion. Grasslands have been overgrazed, abandoned and have turned to desert. Biodiversity loss has occurred and ecosystem services performed by soil such as drainage and filtration have been compromised. Continued population growth, migration and urbanization are compounding the problem. Some soils have been polluted and are no longer able to produce food or provide ecosystem services. Freshwater quality is declining and climate change promises to push the drought/flood cycle to greater extremes and place further pressure on soils. Rising sea levels could claim fertile coastal habitat and farmlands. At a time when we need the world's soils to capture and sequester carbon, these compounding factors limit their functionality.

Soils central place in our global systems means it's health and performance can be limited or enhanced by many natural and man made phenomena. As such, it will take coordinated global action to mitigate the threats and protect our soils for generations to come. In this context, business plays a critical role in designing and delivering effective practical solutions for sustainable soil management.

Context

The 68th UN General Assembly declared 2015 the International Year of Soils (IYS) ([A/RES/68/232](#)) with a view to increasing awareness and understanding of the importance of soil for food security and essential ecosystem functions. The IYS offered the opportunity to engage the private sector actively in support of sustainable soil management. Recognizing that soil health requires strong public-private collaboration and partnerships, the UN Global Compact facilitated a dialogue among experts and practitioners that led to the development of voluntary business principles.

Voluntary business principles

Building on the foundation of the Food and Agriculture Business (FAB) Principles, the Principles for Sustainable Soil Management (Soil Principles) have been developed to further literacy among key actors and create an awareness of the need to protect our soils through enlightened programs and policy. Galvanizing voluntary business engagement, the Soil Principles are also aimed at inspiring corporate soil stewardship by guiding the strengthening of existing strategies and policies on soil conservation.

Development process

Facilitated by the UN Global Compact, the development of the Soil Principles is the result of a broad and inclusive multi-stakeholder effort, involving over 200 global experts and practitioners. The consultation process comprised two modes administered subsequently: in-person meetings bringing experts and practitioners together, followed by an open online consultation.

The five in-person meetings were held as follows: (i) New York, January 2014; (ii) Bonn, March 2014; (iii) Singapore, June 2014; (iv) Nairobi, September 2014; and (v) São Paulo, March 2015. The online consultation was open to public participation during 6 weeks in August and September 2015, inviting all stakeholders to comment on a proposed draft.

Based on the contributions received from the over 200 stakeholders who participated in the online consultation, the UN Global Compact finalized the Principles for Sustainable Soil Management in close collaboration with the Earth Institute at Columbia University.

A global framework for action

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by UN Member States in September 2015 introduced ambitious and universal goals for sustainable development. Twelve of the seventeen SDGs relate to the sustainable use of natural resources and several stress the importance of the sustainable use of land resources, calling for serious and collaborative efforts to protect and restore ecosystems, forests, combat desertification, land degradation and biodiversity loss.

In particular, SDG15 calls on all stakeholders in society, including business, to “*protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and biodiversity loss*”.

Achieving this goal requires the active involvement and collaboration of all stakeholders. As agricultural input producer, farmer or food producer, business has a driving role to play in ensuring that soil health is integrated in corporate strategies as a critical and necessary outcome.

Business to advance soil health

The Soil Principles offer a reference point when considering measures to increase agricultural productivity, intensify agriculture or conserve ecosystems. With these principles designed to foster effective collaboration between business and non-business stakeholders, the UN Global Compact invites companies to support the Soil Principles and to:

- Make a commitment to global soil health
- Partner with stakeholders to work for healthy soil
- Share and promote better soil management practices
- Include soil health in strategic and operational planning

By aligning their policies and practices with the Soil Principles, business can contribute to meeting the global challenges of food security and sustainable agriculture.

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