

Global Soil Week 3
20 April 2015
Monique Barbut, UNCCD Executive Secretary
Opening Remarks

It is a great honour to be here. I would like to thank my good friend Klaus Topfer for the invitation and for his tireless work.

And allow me to congratulate the whole organizing team. The Global Soil Week is rapidly becoming the world's most important scientific forum on land and soil issues.

As you know, this (3rd) Global Soil Week is happening at a very busy time. A number of key decisions are due in the coming months. They will determine the place of land and soil on the political agenda for, at least, the next decade.

We can all be a part of a massive transformation about what is a, little appreciated but, universal truth. **Access to healthy and productive land and soil is crucial to the survival and dignity of future generations – wherever they happen to live.**

In 2015, our common challenge is to make sure land and soil emerge with a very high profile. We will have to plan our way through a complex labyrinth.

But as Victor Hugo, the French poet and dramatist, eloquently put it: *“He, who every morning plans... and follows that plan, carries a thread that will guide him through a labyrinth of the most busy life”.*

There are two threads, in particular, that I would like to touch on this morning that should be part of our plan:

Firstly, the **Sustainable Development Goals (the SDGs)**.

It is clear most of the proposed SDG goals would benefit from better management of land and soil.

But there are 2 goals that interest us in particular.

One is the goal on food security and sustainable agriculture. The other is goal 15 to combat land degradation and to protect and restore terrestrial ecosystems.

For goal 15, two related targets are being looked at. 1) to “progressively improve land and soil quality” and 2) to “achieve land degradation neutrality” by 2030.

For me, land degradation neutrality by 2030 is the most critical. It is dynamic and attractive. It encompasses the idea of stopping the drivers of land and soil degradation along with the scaling up of sustainable management practices and rehabilitation of degraded ecosystems. It applies to deforestation and the resulting soil erosion in Africa drylands. It applies equally to European soil sealing and exploitative corporate value chains.

However there will now be a “technical proofing” of these targets. This means identifying suitable indicators that can be used to monitor progress.

To pass the technical proofing, the indicators must demonstrate that there are 1) global datasets already available and that 2) the indicators are accepted by the global community.

Of course, they must also be relevant and effective universal tools for communication. So they should be both “*measurable and compelling*” [David Cameron].

Earlier this year, the European Environment Agency produced a shortlist of global indicators for these targets that aims to be just that. These are based on the UNCCD’s progress indicators, namely 1) land cover – land use change, 2) land productivity and 3) soil organic carbon stocks.

I recognize that, by their nature, indicators represent a simplification of complex processes. **But can Global Soil Week help assess and validate these as a practical monitoring framework?**

In that, I’ll remind you that as Voltaire said: “Perfect is the enemy of good”
“Das Bessere ist der Feind des Guten” “La perfection est l’ennemi du bien”.

We will lose a “once in a generation” opportunity if we cannot agree on which thread to follow out of this particular labyrinth.

So please give us something compelling. Please make it measurable. Or as the Americans say, something we can take to the bank this year.

The second important thread we need to follow is the climate negotiations.

In Paris, in December this year, at the UNFCCC COP 21, the new climate agreement will - for the first time – seriously consider the land use sector.

Both in terms of adaptation AND mitigation targets.

So far the mitigation agenda has focused almost exclusively on energy and forestry. But up to 65 countries have neither a significant energy nor forestry sector to begin with.

If we compare Finland - with 73% of its land area classified as forested and 5,047kg of oil equivalent in energy consumption - to Niger - with 1% of its land area classified as forested and 21 kg of oil equivalent in energy consumption;

Niger and its peers have no “skin in the game” in mitigating climate change as it currently stands. They merely deal with the consequences.

Countries can go above and beyond “business as usual” by putting land use and potential soil carbon sequestration in their Intended Nationally Determined Contributions. All countries could then make a useful contribution.

Together, can we underscore that this is a universally valid approach that would further transform the understanding of the value of soil to sustainability?

In practical terms, planning that avoids land use change is a no-regrets first step. Beyond that, there is an estimated 2 billion hectares of land with restoration potential. 75% is considered mixed use. Agroforestry, for example, might be applied on 630 million hectares worldwide helping to sequester up to one ton of soil carbon per hectare per year. By restoring soils in these degraded ecosystems we could store up to 3 billion tons of carbon annually.

As these political deals take shape, getting the balance right between the approaches and competing demands will be tricky.

Countries will be looking for smart projects that deliver for food security, for sustainable development for mitigation and adaptation at the same time.

We will need an agile scientific community to help navigate implementation in both developing and developed economies. I would like to make the relationship between UNCCD and Global Soil Week as practical and useful for implementation as possible.

In the future, might we consider joining forces and combining meetings of UNCCD bodies - the CST or CRIC – with the Global Soil Week?

Because there is a growing realization that if we lose the soil, we lose everything. Franklin D. Roosevelt once said *“The nation that destroys its soil destroys itself.”* By joining forces, let us find a way to now say **the planet that secures its soil secures itself a truly sustainable future.**