



MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE WESTERN BALKANS SOIL PARTNERSHIP (WBSP)

1. Background and driving forces

Soil is a limited natural resource in the Western Balkans and its availability for biomass production and ecosystem functions and services is decreasing (Zdruli et al., 2022)¹. The soils of the region are under increasing pressures due to demand for food, feed, and fuel supply and because of unsustainable soil management practices. Soil erosion continuous be the most important aspect of soil degradation while reduction of soil organic matter in the best soils (Chernozems) is an issue of severe concern. These pressures will only increase in the future and climate change will aggravate the situation as the region could become hotter and drier. Soil degradation is a transboundary issue, therefore tackling it requires a well-coordinated regional approach where all stakeholders have equal responsibility to ensure that soils are managed sustainably and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development goals are met.

There are several ongoing national, regional, and international initiatives that promote sustainable land and soil management. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) defines sustainable land management (SLM) as *“the use of land resources, including soils, water, animals and plants, for the production of goods to meet changing human needs, while simultaneously ensuring the long-term productive potential of these resources and the maintenance of their environmental functions.”* The most important aspect of SLM includes implementation of best practices and their wider dissemination and upscaling to inform decision makers on the needed actions that prevent land and soil degradation through conservation, management, and restoration of soil, water, biological resources, and ecosystem services.

The European Union has brought sustainable soil management at the highest level of its political agenda. By considering sustainable agriculture as a key sector, the EU emphasise the need for better integration of land and soil management into all rural development programmes. This investment guarantees better resilience for all EU citizens and the whole society.

Among most important policy instruments launched by the EU is the European Green Deal that sets a strategy for tackling the agriculture, climate, and environmental challenges. Soils play a crucial role in achieving the ambitious targets of the Green Deal towards the goals of a climate-neutral EU by 2050. Soils are the foundation of agriculture and are essential in the EU Farm to Fork Strategy. Together with air and water they make the three elements to address zero pollution targets in the EU. Furthermore, the establishment of the new EU Soil Observatory will collect policy-relevant data and develop indicators for the regular assessment and progress towards the ambitious targets of the Green Deal (Montanarella and Panagos, 2021)². The new EU Soil Strategy for 2030 states: *“making sustainable soil management (SSM) the new normal requires coordination and working together at local, regional, national, EU and global level to promote and implement such practices”*. Playing its role, the European Commission will integrate the sustainable use of soils into the relevant EU

¹ Zdruli, P.; Wojda, P. & Jones, A., *Soil health in the Western Balkans*, EUR 31163 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2022, ISBN 978-92-76-55210-9, doi:10.2760/653515, JRC130276

² Montanarella, L. and Panagos, P. 2021. The relevance of sustainable soil management within the European Green Deal. Elsevier. Land Use Policy. 100, January 2021, 104950. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2020.104950>



policies. The Strategy defines the actions to promote and strengthen the use of sustainable soil management practices to safeguard ecosystem services (namely by promoting agroecology and other biodiversity-friendly practices) and integrates soil preservation and restoration in different targets and indicators. An ambitious research programme on soils will be conducted in the context of the Horizon Europe programme that will be supported by the Mission Soil Deal for Europe. Aspirations are that countries of the Western Balkans could benefit from it.

Driven by the Western Balkans Green Agenda Action Plan in the context of the EU policy agenda for the region, all Western Balkan countries have set soil-related goals in their respective strategic documents³ regarding agriculture and rural development. The Standing Working Group for Rural Development (SWG RRD) background document⁴ summarizes these objectives for sustainable soil management. Many of the topics refer to agricultural land, but some objectives are valid also for all types of land.

Besides similar political and social challenges, the region also has common environmental challenges in particular with regard to soil threats and degradation:

- Water soil erosion on steep slopes
- Decline of soil organic matter
- Soil pollution (in specific cases due to overuse of fertilizers and pesticides, poor quality of irrigation water, inadequate waste disposal; industrial and mining activities, urban expansion)
- Irregular and inadequate agricultural practices deriving from common past experiences such as privatization of agricultural land and its fragmentation, small farms, unsustainable intensification, unplanned and illegal forest clearance and fires, among others
- Abandoned and neglected soils

The magnitude of these pressures is largely conditioned by the **lack of awareness and knowledge about sustainable soil management, the lack of a legislative framework (EU and national), division of responsibilities and lack of cooperation** among the institutions. In order to tackle these challenges, well equipped and trained administrative steering is needed (institution building), while it is equally important to increase institutional cooperation, information development and data exchange.

2. Scope, Objectives, Approach and Tasks of the Western Balkans Soil Partnership

Scope:

There are several targets set out by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that require sustainable soil use and management and improvement of soil health. The essential role of soils for sustainable food production, biodiversity preservation (healthy ecosystems) and human health based on the paradigm of One Health concept make them crucial to reach these targets. Moreover, climate change actions like mitigation and adaptation along with dealing with water security is deeply anchored in the European Green Deal. Inspired by these goals, for the first time, this partnership will address these common challenges for the Western Balkans region based on principle of knowledge sharing and active participation. Specifically, the partnership will contribute to fulfil the targets of the Action Plan for the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (2021-2030).

³ This refers to the National Strategies for agriculture and rural development of the respective countries.

⁴ State of the art of soil management in the Western Balkans. Regional assessment.



The partnership will accomplish its goals through cross-regional cooperation and information exchange, targeted to strengthen national agricultural and environmental policies objectives in the light of EU policy developments in the topic of soils (such as the European Green Deal, EU Soil Strategy 2030 with proposed EU Soil Health Law, Soil Deal for Europe).

Objectives:

- Identify and restore degraded soils to improve productivity and the provision of ecosystem services
- Enhance public awareness about the importance of soil and develop advice to improve national/regional technical capacity and the proper institutional response (implementation infrastructure)
- Ensure broad stakeholder involvement, incl. civil society participation, to successfully implement soil-related actions related to the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans
- Promote soil literacy and enhance involvement of younger generations in soil science

Approach:

- Improved soil monitoring, based on indicators set out by EU and international (FAO Global Soil Partnership) entities (e.g., EU Soil Strategy 2030, GSP Action Framework 2022-2030) and national legislation including the development of regional soil characteristics statistics (Eurostat Agri environmental indicators⁵)
- Regional guidance on sustainable soil management, and exchange of best practices and demonstration projects
- Establish a database of soil degradation processes including inventory of contaminated sites, and assessment of environmental and health risk
- Improve national capacities to report soil characteristics statistics (SDG, UNCCD/LDN, Eurostat regional statistics, agri-environmental indicators, indicators for sustainable soil management)
- Develop (sub)regional soil assessment in support of European and global soil assessments
- Establish a regional soil information system for soil monitoring, soil degradation assessment and science policy support

Tasks

1. Develop a detailed, integrated, and scientific assessment of the soil degradation processes in Western Balkans and a set out a regional database of soil conservation practices and policy instruments for soil protection.
2. Assess the institutional and scientific capacities of the Western Balkan countries for the implementation of the new Soil Strategy for 2030.
3. Conduct regional meetings, and exchange best practices, in order to:
 - harmonize guidelines and methods, measurements, soil protection indicators, and sustainable soil management practices;
 - improve the quality and availability of data and information about the soil: collection, analysis, verification, reporting, monitoring, and integration with other disciplines;
 - raise awareness in the area of soil protection and sustainable land use.

⁵ Currently, the EU agro-environmental indicators are being revised as indicators for interactions between agriculture, climate, health and the environment, based on scientifically and technically robust methodologies, common quality criteria, as well as metadata, trends, policy relevance, and agri-environmental context.



4. Design and establish a regional soil platform for data storing and data sharing; ideally, a region-specific decision Support System (DSS) should become available based on the INSPIRE data specifications for the exchange of soil-related information so that region-specific data are interoperable with neighbouring and other European soil data sets.
5. Develop the database to support land degradation neutrality, including desertification risk (vulnerability).
6. Establish the Western Balkans Soil Museum for wider dissemination and awareness of the importance of soils for the wellbeing of the society.
7. Establishment of summer school for soil science students.
8. Develop risk assessment practices (or guidelines) for contaminated sites
9. Enforcement and strengthening of scientific work through joint application within various regional initiatives and projects calls

3. Members of the Western Balkans Soil Partnership

This partnership has been created with close ties to the Western Balkans pre-accession process, related to tight cultural and political connections. In the initial phase of this partnership, specific initiatives and projects target the Western Balkan countries, namely Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

However, many soil-related topics are cross-border, thus extend geographically to neighbouring countries south of the Danube River, Greece, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Italy, thus fully embracing the South Eastern European cooperation. Various future implementation steps of this partnership will thus reach out to its neighbours, and the current scope and membership shall be inclusive and expandable.

Any interested party from the civil society, industry, practitioners, public authorities, scientific organisations are invited to join the partnership, as:

- member by registration
- observer or interested party

Any member or interest party will receive confirmation of membership by the Western Balkans Soil Partnership that will be part of the European and Global Soil Partnerships (GSP).

4. Governance of the Western Balkans Soil Partnership

The Western Balkans Soil Partnership (WBSP) is governed by the WBSP Steering Committee (WBSP SC), which comprises representatives of the WBSP members, from each of the country/territory (member of the Regional Expert Advisory Working Group on soil) which are based on proposals by the ministerial partners. The WBSP SC has a mandate to develop and decide on the organisational structure and statutes of the WBSP, the work programme thereof, as well as to harmonise WBSP activities with the activities of the European Soil Partnership, and of other similar organisations. WBSP will also have an Advisory Board with five members with a function to advise WBSP SC on issues related to governance and other strategic activities.

*This designation is without prejudice to positions on the status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.



A more detailed and refined governance will be decided depending on needs during implementation. A chair will be appointed by WBSP SC members.

A Secretariat of the WBSP will be established with the following roles:

- Communication management of members and interested partners
- Information collection and operation and updating of a web site
- Organization of meetings
- Overview of projects
- Monitoring and reporting

SWG RRD as an organization will embed the Secretariat within its structures in its headquarters in Skopje, North Macedonia.

Regular meetings of the steering and implementation body as well as other interested members and partners will collect experiences from implementation, and also discuss needs and requirements expressed by stakeholders. There is no fixed meeting schedule.

5. Financial implications

There are no mandatory financial implications by the members of the WBSP. In-kind contributions from members or other interested institutions or individuals for the financing of meetings and activities of WBSP are welcome.