



ECN Conference Report

Conference on Soil and the SDGs: Challenges and the Need for Action

25 November 2019

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were launched by the United Nations in 2015 and aim to provide a blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet. In total, there are 17 Goals, covering a range of social and environmental indicators, such as sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11), and life on land (Goal 15). Set within goal 15, is the indicator 15.3, which aims to combat desertification and restore degraded land and soil. This was the focus of a meeting organised by the Soils Unit of the European Commission held in November in Brussels. Delegates from both the public and private sectors heard from a range of speakers about the need for action and the urgency of the situation.

Ibrahim Thiaw, Executive Secretary of the UN Committee to Combat Desertification, set the scene by highlighting that 3.2 billion people currently suffer because of land degradation, with 18% of European croplands also suffering. He noted that this is particularly acute in Africa, and warned that if the African continent became unstable, this would have a direct impact on Europe.

Saskia Keesstra of Wageningen Environmental Research in the Netherlands followed with an overview of the implementation of land and soil-related SDGs in the EU. She noted that although there have been a number of important reports published over the last few years highlighting the degradation of soil (including those by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, the European Court of Auditors and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) most European policies remain fragmented and sectoral. Italy is the notable exception, having in place a **Land Degradation Neutrality plan**.

Rainer Baritz then spoke about the European Environment Agency's State of Environment Report 2020, which was only published in December (see link below). The report makes depressing reading by suggesting that most European member state policies and non-binding, with about 11% of Europe's land being affected by moderate/high rates of erosion. Overall, deteriorating trends dominate in most member states.

The final sessions of the morning included presentations by **Phil Wynn Owen** from the European Court of Auditors, **Michael Cherlet** from the Joint Research Centre, European Commission, and **Camilla Nordheim-Larsen** from the Global Mechanism of the UNCCD.



Owen spoke about the 2018 report by the Court of Auditors that set out a number of recommendations aimed directly at the European Commission, whilst Cherlet spoke about the World Atlas of Desertification, which indicates that over 50% of global land is under growing anthropogenic pressure. Finally, Nordheim-Larsen described the UNCCD's global call for action for healthy soils, which includes a **Land Degradation Neutrality programme**. To achieve this, she suggested that cross sectoral synergies need to be exploited, the economic case for protecting soils need to be communicated, and stakeholders need to connect soils to broader political processes.

The morning question and answer session highlighted the growing sense of urgency. It concluded that to achieve a transformation change, factors such as branding, engagement with the private sector and improved indicators need to be developed. **Soil preservation and enhancement needs to be linked to the growing awareness and urgency of addressing climate change, capitalising on the so-called "Thunberg effect"**.

The afternoon sessions also included presentations from a range of notable speakers. **Cees Veerman** (Chair of the Horizon Europe mission on Soil Health and Food) spoke about the role of research and the proposal by the European Commission to fund Horizon Europe with a budget of €100 billion. Part of the programme will include a mission area specifically focussing on soil health and food; so this may provide an opportunity for ECN.

Delegates also heard from representatives of the German and Italian environment ministries, with the latter explaining how Italy has set Land Degradation Neutrality targets. **Jean-François Soussana** spoke about the IPCC Special Report on Climate Change and Land, which highlighted the negative environmental impacts of the overapplication of nitrogen fertilisers to land, and the risks to food supply as global temperatures rise. **Olivier De Schutter** (Co-chair International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems) linked diets to soils, making reference to the 2018 IPES report on agroecological systems called 'From Uniformity to Diversity'. He noted that there is an urgent need to develop a set of indicators that will lead to accountability.

The final presentation was made by **Gabriele Broll** of Osnabrück University, who spoke about the importance of soil awareness. Citing the AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) marketing model, she described a number of different public exhibitions aimed at both children and adults, whilst noting that 'action' is the most difficult aspect to address. Working in partnership with different organisations will be essential to communicate effectively with all citizens about sustainable land use and soil protection, which will involve both a 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' communications approach.



Further information about the conference, including copies of the speakers' presentations and a draft report on 'Providing support in relation to the implementation of soil and land related Sustainable Development Goals at EU level' can be accessed: [here](#).

The recently published State of the Environment Report 2020 by the EEA can be accessed: [here](#).