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World soil day

What's next after the UN year of Soils?

Soil is a living ecosystem. Soil health has a direct impact on human health, farmers work and climate change. But soil is under threat today. We lose an estimated 24 billion tons of fertile soil each year due to erosion.

The use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers is killing the soil. In turn farmers become dependent on these products and cannot benefit from the free and natural services provided by the soil anymore. The quality of our food is also in danger. Chemical inputs help grow fruits and vegetables that are low in vitamins and essential nutrients but also in taste. Input-dependent food also contains potentially harmful pesticide residue.

Eventually, degraded soil cannot play its role of carbon sink whereby it reduces the polluting effects which contribute to climate change.

The annual World Soil Day is on 5 December, to remind us of the need to bring our soils back to life.

Failure to protect soil and build topsoil means it will become impossible to feed people, keep global warming below 2°C, transition to a toxic-free future, and adapt to the challenges of climate change and extreme weather events.

With the 2015 UN International Year of Soil coming to an end, the World Soil Day is needed more than ever to raise awareness. This year has been the occasion to put the issue of soil back on the political agenda. Many campaigns and events worldwide have raised concerns about the importance of soil to our food systems and climate change.

It has also been the time to bring the issue back to the EU agenda, and flag up existing alternatives and potential political initiatives to break the vicious circle that leads to the loss of healthy living soils.

This was the objective of the conference organised by the Greens/EFA group in the Parliament on 18th November. It brought together high level speakers from the academic world, activists working at grassroots to preserve healthy living soils, such as NGOs, farmers or gardeners as well as also artists, who are all committed to bringing soil back to life through awareness campaigns or performances.

This event made clear that the classic, conventional, sometimes still called ' green revolution' approach that

insists in bringing more external inputs (pesticides, synthetic nitrogen-based fertilisers) to monoculture crops, with investment in mechanisation, large scale irrigation, and use of improved varieties of plants, affect soils' biological life and reduce its ability to remain fertile without these add-ons.

The conventional approach has also moved increasingly towards a market-led agriculture model, which favours export markets and does not respond to the ecological logic of how to respect the soil and rebuild the ecosystems but focuses instead on cultivating according to market prices.

At EU level, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been mainly based on this logic. The attempt to get a coherent European Soil policy covering all aspects of soil protection, while taking into account the variety of situations in each country, was aborted with the withdrawal of the proposed Soil Framework Directive. The Greens/EFA hope that new steps currently taken on soil related issues by the European Commission will stick to the initial approach for a comprehensive EU soil policy which is ecologically sustainable, considers soil as a common good and is joined up with the content of the CAP.

Soil plays a critical role in climate change

Europe's soils are a huge carbon reservoir, containing around 75 billion tonnes. Soil management practices have a considerable impact on carbon stocks. But agricultural practices can be improved to minimise carbon losses, for example by ensuring that soils are protected against erosion and extreme weather events with a permanent vegetation cover, less intrusive ploughing techniques and re-use of biomass in the soil. Such practices, known as agroecological, could sequester between 50 and 100 million tonnes of carbon annually in European soils.

Some solutions offered to challenge climate change, with the platform supporting 'Climate Smart agriculture' developed by the FAO, sound attractive but are actually rather worrying. Supporters of the CSA claim that carbon capture and storage techniques could finance climate resilience, food security and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Despite the fact that FAO explains in its literature that chemical inputs can damage soils, there is no clear definition explaining what is and what is not CSA. This concept does not question the specificities of industrial agriculture such as the use of synthetic fertilisers, GMOs or high-yielding seed varieties, which cause soil erosion and put biodiversity and farmers' rights at risk. Besides, it is high jacked by the agrochemical industry and among the private supporters of CSA, 60% are fertiliser companies, including Syngenta and Monsanto.

Unfortunately use of fertilisers in soil is not on the COP21 agenda, nor is agroecology, which we believe is the most sustainable alternative to help revive our soils.

Agroecology signifies that rather than simplifying nature, recognising its complexity and adapting agricultural practices to this complexity, working together with nature as an ally rather than reducing it to a chemical formula or a market place.

However, the benefits of agroecological approaches to farming are still in question. Because of such scepticism from policy makers there is no investment in training farmers in those techniques. Current agricultural policies continue to subsidise access to fossil fuels. The power exercised in decision-making by large players, particularly agrochemical companies, who do not have much interest in promoting this transition worsen the lack of further investment in agroecology.

How can we prove that the agroecological path is the right one and is more resilient, sustainable and will indeed feed the world - not disregarding our need to examine our consumption practices, the waste of agricultural products and the need to question our lifestyle?

To prove it we need to make sure there is a broad understanding that it's the right solution for protecting

our soils. Additional to scientific evidence, we need to build the conviction among farmers, civil society as well as at all political levels that soil is so important that it cannot be ignored.

On the eve of the World Soil Day the FAO and the European Commission held closing events of the International Year of Soil in Brussels and Roma. Let's hope that this year has helped to plant progressive seed of change to effectively bring our soils back to life from now on.

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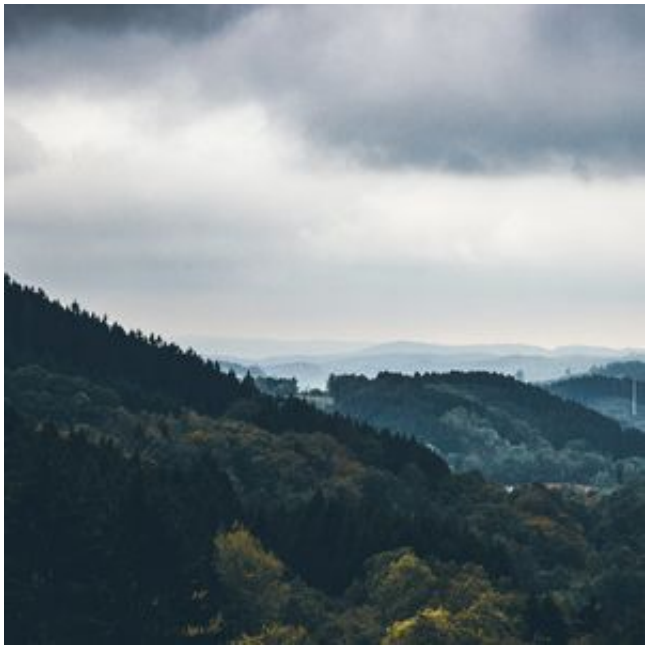


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Contact person



Nelly Baltide

Advisor on Development

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