**STATEMENT BY**

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on the occasion of

# WORLD SOIL DAY 2019

*"Stop soil erosion, save our future"*

Most of us pay little attention to the soil under our feet, yet all human life depends on it. Representing at least a quarter of global biodiversity, soil is the foundation on which the house of terrestrial biodiversity is built.

As governments prepare to negotiate a post-2020 global biodiversity framework for adoption next year at the UN Biodiversity Conference[1] in Kunming, China, to achieve the 2050 Vision of the Convention on Biological Diversity's Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020, it is important to bear in mind that soil plays a key role for sustainable development, including poverty and hunger eradication, economic growth and environmental protection.

Soil supplies the essential nutrients, water, oxygen and root support that our food-producing plants need to grow and flourish. It helps process waste organic matter produced by plants, animals and humans. Furthermore, soils regulate the ebb and flow of carbon flux and the water cycle, keep pests at bay, decontaminate polluted land, and provide raw materials for new pharmaceuticals to tackle infectious diseases.

Soil erosion, the removal of the most fertile top layer of soil from the land surface through water, wind and tillage, occurs naturally under all climatic conditions and on all continents. However, it is being accelerated up to 1 000 times[2] by unsustainable human activities, including the removal of vegetative cover, deforestation, overgrazing and improper land-use changes.

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[1] Fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity; Tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety; Fourth meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-sharing; October 2020, Kunming, China.

[2] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2019, www.fao.org/3/ca6688en/ca6688en.pdf

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According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the equivalent of a soccer pitch of soil is eroded every five seconds. Even more worrisome, soil is a finite resource. It can take up to 1000 years to produce 2-3 cm of soil, making its loss and degradation unrecoverable within a human lifespan.

The planet is presently on a path that could lead to the degradation of more than 90 per cent of all the Earth's soils by 2050. This threatens the capacity of future generations to meet even their most basic needs.

Without robust soil ecosystems, the world's food web would be in trouble. Ninety-five per cent of our foods come from soil. Soils are also crucial to our response to climate change, as soils are considered the second largest carbon store after the oceans. By displacing organic carbon, soil erosion decreases the soil's potential to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

But what can we do, how do we go about stopping soil erosion? The good news is that soil loss is avoidable. And everybody can play their part.

Farmers, for example, can adopt sustainable soil management practices such as cover crops, crop rotation, limited tillage, keeping soil surface vegetated, building terraces or wind breaks. Civil society can raise awareness about the importance of soils, particularly among young people. Policymakers can highlight the importance of soil biodiversity at the national level and promote sustainable soil management policies in a broader resource management agenda. Scientists can continue to address knowledge gaps and pursue innovative solutions and technologies to assess, control and prevent soil erosion. And last, but certainly not least, everybody can help by planting vegetation to protect the soil. Grasses, shrubs, trees and ground cover will develop a root system that keeps the soil firmly anchored to the ground.

The bottom line is that sustainable management of soils and land supports agricultural productivity, food security, human health, climate change mitigation and resilience, and a range of ecosystem services. In fact, many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are closely related to soil health—SDG 15 specifically calls for halting and reversing land degradation by 2030. Given the fundamental importance of healthy soils, coordinated and effective action needs to be fostered and accelerated to address soil degradation.

On this World Soil Day, let's reflect on the importance of healthy soils for biodiversity and our well-being. Let us also think about the actions we can take, and work towards ensuring that the prevention and reversal of soil erosion becomes a top global priority, and part of our work to build a future of life in harmony with nature.

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