

ACCELERATING OFF A CLIFF

Soils are scarcely mentioned in international agreements. The neglect has not been benign.

Three trends dominate how we use land today. First, we are crossing several global ecological limits simultaneously, and at increasing speed. The consequences are in part non-reversible and for humans they are incalculable – especially in terms of biodiversity loss and climate change. Second, despite economic growth, billions of people are left without a fair share of land resources. Third, we know all this, yet we lack policies to correct the situation.

As with other environmental problems, this has many causes. But unlike protecting the climate or biodiversity, soil conservation has not been an explicit goal of international agreements. The world community has set itself three major goals that cannot be reached without soil conservation: to stop the loss of biodiversity by 2020, to limit global warming to 2 degrees Celsius, and to ensure everyone access to enough food.

We can achieve none of these goals without appropriate policies to conserve the soil and use land in a more sustainable way. But all of the more than 200 international treaties, agreements and protocols neglect soil conservation and fail to define specific targets.

Instead, soil conservation is seen as a vehicle for achieving climate goals; it is of interest only insofar as the amount of carbon dioxide the soil can store. In 2013, the United Nations Environment Programme presented no-till farming as a way of limiting greenhouse gas emissions. The risks involved, such as the harmful effects of pesticides on biodiversity, or water pollution, are neglected.

The only international agreement that refers explicitly to soils is the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). But this is limited to dry areas. Efforts to extend

its scope to wetter climates have foundered on resistance by various governments. In any case, such an extension, or even a separate UN convention to protect the soil, could be effective only if it were supported by determination, a clear political will, and an independent monitoring mechanism. The decades-long climate negotiations demonstrate how difficult these multilateral discussions can be.

Nevertheless, in a conference before the Earth Summit in Rio in 2012, the UNCCD set a goal of halting net soil degradation worldwide by 2030. The “net” means that degradation in one place can be offset by restoration somewhere else. This goal made it into the final document of the Rio summit, and is even part of the development agenda that in 2015, will replace the Millennium Development Goals that were set in 2000. But compared to the other demands in the summit document, the call to halt soil erosion is weakly formulated.

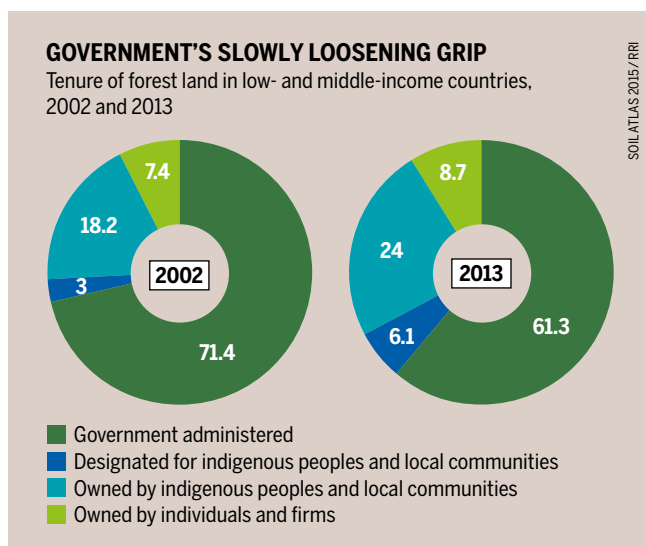
International agreements on land rights present a somewhat brighter picture. In 2012, the member states of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations agreed to a set of “voluntary guidelines” to manage land rights in a responsible way. These are a response to large-scale land acquisitions by foreign investors, along with evictions, inadequate compensation and expropriation. The document is remarkable in the context of international politics:

- It is the first intergovernmental agreement to address responsible government in rural areas that is based on human rights. Despite its voluntary nature, the agreement carries weight because it rests solidly on international law.
- Representatives of civil society were involved in the negotiations from day one. They represented the various interests of different groups who use the land in diverse ways.

The formal title of this document is “Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security”. That is quite a mouthful, but to activists worldwide it is an important contribution to the protection of land rights, and they campaign for it to be implemented locally. The guidelines consider soil conservation only with reference to sustainable land use, although the secure access to land should go hand in hand with the maintenance of soil quality.

In the past, the link between soil conservation and other policy aspects has been very weak. This has meant that the central function of the soil in the ecosystem and in society has been undervalued, and soils and land have received far too little protection. On the other hand, the overlaps with other areas are enormous: agriculture, food, energy, climate, biodiversity and the right to food. Soil and land must be seen as cross-cutting themes in policymaking; only then will they receive adequate protection. ●

Forests are attractive resources for outsiders. Despite agreements, politicians are only slowly accepting the rights of indigenous peoples to their land



ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE, DEVELOPMENT... BUT HOW ABOUT SOILS?

Selected global treaties and institutions influencing land and soil policies; year of foundation and locations if available

