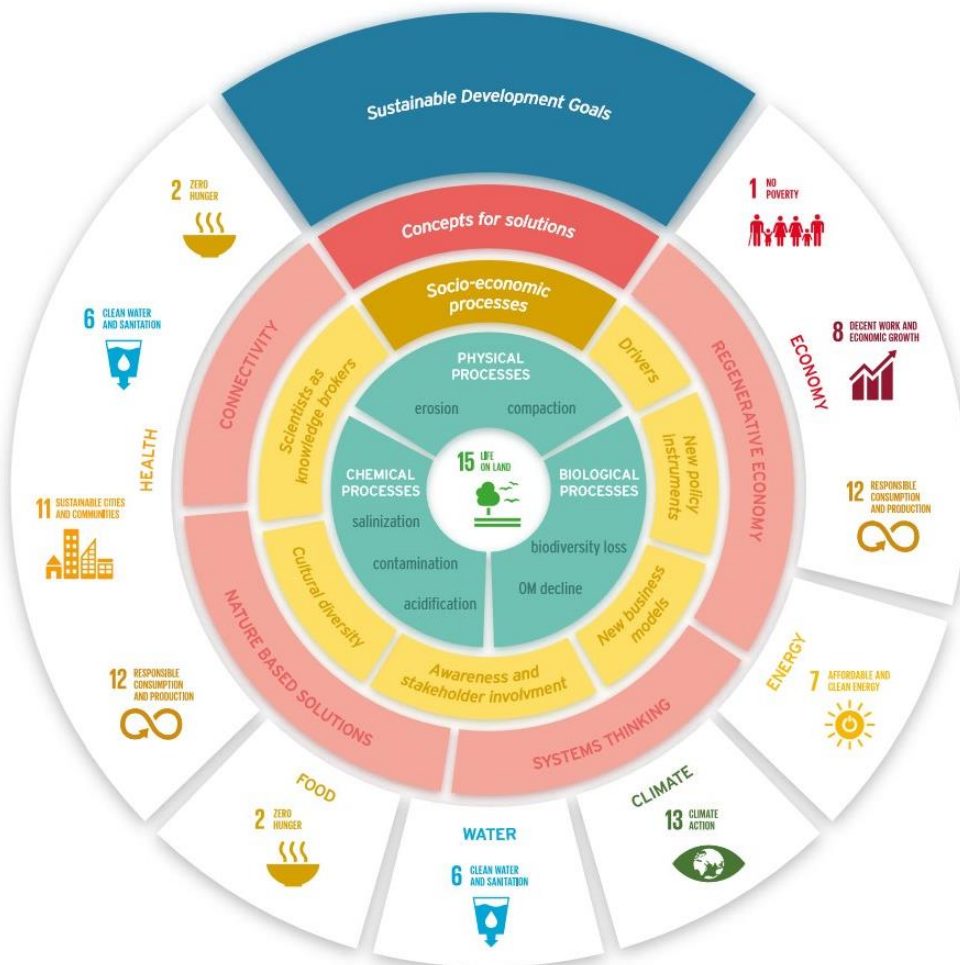


# Providing support in relation to the implementation of soil and land related Sustainable Development Goals at EU level

## Interim report

### Executive Summary

November 2019



## Executive summary

Degradation of soil and land are major challenges that are recognised both at EU level and worldwide. Many of the Sustainable Development Goals that were put forward in the UN Agenda 2030 refer to land and soil either directly (SDG 2, 3, 15) or indirectly (SDG 6, 11, 13, 14), by addressing other compelling issues inherently linked to soil and land, such as food and water security and climate change.

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the European Commission has published several strategic documents outlining the plans to implement the SDGs in the EU. In the Communication on 'Next Steps for a Sustainable European future' issued in November 2016, the Commission stressed its intention to mainstream the SDGs into EU policies. The reflection paper 'Towards a sustainable Europe 2030' published in January 2019 presents the enabling factors and challenges to implementation of the SDGs in the EU.

The **EU Soil Thematic Strategy** adopted in 2006 is the cornerstone of the EU soil policy. The strategy aims at protection of soil and its sustainable use, prevention of further soil degradation and restoration of the degraded soils. The strategy defines four key pillars to achieve its goals: 1) framework legislation; 2) integration of soil protection in other policies; 3) research; and 4) raising public awareness about soil-related challenges.

Soil and land related challenges have been integrated into a wider EU policy focusing on sustainable use of resources. The Roadmap to a Resource Efficient Europe adopted in 2011 aims at achievement of sustainable resource management, including land and soil management, by 2050. It also sets a target of **no net land take by 2050**. This target has been repeated in the 7<sup>th</sup> EU Environmental Action Programme that came into force in 2014. Other targets established in the 7<sup>th</sup> EAP aim at increasing efforts to reduce soil erosion and to enhance soil organic matter as well as at integration of land use aspects in coordinated policies involving all relevant levels of government.

Despite these high-level initiatives, policies targeted at prevention of land and soil degradation remain fragmented and relying on sectoral policies. Some of the sectoral policies can be very helpful in implementation of soil and land related SDGs by establishing environmental standards and safeguards, promoting good practices and supporting sustainable approaches to natural resource management.

Our mapping exercise related to Member State level shows that most Member States have adopted national sustainable development plans or strategies. Not all of them, however, address the SDGs as adopted in 2015 – this may trigger the need to update these documents, a process that is currently underway in several Member States. Few Member States have dedicated land or soil policies but in several of them, soil policies exist at sub-national level. Sectoral policies which address land and soil include typically agricultural, forestry and spatial planning policies. Many of these policies set clear provisions for improving the condition of soil and land and have a potential to significantly contribute to the implementation of the soil and land related SDGs.

Measuring progress towards the achievement of the SDGs poses numerous challenges. **Land Degradation Neutrality** is an example of a target linked to the SDG 15 (Life on Land) that can be monitored. The LDN target sets an objective of striving to achieve a land degradation-neutral world by 2030 through taking actions such as combatting desertification and restoration of degraded soil and land. Globally an indicator for 15.3.1 has been set up by the UNCCD for monitoring of this target, consisting of three sub-indicators focusing on land cover, land productivity and carbon stocks.

However, to date, no standard approach exists regarding collection and interpretation of data and information needed to calibrate this indicator in a consistent manner across countries. Among the EU Member States, only Italy has so far set up a national plan to reach Land Degradation Neutrality; no methodology neither coordination mechanisms nor guidance at EU level have been established to monitor LDN.

Several **conclusions and recommendations** can be formulated following our analysis:

- Political leadership in support of the implementation of soil and land-related SDGs is widespread. While land policy in the EU is not strongly defined, many EU environmental and sector policies contain important provisions and instruments which enhance sustainable approach to land and soil management by introducing environmental safeguards and measures aimed at restoration of degraded areas and protection of biodiversity.
- Whilst environmental mainstreaming taking into account soil and land aspects is important and can be effective, its results are dependent on the extent to which clear objectives and targets relating to land and soil can be incorporated in the other policies and on the effectiveness of their implementation.
- The situation at EU level is mirrored at the national level; there is a tendency to integrate soil objectives into other sectoral policies.
- Most Member States have adopted national sustainable development plans or strategies, however not all of them address the SDGs as adopted in 2015 – this may trigger the need to update these documents, a process that is currently underway in several Member States.
- Adoption of quantitative targets such as Land Degradation Neutrality at Member State level would be a good step towards making soil and land-related SDGs more operational. The experience of ‘frontrunners’ in setting up the LDN can be shared with other Member States.
- Transitional change in land management is needed to reach the land and soil related SDGs. Some steps in this direction would include promotion of region-specific but interdisciplinary land use planning, and designing legislation that would make transition towards sustainable land and soil management possible for every stakeholder involved in land and soil related activities.
- There is a need to define a clear methodology for monitoring of the SDGs. Although many organisations and countries have started to work on measuring and monitoring the SDGs, there is little coordination in this process and no standard approach has been achieved so far.
- Land Degradation Neutrality indicators provide a good starting point for measuring progress in relation to land and soil related SDGs but further guidelines and coordination across the countries is needed to make this indicator fully operational.
- The EU, using its expertise in defining and reporting SDG-related indicators and its prominent role in the UN General Assembly, could take up a leading role in working out a standard approach to (some of) the indicators that could be used to monitor the progress in achieving the SDGs.
- The SDGs and the associated targets should be refined and expanded for soil and land in order to develop a clear framework for data collection, analysis and target setting. For this, a technical debate should take place on how to describe the role of soils in the SDGs both at the level of the EU and the UN.