

## Soil and Water Forum opens in Bangkok to address scarcity and degradation

The first International Soil and Water Forum opened on Monday ( December 9 ) to map out concrete measures to boost global efforts in managing water scarcity and reversing soil degradation – both critical for global food security and environmental health.



"The world's natural resources, including soil, water and land, are being depleted at an alarming rate, while climate-induced natural disasters are occurring more frequently and with more intensity," said QU Dongyu, Director General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in opening remarks at the new global forum, co-organized by FAO and Thailand's Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives.

With agriculture using roughly 70% of global freshwater, land and soil degradation are directly undermining agrifood systems with human-induced degradation contributing to "pushing land, soils and freshwater systems to their productive limits, and increasing the water crisis, including water scarcity, droughts and floods, and pollution - the four elements of water that together compose the global mapping of water," he added.

Also delivering opening remarks were Prof. Narumon Pinyosinwat, Thai Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives; Francisco Kalbuadi Lay, Deputy Prime Minister of Timor Leste; and Retno L.P. Marsudi, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Water.

### Sharing perspectives

Ministers from countries including Iraq, Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand and Timor Leste, shared their perspectives as they began a Ministerial Dialogue taking place from 9 to 11 December in Bangkok. Among the issues they highlighted were a deteriorating water and soil situation caused by population pressure and the climate crisis, the potential for improvements through land restoration and water-saving irrigation techniques, along developing countries' vital need for investment and support to achieve further progress and the critical nature of water governance using an evidence-based systems approach. Also taking part in the forum are technical specialists from a range of countries.

The gathering is expected to endorse a "Ministerial Declaration on managing water scarcity and reversing soil degradation for sustainable and resilient agrifood systems", which will serve as a critical framework for promoting sustainable practices enhancing agricultural productivity while safeguarding global ecosystems.

The forum is organized along four themes: Managing water scarcity; Reversing land degradation, Boosting land restoration; Sustainable soil management; and Integrated climate-resilient land, soil and water management.

Its objectives will reinforce commitments to sustainable and integrated land, soil and water management; champion technological, institutional, governance and social innovations; deliberate on the challenges and opportunities; identify technical and knowledge gaps and research priorities; and promote partnerships and collaboration.

The "Global Status of Salt-affected Soils" report, to be launched at the forum on December 11, will be the first major assessment of global salt-affected soils in 50 years. It will provide a new estimate on the areas of salt-affected soils in the world and introduce many innovative ideas and sustainable approaches to tackling the challenge posed by saline soils.

### **SDG progress reports**

Also to be unveiled are progress reports on two Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) indicators – 6.4.1 and 6.4.2 – which are critical for agricultural productivity and resilience, as well as food security, ecosystem balance, and enhanced climate resilience. The indicators, for which FAO is the custodian, relate to water-use efficiency and water stress.

More than 730 million people worldwide faced hunger in 2023 and more than 2.8 billion live in water-stressed countries. The FAO Director-General said it was vital to speed up concrete actions on the ground if the 2030 SDG targets are to be met. He emphasized the overwhelming importance of data, and the need to focus on the availability and affordability of water as well as food, taking a holistic approach with decisive leadership. FAO's Strategic Framework 2022-31 seeks to support the 2030 Agenda through the transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems. That is key for realizing the aspiration for Four Betters - Better production, Better nutrition, a Better environment, and a Better life, leaving no one behind, Qu said.

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