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A third of world's arable land affected by degradation

Experts call for international foundation for soil protection

The UN estimates that humans are producing 23 hectares of desert every minute - an area equivalent to about 30 football pitches. The most common cause is the improper cultivation of soils, which is becoming a serious problem because soils are a non-renewable source of our livelihoods. They are used as the source of 90 percent of our food and, increasingly, to produce renewable raw materials for the manufacture of textiles, bioplastics and biofuels. As world population rises so will the pressure on soils as the attendant urbanisation often destroys fertile soil. "We have neglected our soil for too long. It is high time to provide better protection and gain better control of the growing pressure exerted on soil by meeting our food and fuel needs. In a globalized market, this will require national and international coordination of efforts with explicit and binding rules", said Thomas Holzmann, Vice-President of the Federal Environment Agency (UBA), at the World Soil Day on 5 December 2011. Dr. Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director of the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies IASS in Potsdam, adds, "World population is growing as are our demands on nature's performance. The result is loss of fertile soils if they are not managed sustainably. This in turn results in more hunger, water scarcity and global poverty. Aid shipments and protective treatment of our soil will be needed to combat all this."

Soil - our most vital basis - is in jeopardy. The UN estimates that world population reached the 7 billion mark on 31 October of this year, half of which lives in urban areas. For soils this means increased strain, for besides the steady rise in population, more consumption of meat requires ever more intensive use of soil to grow food and feed.

Once soil is damaged - whether by erosion, compaction or salinization - it often takes decades or even centuries for regeneration to occur naturally. Although soil remediation is sometimes possible, it is a complex and costly process. The economic costs of soil damage, however, are usually higher than implementing effective protective measures.

International regulations in soil protection and sustainable management are inadequate. Any efforts made up to now have either been limited to certain departments or non-binding. Although there is a convention to contain desert formation, its scope is limited to arid regions. Other

environmental treaties such as the Convention on Biological Diversity or the Framework Convention on Climate Change address the issue of soil only peripherally.

UBA supports adoption of a comprehensive, internationally binding approach to sustainable soil management. In September 2011 UBA and experts from international institutions such as the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) in Potsdam issued a joint statement known as "Protecting Soils for our Common Future - A call for action." It is clear to UBA's Vice-President Holzmann that "we need greater lobbying efforts to promote soil. There are convincing arguments on hand; it is now a matter of raising awareness of soil's value and its vulnerability and of implementing concrete measures."

Solutions must come from science, public authorities, industry and policymakers alike. "We have recognised the problem in Germany", says Franz Makeschin, Chairman of the Soil Protection Commission at UBA. "The urgent task in priority fields of action are being addressed by a research and technology network whose focus is soil and land management and will work towards proposing solutions. Protection and sustainable use of soil will thus go hand in hand."

Further information and links

Berlin Call for Action: Protecting Soils for our Common Future:

http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/boden-und-altlasten/boden/downloads/statement_protecting_soils_for_our_common_future_september_2011.pdf

Travel guide to Germany's soils (Die Böden Deutschlands - Sehen, Erkunden, Verstehen):

<http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/uba-info-medien-e/4161.html>

Recommendations of Soil Protection Commission at Federal Environment Agency:

http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/boden-und-altlasten/boden/downloads/Flaechenpapier_KBU.pdf

Soil protection in cultivation of renewable resources (in German):

http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/uba-info-medien-e/mysql_medien.php?anfrage=Kennummer&Suchwort=3472

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