

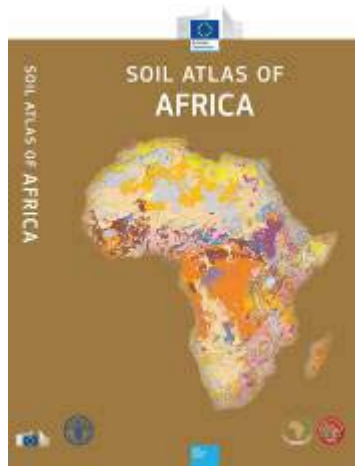


EUROPEAN COMMISSION

PRESS RELEASE

Brussels, 26 April 2013

Spotlight on Africa's life source – first Soil Atlas of Africa



The European Commission has today presented the first Soil Atlas of Africa, highlighting a vital natural resource which provides food, fodder, fuel wood, reduces flood risk and protects water supplies. With full colour maps and illustrations, the atlas explains in a simple and clear manner the diversity of soil across the African continent and emphasizes the importance of this non-renewable resource. Coordinated by the European Commission's in-house science service, the JRC, an internationally renowned group of soil scientists from Africa and Europe has contributed to this atlas. The aim is to raise awareness at all levels – from politicians to the general public - of the significance of soil to life in Africa.

Presenting the Soil Atlas of Africa at today's College-to-College meeting of the European Commission and the African Union Commission in Addis Ababa, European Commissioner for Climate Action, Connie Hedegaard, said: *"The soils of Africa have a crucial role in climate change adaptation and mitigation policies and they are the basis for sustainable development and food security. Land productivity is fundamental to reaching many of the Millennium Development Goals."*

Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, responsible for Research, Innovation and Science, added: *"By providing a comprehensive assessment of this limited natural resource we hope to raise awareness of the need for improved protection and sustainable management of African soil."*

Deserts and drylands comprise 60% of the land surface of the African continent, populated by over one billion people. Much of the remaining land shows old, highly weathered soils which require special attention to be of use for agriculture. Population growth and urbanisation, coupled with conflicting economic challenges (cultivation of cash crops for export, biofuel production, biodiversity conservation, mineral extraction, carbon sequestration), increase the already heavy pressure on the land. Fertile and productive soils are key to tackling hunger and are a particular challenge in Africa, where, in many parts, soils are losing nutrients faster than fertilisers can be added.

Informed decision making is currently limited by the scarcity of up to date data on the soil resources of Africa. The JRC, in collaboration with the FAO and African soil scientists, will launch a pan-African assessment on the state of soil resources at the forthcoming conference of the African Soil Science Society in Kenya (October 2013).

Background

The Soil Atlas is a collaborative initiative of the European Union, the African Union and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to support and encourage the sustainable use of soil resources in Africa and the Global Soil Partnership for Food Security.

The Atlas explains the origin and functions of soil, describes the different soil types and their relevance to both local and global issues. It also discusses the principal threats to soil and the steps being taken to protect soil resources.

Some key facts from the atlas:

- 98% of all calories consumed in Africa originate from the soil resources of Africa.
- Organic matter in the soil can store more than ten times its weight of water, which reduces risk of floods and protects underground water supplies.
- Africa's soils store about 200 gigatonnes of organic carbon - 2.5 times more than contained in the continent's plants.
- Tropical rainforest soils are not naturally fertile but need a constant supply of organic matter from natural vegetation. Deforestation breaks this cycle.
- Over half of Africa's land surface is characterised by sandy soils (22%), shallow stony soils (17%) and young, weakly developed soils (11%).
- Many of the soils of Africa are severely degraded by erosion and excessive nutrient depletion. This explains the low productivity of African soils, mainly due to lack of plant nutrients, not adequately replenished by artificial fertilizers. On average, African farmers, due to rural poverty, are able to apply only 10% of the nutrients that farmers in the rest of the world return to the soil.

For more information:

http://eusoils.jrc.ec.europa.eu/library/maps/africa_atlas/index.html

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