

Unprecedented law on soil protection and land improvement in Turkey

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For the first time in Turkish history, a 'Law on Soil Protection and Land Improvement' was passed after protracted advocacy efforts to parliament by the TEMA Foundation, a Drynet (see page 31) partner. Included in this milestone effort were diverse volunteers (universities, Chamber of Turkish Agricultural Engineering, parliamentary groups, the Turkish National Assembly, farmers, technocrats, bureaucrats and TEMA and grassroots representatives). These volunteers now act as representatives of local Soil Conservation Councils, established by this new law. This landmark law is also the first such law that has passed thanks to NGO pressure. Such a law was necessary to help curb desertification, prevent land degradation and ensure land management in the country

Lobby efforts

Lobbying included a petition campaign with over 1 million signatories, and communication to raise public awareness on the issue through media, seminars, and visits. TEMA actively led the lobbying activities with the support of partners and TEMA members. Each citizen can become a TEMA volunteer by paying 20 Turkish Liras. TEMA is the largest environmental NGO active throughout Turkey, with over 350,000 supporters and 555 voluntary representatives.

The participation in the decision-making process of universities, chambers and NGOs through Soil Conservation Councils hastened the process at local government level, and all the information gathered has been used to develop an action plan that includes one representative in each Soil Protection Council.

Background

Turkey's nature is facing serious threats due to intense land use. Given Turkey's harsh climatic conditions, poverty, unsustainable land

management and climate change are turning drylands into deserts, and desertification in turn exacerbates poverty. Numerous soil types occur in Turkey, with many highly eroded.

Soil erosion risks increase in more mountainous areas, yet this is where most villages are and where most of the agriculture takes place. Valuable humus is lost through the indiscriminate felling of trees, overgrazing, uncontrolled irrigation, salinization of the soils, and inappropriate land use techniques. Many practices such as deep tillage and using heavy machinery, excessive and incorrect fertilization, excessive irrigation, ploughing slopes in the wrong direction, and badly chosen land uses have led to high erosion.

Unfortunately, farmland is also threatened by a huge and rapidly growing transportation and construction industry. Uncoordinated action by government agencies makes legislation difficult to enforce. The destruction of vegetation and soil leads to water shortage, poverty, and emigration.

TEMA Foundation raises public awareness of environmental problems, specifically soil erosion and deforestation. It implements model ecological agricultural practices that protect the soil and plant cover in forests, pastures and farmlands, such as: terracing, production of cover fodder crops, wind breaking, contour farming, pasture rehabilitation, strip cropping, rotations, range improvement measures, deferred grazing, and measures to protect the soil from the impact of rain, wind and frost. The local people also learn different income-generating methods that do not include moving the soil, for example, beekeeping, fruit growing, and eco-tourism.

Challenges faced when pushing for the law

Numerous advocacy meetings were organized with ministers, parliamentarians, and party leaders, although in the middle of all this effort

there was a change of government, which delayed the drafting process. There was also no empirical scientific evidence on what desertification and land degradation had occurred, and no legislative framework to oversee the drafting process for such a law. In addition, it was important to get buy-in from business and industry groups which were included in the drafting process, while reassuring them that their investments in the land were protected.

Achievements from the law

These efforts bore fruit as the law is now in place and TEMA continues to work through the Soil Protection Council representatives to ensure that soil is properly managed. The Government now considers land-use planning as an important Action Plan, and soil protection rules are enforced in every state in Turkey. The new rules include Chamber of Agricultural Engineers and TEMA Foundation national representatives in the decision-making process, where TEMA can impact land use decisions. The law now requires that factories operating in agricultural areas without a license must stop operations. It has also been exciting to identify the factors that have contributed to soil degradation, desertification and misuse of land, raise local community awareness on land use, and see the land in Turkey rehabilitated.

Hurdles to implementation of the law

The challenge now is to ensure that Soil Conservation Councils have enough power and means to act as watchdogs to oversee implementation. There is still the need for Statutes to bring the Law into force, and soil mapping and classification is essential to identify erosion-sensitive lands. There is also need for clear and enforceable penalties for those who misuse land. ■

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