



**Inspiring Initiative:** Civil Society Driven  
Conservation Legislation

**Land:** Turkey

**Initiative by:** TEMA and other Turkish civil society groups

# *One Million Signatures for Soil Conservation*



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## SETTING THE INITIATIVE

While Turkey is a signatory to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, it has lacked the legal framework to fully meet its obligations under the convention. There were laws on soils and agricultural lands, but there was no specific mandate for soil protection and land improvement, no mechanism for designating at-risk areas and no system of governance for managing land sensitive to erosion, particularly grazing lands.

TEMA is Turkey's largest environmental NGO and has for years been involved in projects to protect threatened areas and raising public awareness about the dangers of erosion and desertification. However, without a proper legislative framework for soil protection and the institutional framework to carry this out, TEMA realised that these approaches were drops in the ocean. As a result it embarked on a campaign to introduce new legislation.

## MAKING THE DIFFERENCE

TEMA began a process of mobilising public opinion and seeking to win over policy makers and experts. They started by identifying key partners to participate in discussions at national level and by arranging a series of workshops in collaboration with the Chambers of Agriculture, universities and other stakeholders over how to draft a law on soil protection and land improvement. Particular attention was paid to involving farmers and others whose livelihoods are dependent on healthy soils in the consultations and workshops.

This process was accompanied by media events, such as a TV presentation on the draft law, and a national campaign, which was led by local TEMA representatives who collected more than a million signatures in support of TEMA's proposal. Following this, a team of experts led by TEMA consultant Mahir Gürbüz drew up a first draft of the law. Followed by a period of lobbying the National Assembly and the President and providing briefings to the parliamentary groups in the National Assembly.

After seven years of preparation and lobbying the Law on Soil Protection and Improvement was ratified by parliament in July 2005. This was a historic moment as it was the first time that an NGO in Turkey had played the lead role in drawing up environmental legislation and getting it passed through parliament. However, this wasn't the end of the process. The legislation has established local Soil Conservation Councils responsible for drawing up soil plans, designating areas at risk, putting appropriate controls in place to protect land in these areas and restoring land which is already degraded. These councils have a broad membership, including local planners, representatives of Chambers of Agriculture, other land-users and academics together with local civil society groups and NGOs. In most areas local TEMA volunteers have become actively involved with these councils and the TEMA Foundation continues to support these local representatives by providing them with expert advice on technical and legal matters. They now face the challenge of implementing the new legislation at the grassroots level.

TEMA's achievements demonstrate the growing importance of civil society in Turkey. They also provide an example of how NGOs and CSOs in other places can work towards encouraging their governments to adopt the legislation needed to back up their commitments to international environmental treaties.