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Science and policy in times of multicrisis and dissent: Issues of framing, authority, evidence
– and political-economic power

15-17 May 2025, Athens and online

Abstract

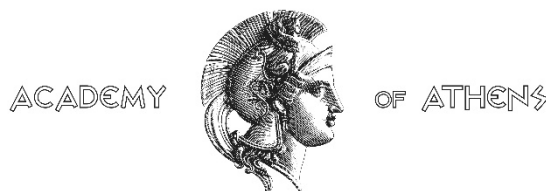
Long debate, little movement: the case of soil science and policy

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Soil is not as directly linked to human health as air and water and is therefore not such a sensitive environmental medium. Furthermore, apart from the dirt that sticks to potatoes, most people don't really come into contact with it, so there is no particular sensitivity to soil quality in society.

It has to be said that the EU Commission has been very progressive and made an initial regulatory proposal in 2002 without any particular pressure from outside. The EU Commission also has a very progressive research institute in ISPRA, Italy. The situation is completely different in the individual member states. Many have no soil protection legislation at all. Some only deal with certain areas. A soil protection law like the one in Germany is the exception.

Unlike today, when lobbying pressure is exerted on the EU Commission as early as the drafting of legislative proposals, in 2002 the EU Commission proposed its soil protection strategy largely independently of lobbying influences. The wrangling between interest groups only began afterwards. Firstly, the Member States invoked the principle of subsidiarity because soil is not an environmental element that moves between Member States. And secondly, the agricultural lobby exerted massive influence, concerned that soil protection regulations could have interfered with the freedom of agricultural management.



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In the area of soil protection, scientific expertise lies more at European level than at Member State level, with some exceptions of course. At European level, the Lucas soil research programme and the European research programme Horizon plus indirectly related to soil activities spend around €500 million on soil research and soil monitoring. That doesn't sound like much, but it does produce impressive results and provides us with information about the state of the soil that is not collected by the member states.

In any case, it is primarily the Member States that always have a problem with environmental regulations, which they then have to implement themselves, especially if they have already developed national regulations and would then have to make changes. On the other hand, when it comes to soil, it is the agricultural industry in particular that is putting up massive resistance. After all, if standardised monitoring rules were first established, it would very quickly become clear that the agriculture predominantly practised today is not at all sustainable for soil resources and that management has to be changed.

But local authorities are not interested in it either, because they would then not be able to plan new development areas for additional residents or industrial areas with trade tax, because of soil sealing regulation.

All this resistance has meant that we have not made any progress in the area of soil protection in Europe since 2002. And it is by no means certain that the Soil Monitoring Directive, which is now being finalised, will be adopted in the final vote in the European Parliament.

See also [Beste, A. \(2023\): Soil protection-related legislation and strategies in the European Union](#)