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Editorial

Sustainable Water and Soil Conservation and Management for Agriculture

Juan Manuel Trujillo-González [1,*] and Raimundo Jiménez-Ballesta [2]

[1] Instituto de Ciencias Ambientales de la Orinoquia Colombiana (ICAOC), Universidad de los Llanos, Villavicencio 500003, Colombia
[2] Department of Geology and Geochemistry, Autonomous University of Madrid, 28049 Madrid, Spain; profe.raimundojimenez@gmail.com
* Correspondence: jtrujillo@unillanos.edu.co

Water and soil conservation in agroecosystems requires understanding of the properties and processes that govern their functioning. Greater water retention does not always ensure higher water availability for crops, just as higher infiltration rates do not necessarily imply lower runoff. Similarly, an increase in soil organic carbon stocks does not by itself indicate a positive carbon balance. The effects of management practices depend on environmental conditions, soil characteristics, and the processes evaluated [1]. The nine articles published in the Special Issue "*Sustainable Water and Soil Conservation and Management for Agriculture*" examine soil hydraulic properties, cropping systems, organic amendments, carbon dynamics, agroclimatic conditions, salinity, and the institutional factors associated with agricultural production (List of Contributions).

Evaluating these practices requires distinguishing among soil properties, functional processes, and management outcomes. Soil pH, bulk density, organic carbon content, carbonate content, and salinity characterize soil conditions, whereas water retention, infiltration, and hydraulic conductivity provide information on soil hydraulic behavior [2]. These conditions influence crop yields, erosion, and drainage. However, responses also depend on climate and management practices. Therefore, an improvement in an individual indicator does not necessarily reflect better overall system functioning.

Pore distribution and continuity regulate water storage, movement, and soil aeration. Soils with a higher proportion of fine pores may retain more water but exhibit lower macroporosity. Infiltration rates also vary according to the measurement method, water application conditions, and surface cover. In diversified cropping systems, root development, organic matter inputs, and aggregate stability may influence soil hydraulic properties. The implications of these differences depend on soil and environmental conditions. Greater water availability may benefit crops in water-limited environments, whereas inadequate drainage can restrict soil aeration. Hydraulic measurements should therefore be interpreted in relation to the conditions under which they were obtained and the soil functions they represent.

Organic carbon is another component of soil conservation. Carbon concentrations and stocks represent quantities present at a specified depth, whereas carbon balances account for inputs and losses over a defined period. Studies of acidic soils under cacao cultivation identified substantial spatial variability in carbon stocks and soil chemical properties. In vineyards, biochar application produced different responses across sites, without consistent yield increases. Similarly, pulse–wheat rotations showed negative carbon balances under the conditions studied. These findings indicate that agricultural practices, such as residue incorporation, crop rotation, and amendment application, can modify

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soil properties without producing equivalent changes in carbon stocks or crop yields [3]. Their evaluation should therefore consider initial soil conditions, temporal changes, and crop responses.

Environmental conditions also influence the effectiveness of conservation practices. In water-limited regions, water availability can constrain agricultural production, whereas shallow groundwater tables and inadequate drainage may favor salt accumulation [4]. Agroclimatic zoning helps identify spatial differences in growing conditions and crop suitability. Similarly, analyses of groundwater depth and salinity allow the estimation of risk thresholds that vary across locations and seasons. Both approaches, however, require field validation before they can inform management decisions, particularly when their results are applied beyond the original study areas.

Economic and institutional factors also influence the adoption of conservation practices. Costs, risks, and access to support mechanisms can affect farmers' decisions. The study on agricultural insurance in rice production systems examines the relationship between insurance coverage and pesticide expenditure. However, lower expenditure does not necessarily demonstrate reduced pesticide application or environmental impacts. Economic decisions should therefore be examined alongside measurements that allow for assessments of the environmental outcomes of agricultural practices.

The published studies employ methodological approaches, ranging from laboratory experiments to regional assessments and socioeconomic analyses. Each approach addresses specific questions but has limitations related to experimental conditions, spatial scale, and observation period. Laboratory results may not fully represent field conditions, while short-term studies cannot establish whether observed changes persist. Similarly, carbon stock estimates depend on the accounting methods and sampling depths used [5], while spatial models depend on the available data and underlying assumptions.

A review of these contributions identifies three main knowledge gaps. First, few studies assessed hydraulic properties, carbon, nutrients, crop responses, and economic outcomes within the same period. Second, measurements obtained at different scales remain difficult to compare. Third, it remains necessary to determine whether changes associated with management practices persist across successive wet and dry periods. Addressing these gaps requires study designs that integrate relevant variables and allow their temporal responses to be assessed.

Research on soil hydraulic functions should include measurements of water retention, infiltration under rainfall conditions, unsaturated hydraulic conductivity, and aeration within the same trials. This would allow for the potential trade-offs among soil functions to be assessed. For carbon, multi-season studies should measure stocks at comparable depths and account for carbon inputs, crop exports, and gaseous fluxes. Such information would help relate changes in carbon stocks to the carbon balance of the system.

Spatial assessments also require validation at the scale of their intended application. Agroclimatic zoning should be compared with field observations and data on actual water availability. Salinization risk thresholds should be evaluated across different seasons and irrigation systems to establish their limits of applicability. Similarly, improvements in irrigation efficiency at the field scale do not necessarily translate into reduced water consumption at the regional scale [6]. At the institutional level, studies on agricultural insurance should complement economic analyses with measurements of pesticide application rates, active ingredients, and associated environmental effects.

The nine articles published in this Special Issue show that the effectiveness of water and soil conservation practices depends on soil characteristics, environmental conditions, and the scale of assessment. Improvements in individual indicators do not necessarily indicate favorable responses across all soil functions, while inconsistent results across studies do

not by themselves demonstrate that a management practice is ineffective. Management recommendations should therefore consider these differences and the limitations of the available evidence. These considerations provide a basis for interpreting the outcomes of water and soil conservation practices in agricultural systems.

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