

In Memoriam



Hans Hurni

It is with deep sadness that we bid farewell to Prof. em. Dr. Dr. h.c. Hans Hurni, a visionary in the field of sustainable land management and a passionate advocate for the people and communities working to protect the land on which they depend. He passed away at the age of 75 on 27 September 2026, following an extended period of illness.

In 1992, while serving as president of the World Association of Soil and Water Conservation, Hans Hurni initiated WOCAT (the World Overview of Conservation Approaches and Technologies) to respond to the growing global problem of soil degradation. His vision was ambitious: to create, within just a few years, a world map showing the soil and water conservation measures being undertaken around the world to prevent further land degradation and rehabilitate degraded land.

The vision took longer to realise than originally planned. Building a methodology for documenting knowledge, developing the necessary questionnaires and tools, and establishing a global database required years of patient work. Yet that persistence became one of Hans's defining qualities. Guided by this vision, WOCAT grew from an ambitious programme into a global network and knowledge platform, with a growing body of documented experience from around the world.

Hans understood that knowledge was most valuable when it could be shared. He welcomed experienced specialists, young professionals, large countries and small countries alike. For him, the exchange of ideas and experience was not determined by the size or wealth of a country. What mattered was the knowledge that communities and practitioners could contribute and learn from one another.

His thinking also extended far beyond soil erosion. Although WOCAT had initially been focused on soil degradation and erosion, Hans recognised the need for its methodology to evolve with emerging challenges. He saw connections between land management and some of the world's most pressing concerns: climate change, water, biodiversity and poverty.

Perhaps most importantly, Hans believed that these global challenges could be addressed through the knowledge and actions of farming communities. He wanted WOCAT to demonstrate, with stronger evidence and measurable indicators, how sustainable land management could improve soil organic matter, increase carbon sequestration, improve water infiltration, reduce erosion, support biodiversity and enhance agricultural productivity.

His close collaboration and friendship with former WOCAT Director Hanspeter Liniger also led to a strong commitment to supporting Master's and PhD students in applying and further developing the WOCAT methodology. Strengthening the scientific evidence on the impacts of different sustainable land management practices was particularly close to Hans's heart.

More broadly, Hans challenged WOCAT not to regard its database as the final product. The database was, in his words, a means – a foundation from which knowledge could be used to address larger global questions. He called for WOCAT to be embedded in broader programmes and to use its accumulated experience to demonstrate the wider benefits of sustainable land management.

Hans Hurni's legacy is consequently more than a collection of case studies or a methodology. It is a way of thinking: that local knowledge matters; that experience should be documented and shared; that sustainable land management can contribute to global environmental and development goals; and that institutions must continue to evolve if they are to remain relevant.

The WOCAT he helped create reflects this enduring vision. What began as an effort to understand and map soil and water conservation practices became a global platform for connecting people, knowledge and action.

Hans Hurni leaves behind ideas, institutions and a global community committed to caring for the land. His work reminds us that the protection and restoration of land is not only a technical challenge, but also a human endeavour – one grounded in knowledge, cooperation and the experience of farming communities around the world.

His vision continues in the work of all those who document, share and apply knowledge for a more sustainable relationship between people and the land.