**The Role of Organic Matter in Soil for Improving Crop Productivity and Soil Health**

**Abstract**

Soil organic matter (SOM) is one of the most important natural resources and the basis of soil fertility. The term SOM generally refers to the total organic carbon (C)- containing substances in soil. The total mass of organic C in soils has been estimated at 22 × 1014 kg, similar to the total of all other C reservoirs on the earth’s surface (21 × 1014 kg). 1 SOM contents range from less than 1% in sandy and desert soils to 1%-5% (w/w) in the surface horizons (top 15 cm) of typical mineral and agricultural soils, to almost 100% in organic soils. Even at the lowest levels, the role of SOM in all processes occurring in the soil is ascertained to be highly relevant. SOM plays a crucial role in the global carbon balance that largely governs global climate change, and organic matter in soil profiles contains four to six times as much carbon as all of the world's vegetation. These include enhancing soil aggregation, boosting nutrient exchange, retaining soil moisture, decreasing compaction and surface crusting, and increasing water infiltration into the soil. Since SOM is the best way to incorporate natural soil production, it ought to be used as a soil quality indicator. Therefore, boosting SOM pools in agricultural ecosystems is crucial for reestablishing soil health, ensuring sustainable crop production, and storing CO2 in the atmosphere. To increase the biomass production required to raise the SOM level in the soil, it is,therefore, crucial to implement practices like crop rotation, minimizing tillage operations, using cover crops, applying animal manures, green manures, crop residues, and composts, as well as using chemical fertilizers.

**Keywords:** Carbon, Nutrient, Compaction, Metals, Biomass, Soil Organinc Matter

**Introduction**

“Soil organic matter is any material produced originally by living organisms (plant or animal) that is returned to the soil and goes through the decomposition process. Most soil organic matter originates from plant tissue. Plant residues contain 60-90 percent moisture. The remaining dry matter consists of carbon (C), oxygen, hydrogen (H) and small amounts of sulphur (S), nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), potassium (K), calcium (Ca) and magnesium (Mg). Although present in small amounts, these nutrients are very important from the viewpoint of soil fertility management. The availability of soil P to plants is often limited due to the strong fixation of P species such as orthophosphate and inositol phosphate species in the soil solid phase” (Gerke 2015; Gerke, 2021). “Soil organic matter consists of a variety of components. These include, in varying proportions and many intermediate stages, an active organic fraction including microorganisms (10-40 percent), and resistant or stable organic matter (40-60 percent), also referred to as humus. For practical purposes, organic matter may be divided into aboveground and belowground fractions. Aboveground organic matter comprises plant residues and animal residues; below-ground organic matter consists of living soil fauna and microflora, partially decomposed plant and animal residues, and humic substances” (Hooker et al., 2005). Doran and Parkin (1994) indicated that “maintenance of soil quality, which is the capacity of soils to sustain productivity, maintain environmental quality, and promote plant and animal health, is the key to agricultural sustainability”.

“The C: N ratio is also used to indicate the type of material and ease of decomposition; hard woody materials with a high C: N ratio are more resilient than soft leafy materials with a low C: N ratio. The total amount and partitioning of organic matter in the soil is influenced by soil properties and by the quantity of annual inputs of plant and animal residues to the ecosystem. Soil organic matter, therefore, plays a critical role in the global C balance that largely controls global climate change” (Weil and Brady, 2017). Organic matter existing on the soil surface as raw plant residues helps protect the soil from the effect of rainfall, wind and sun. Removal, incorporation or burning of residues exposes the soil to negative climatic impacts, and removal or burning deprives the soil organisms of their primary energy source. Körschens et al., (2014) state that “the two agronomic instruments are especially important to achieve and maintain high SOC levels in soils. Soil fertilization with organic fertilizers containing stable organic carbon helps to increase SOC”. Among these fertilizers, rotted farmyard manure, its composts, or composts from other sources may be very efficient. Thus, increasing pools of soil organic carbon (SOC) in agricultural ecosystems is very critical both for restoring OM pools important to soil health and sustainable crop production as well as sequestering atmospheric CO2 (Hooker *et al*., 2005; Gurmu, 2019).

**Fig 1: Components of soil organic matter**



**Soil Organic Matter and Its Various Fractions**

“Soil organic matter is classified as a stable humus pool when it is in a "protected" state, and as labile when it appears to be free or "unprotected." The term "labile" indicates that the C-containing materials in this pool are subject to rapid oxidation by soil organisms over periods of months to years. This is primarily because some of its component compounds are easily altered, while some of it is protected from decay by the soil environment, particularly by association with soil mineral particles and aggregates. In contrast, the C in the humus pool appears to be stabilized by various mechanisms that enable it to remain in the soil for relatively long periods (centuries or even millennia)” (Weil and Brady, 2017).

“The living component or biomass, macro-organic matter or light fraction, plant litter, and non-humic materials that are not bonded to soil minerals make up the labile fraction of organic matter (OM) (Tirol-Padre & Ladha, 2004). Carbohydrates, amino acids, peptides, amino sugars, lipids, cellulose, hemicellulose, waxes, fats, resins, and lignin are the most prevalent constituents of the labile fractions. Labile SOM fractions will offer a significant shift prior to any change in total OM since they are very sensitive to changes in C inputs to the soil” (Tirol-Padre and Ladha, 2004).

“The stable fraction of OM (humus) includes protected bits of degraded cell walls & tissue (particulate OM), protected biomolecules, supra-molecules & degradation products, and black aromatic products of fire i.e. char” (Weil and Brady, 2017). “Humus is highly resistant to microbial decomposition being physically adsorbed on mineral surfaces or entrapped within clay and mineral aggregates” (Theng et al., 1989; Tirol-Padre and Ladha, 2004). Thus, the stable fractions of OM are probably more appropriate and representative for C sequestration characterization (Cheng and Kimble, 2001; Tirol-Padre & Ladha, 2004).

“Carbon is the chief element of SOM which is readily measured quantitatively. Values for the SOC contents may be expressed as such or may be reported as total OM by multiplying the figure of OC by the conventional Van Bemmelen factor of 1.72. The use of this factor is based on the assumption that SOM contains 58% C. Organic N may also be estimated from OC values being divided by 12 for most soils” (Weil and Brady, 2017). However, this conversion factor does vary depending on the origin and nature of the SOM from 1.72 to 2.0. Crop rotations are also of central importance in maintaining increasing soil organic carbon content. If semi-perennial cultivars such as alfalfa, clover and grass species as well as their mixtures are integrated into the agronomic rotations, then a combination of zero or reduced tillage, high production of organic residues, e.g., dead roots, litter and leaves, and root-released organic carbon and photosynthetic activity during the whole vegetative period may strongly increase SOC content in arable soils.
Fuentes et al., 2020 revealed that a key reason for the stability of organic carbon in rotted or composted farmyard manure is the formation of stable humic substances during the transformation process.

**The Connection between Organic Matter in Soil and Other Soil** **Properties**

**Effects of SOM on Soil Physical Properties**

“Physical properties of soils are those characteristics, processes, or reactions of a soil that are caused by physical forces and can be described by, or expressed in physical terms or equations. Examples of physical properties are soil texture, structure or porosity, bulk density, and water-holding capacity. The soil's physical properties mainly influence air–water relations in the soil, which, in turn, affect the growth of plants. The addition of OM to soil improves these physical properties. With the improvement of soil physical properties, there is an improvement in soil quality and consequently improvements in crop productivity” (Bauer and Black, 1994).

# Soil Structural Stability

# In soils, individual soil particles typically do not stay that way. They combine in a variety of ways to create aggregates or structural units of soil. The ability of these aggregates to withstand stress from tillage, rainfall, and wetting under tension is known as aggregate stability. Because the aggregate structure can affect the bulk density, aeration, surface crusting, erosion, infiltration, water-holding capacity, soil strength and mechanical resistance to emergence and root growth, maintaining the aggregate structure is crucial for plant production. Aggregate stability is a general indicator of the physical fertility and health of the soil, which is greatly enhanced by the existence of various functional soil attributes, even though the direct relationship between them is not always clearly defined. It is also indicated in Duiker et al. (2003) and Denef et al. (2004) that the major binding agents responsible for soil aggregate formation are the silicate clays, oxides of iron and aluminum, and OM and its biological decomposition products.

**Bulk Density of Soil**

OM and bulk density are strongly correlated. In general, the bulk density decreases with increasing OM levels. Higher SOM levels are linked to increased aggregate stability, which raises soil porosity and lowers bulk density. According to Bockheim et al. (2003), “in tundra soils in arctic Alaska, bulk density dramatically dropped in a quadratic pattern as soil OC increased. However, other soil characteristics including sodicity, exchangeable cations, clay mineral type, soil texture, and the presence of Fe and Al oxides also have an impact on bulk density. Bulk density can also be impacted by land-use history through compaction by stock, the length of time since farming began, the amount of rainfall during that time, and cultivation practices”.

**Capacity for Holding Water**

“One of the most important consequences of OM addition to the soil is that it modifies the soil’s water retention qualities, which is generally associated positively with crop yield. The primary cause of soil productivity loss due to erosion is thought to be a decrease in the amount of water that is available. This decrease in available water capacity is ascribed to either a decrease in the depth (thickness) of the rooting zone or modifications brought about in the soil water-holding properties of the root zone” (Bauer and Black, 1994).

The plow layer of the soil often contains the majority of the organic matter
(Fageria et al., 1991). Gupta et al. (1977) also reported that the amount of water retained at 15 bars increased linearly with the increase in sludge OM addition in a coarse sandy soil, and Scoot and Wood (1989) reported a linear increase in water retention of silt loam soil with increasing OM content. “The increase in soil water retention caused by OM addition may be attributed to the following factors: (i) decreased bulk density and increased total porosity; (ii) a change in aggregate size distribution, which may alter the pore-size distribution; and (iii) an increase in the soil's absorptive capacity” (Fageria and Gheyi, 1999).

# Effects of SOM on Soil Chemical Properties

# Organic matter brings many significant changes in soil chemical properties such as reducing Al toxicity and decreasing allelopathy in crop plants. It improves the availability of macro and micronutrients to crop plants. Organic matter in the soils also controls fluctuations of pH buffering capacity.

**Availability of Macro and Micronutrients**

“Humus typically contributes between 50 and 90 percent of the cation-adsorbing capacity of mineral surface soils. Similar to clays, humus colloids and high surface area char hold nutrient cations (K, Ca, Mg, etc.) in an easily exchangeable form that plants can use but that is not easily leached out of the profile by percolating water” (Weil and Brady, 2017). “Soil organic carbon plays, therefore, a central role in nutrient soil availability, strongly affecting N and probably S delivery to the plant roots and strongly affecting P, Fe and Cu availability. Increasing SOC and humic substance content in soils is considered to be a main factor in increasing plant yields without or with less negative side effects” (Canellas, L.P. and Olivares, F.L, 2014). “It is also widely acknowledged that microbes employ the C fraction as a primary source of energy for metabolic processes, which changes the availability of nutrients. The concentration of nutrients in the soil solution and the chemical species of the different nutrients in the solution are of central importance for nutrient uptake by the roots. Mathematical nutrient uptake models using mechanistic models show the great sensitivity of nutrient soil solution concentrations for the calculated uptake by roots” (Gerke, 2021). Given the sharp rise in the price of N fertilizer in recent years, the ability of both OM and legumes to deliver nitrogen is very crucial in the current economy. The amount of total N in the soil can be accurately predicted from the level of organic matter. Zanin et al., 2019 stated that “the transport of nutrients in soil takes place via mass flow and diffusion in the soil solution. Plant roots cannot absorb all species of a nutrient present in the soil solution. The uptake is restricted to only a few species. In the case of P, the two orthophosphate anion species, H2PO4 and HPO4 but probably not organic P species, are absorbed by the roots”. “Small molecular weight organic acids, polysaccharides, and some polar biomolecules are particularly good at drawing cations like Fe3+, Cu2+, Zn2+, and Mn2+ from the periphery of mineral structures and chelating or binding them in stable organo-mineral complexes”, according to Weil and Brady (2017). Because they are kept insoluble and in chelated form, some of these metals are more accessible to plants. “Phosphorus is an essential plant macronutrient, the reserves of which are strongly limited” (Körschens et al. 2014).

According to Stevenson (1991), metal-organic complexes have the following impacts on the soil micronutrient cycle:

* Soluble OM keeps micronutrient cations in solution, which would typically precipitate at the pH levels present in most soils. Numerous biochemicals produced by microbes combine with trace elements to form water-soluble compounds. The trace element and fulvic acid (FA) complexes are likewise soluble in water.
* In some cases, using SOM to tone the skin can lower metal ion concentrations to a harmless level. This is especially true for complexes with humic acid (HA) and other high-molecular-weight components of OM, where the metal-organic complex has low solubility.
* Trace element movement to plant roots and, occasionally, to other ecosystems including lakes and streams is mediated by a variety of complexing agents.
* Through the complexion of Ca in calcareous soils and Fe and Al in acidic soils, organic materials can increase the availability of insoluble phosphates.
* The weathering of rocks and minerals and the subsequent release of plant nutrients are significantly influenced by chelation.

**Cation Exchange Capacity**

Depending on its level in the soil, organic matter can contribute significantly to the soil's cation exchange capacity (CEC). An organic method of increasing a soil's CEC is to increase its OM content, which is a slow but dependable method. Like clay particles, OM has negatively charged sites that attract and retain the cations. These negatively charged sites on OM result from the dissociation of organic acids, and this dissociation depends on the pH of the soil. For this reason, when a particular soil has a high CEC value due to its OM content, it is said to be pH-dependent.

According to Kapland and Estes (1985), a comparable rise of 1.7 cmol CEC kg-1 of soil was observed for every 1% increase in SOM on a dry-weight basis. Additionally, in the surface horizon of clay-rich soils in lowland Quebec, Canada. The findings of the experiments mentioned above have demonstrated that OM contributes significantly to the soil's CEC, although the precise amount depends on the pH of the soil.

**SOM's Impact on the Biological Properties of Soil**

“The majority of the food for the community of heterotrophic soil organisms comes from soil organic matter, particularly the detritus percentage. The kind and variety of organisms that comprise the soil community can be influenced by the kind and variety of organic residues that are added to the soil” (Weil and Brady, 2017). Thus, SOM concentrations have a major impact on soil biological characteristics such as total microbial biomass, mycorrhizal fungi, N-mineralizing bacteria, and N-fixing bacteria. Nitrosomonas and Nitrobacter are the two most significant autotrophic bacterial genera that cause nitrification. Thus, a sufficient amount of organic matter (OM) in the soil lowers soil acidity and enhances the activity of these N-mineralizing bacteria.

Asha et al., 2023 stated that organic matter has an impact on nitrogen mineralization due to its greater ability to hold water. “Nitrifying bacteria are often more vulnerable to water shortages than fungi. Since it sustains their life, the presence of sufficient SOM greatly favors the microbial biomass's ability to mediate numerous vital processes in soils, such as nutrient mineralization, nutrient cycling, decomposition, and SOM formation” (Acosta-Martinez et al., 2004). “Numerous studies have emphasized the function of microbial biomass in the breakdown of materials including plant-derived lipids and carbohydrates as well as microbial activity in enhancing soil quality” (Tisdall, 1994). “The efficiency of N-fixing organisms like Rhizobium and Azotobacter is increased by humic compounds that are recovered from manures. Biologically active compounds in soils, such as antibiotics and certain phenolic acids, may enhance the ability of certain plants to resist attack by pathogens” (Stevenson, 1982).

**Maintenance of Organic Matter in the Soil**

Various management techniques, including crop rotation, particularly with crops that contain a lot of biomass, reduced tillage, cover crops, and a range of organic supplements, can increase the amount of organic matter in the soil. In a variety of forms and combinations, these management techniques often achieve one or more of the following objectives: boost soil-dwelling beneficial species, reduce soil-dwelling pests and diseases, and raise carbon inputs and outputs. Additionally, it improves the qualities of the soil, including more water availability, reduced compaction, improved timing of nutrient availability to crop needs, and synthesis of compounds that encourage development, which in turn helps plants establish stronger defences against pests.

**Minimizing Tillage Operations**

According to the findings of several studies, tillage reduces the stability of soil aggregates by exposing them to more raindrop impact energy and increasing the mineralization of organic matter (Park and Smucker, 2005; Weil and Brady, 2017). According to a number of other writers, tillage causes agricultural residues to be incorporated into the soil, break down physically, and disturb macro-aggregates, all of which contribute to the loss of SOM (Paustian et al., 2000; Six et al., 2000; Wright and Hons, 2004). “Conversely, conservation or no-tillage lessens soil disturbance and mixing, which permits the buildup of SOM. One tactic to lessen the loss of carbon from agricultural soils is the application of conservation tillage, which includes no-tillage” (Denef et al., 2004). Crop residues with low N concentrations typically decompose more slowly than residues with high N concentrations, but they also tend to persist longer and increase SOM over time more than residues with high N concentrations, which decompose more readily (Wright and Hons, 2004). Residue quality frequently plays a significant role in regulating long-term SOM storage.

# Use of Crop Rotation

# “Mono-cropping systems can reduce the quality of soils by loss of OM and structure because of low levels of organic inputs and regular disturbance from tillage practices. However, crop rotations have positive effects on soil properties related to the greater C inputs and diversity of plant residues in soils in comparison with continuous systems” (Acosta-Martinez, et al., 2004). The levels of soil C and N were greatest in the rotation of maize–oats– clover and least in the mono-cropping of maize (Mengel et al., 2001). Wright and Hons (2004) also indicated that “crop rotations under conventional tillage that provide residues with low C: N ratios stimulate the decomposition of native SOM to a greater extent than rotations providing residues with high C: N ratios”. Wani et al. (1994) reported that green manures and organic amendments in crop rotation systems provide a measurable increase in SOM quality and other soil quality attributes compared with continuous cereal systems.

**Use of Fertilizers and Organic Amendments**

With their distinct qualities, crop residues and organic amendments affect the biological, chemical, and physical features of soil in diverse ways. Therefore, using a range of organic materials is one of the SOM management options. For crop production, a variety of organic amendments, including composts, green manures, farmyard manures, and food processing wastes, can be applied either alone or in conjunction with chemical fertilizers to increase the SOM content.

“The kind of material used to provide carbon to the soil affects SOM accumulation in addition to the quantity of carbon added. Because manure contains highly resistant chemicals—the most readily oxidized compounds in the original plant tissue have already been broken down by the animal digestive system before its excretion—it is sometimes assumed that manure leads to higher increases in SOM. Conversely, some organic amendments (e.g., wastewater biosolids) may provide soluble nutrients, especially NO3− and ammoniacal-N (NH4+), immediately following incorporation” (Rigby et al., 2016).

“Similar to N, increasing SOM concentrations and, in turn, crop yields and soil quality require the application of P at a sufficient rate. A lack of phosphorus frequently restricts crop development and can even result in crop failure, which causes farmers to clear more land in order to live. On damaged forest and savanna sites, natural plant regrowth is frequently too sluggish to stop soil erosion and SOM depletion in the absence of sufficient P application” (Fageria, 2002).

**Minimizing Organic Matter Losses**

“Reducing crop residue removal during harvest, erosion losses from wind and water, and carbon losses (as CO2) from rapid microbial respiration can all help to minimize the loss of SOM. Since SOM is usually richer in the topsoil, where erosion is more common than in the bulk soil, losses from erosion are greater than those from soil cultivation, which typically range from 5 to 50 Mg/ha/year” (Fred and Weil, 2004). Because these soils experience fewer erosion losses and may be able to absorb SOM through sedimentation from the upslope of steeper sites, soils with less steep slopes and soils in lower landscape positions typically have higher SOM contents.

“SOC losses are mostly controlled by rates of microbial respiration when there is no noticeably enhanced erosion. Temperature and alternating cycles of drying and wetting have a significant impact on the microbial activity that breaks down soil organic matter. Accelerated microbial respiration and SOM decomposition are probably caused by the increased solubility and availability of SOM when soils are wet after drying” (Morash, 2024). In general, soil aggregates with low OM and clay contents are prone to erosion and disintegration at low rainfall intensities. Bauer and Black (1994) also observed that soil erosion in the northern Great Plains of the USA is regarded to impair soil productivity through the associated diminishing of SOM content.

**Conclusion**

A dynamic and diverse soil component with a range of molecular structures is soil organic matter. Decomposition rate, and turnover time, and has a significant impact on the global C cycle and soil quality. In the long run, managing SOM is still a good way to maximize output and preserve the soil's potential for production. The physical, chemical, and biological characteristics of soil are altered by organic matter, improving soil quality and, as a result, crop yields. The mineralization of SOM satisfies a significant portion of plants' nitrogen needs. One of the main causes of OM production in soil is plant and animal waste. However, the amount and location of organic materials as well as management techniques have a significant impact on the development and accumulation of soil organic matter.

Soil OM can be stabilized and/or improved with the use of appropriate crop and soil management techniques. These include liming acidic soils, using farmyard manure or composts, implementing conservation or minimum tillage, using appropriate crop rotation, and fertilizing crops adequately. Essential plant nutrients are gradually released by soil organic matter, which also lessens their leaching into groundwater. The health of people, animals, and agroecosystems is at risk due to heavy metals, which are significant environmental contaminants. Because of their higher CEC and the creation of inner-sphere complexes through surface reaction groups, they are therefore largely prevented from being adsorbed by organic colloid (humus), which reduces their toxicity to agricultural plants and prevents their leaching to groundwater.

Organic matter improves soil structure, water retention, nutrient availability, and microbial activity, all of which help to maintain long-term soil fertility. The study adds to the scientific community by emphasizing the importance of organic amendments in reducing soil deterioration and supporting environmentally friendly farming practices. Furthermore, the findings support evidence-based solutions for improving soil management techniques, making this study useful for agronomists, soil scientists, and legislators concerned with sustainable food production.

**Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)**

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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