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Guidelines for establishment of Soil Health National Hubs

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to guide the responsible person or body within EU member states about how they can establish and organize a multi-stakeholder forum targeted towards reversing soil degradation and improving soil health in each EU and EEA country. The EU SOIL Mission's ambitious goal of a radical reversal in the trend towards increasing soil degradation will require the buy-in and active involvement of every member state. Managing soil resources at a national level is a complex task because there are demands on soils from multiple sectors which all in their own right may be important. Governments have thus the difficult task to navigate between multiple goals and priorities including: 1. Ensuring food security 2. Ensuring a sustainable supply of non-food bioresources such as timber and peat 3. Preserving habitats and biodiversity 4. Mitigating and adapting to climate change 5. Making land available for housing, commerce and infrastructure to meet the needs of growing populations. It is inevitable that these goals and priorities will often come into conflict with one another, for example, expanding food growing areas versus preserving biodiversity, and therefore policy makers need to have clear information of impacts both from a scientific and technical perspective and also in terms of social and economic impact. A soil health national hub can be an arena which brings together multiple actors where information may be shared and different views aired such that eventual legislation takes into consideration the multiple perspectives and attempts to find compromises where conflicts are present.

What is a Soil Health National Hub?

A Soil Health National Hub (SHNH) is a forum which brings together relevant stakeholders in each of the member states to discuss and deliberate on the topic of soil health. Some of key tasks of the SHNH is to define and express a common national position towards soil management, contribute to and learn from ongoing soil research, and to ensure that national and regional soil needs are soundly reflected in the programme of activities and projects in the EU Soil Mission.

Establishing a Soil Health National Hub

1. Fortunately, for most of the EU countries there are existing national hubs that have been started as part of the EJP SOIL programme (www.ejpsoil.eu). EJP SOIL is an EU wide soil research programme which both coordinates, aligns and finances a multitude of soil research projects with the overarching aim to contribute towards sustainable soil management in Europe. There are 26 EU partner countries involved and in each country there is a National coordinator and National Communication Representative who have assisted in the formation of the National Hub. The National Hub in EJP-Soil is made up of stakeholders (usually less than 20 members) representing:
2. Research
3. Government (Policy formation and execution)

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4. Farmer advisory services
5. Farmer unions
6. Agricultural sector companies
7. Research and innovation financing
8. Agricultural related NGOs

However, the EU Soil Mission would also like to address soil degradation in nonagricultural areas, e.g. forests, natural areas, and cities, and thus there is a need to find representatives for these land use types. PREPSOIL's proposal is to expand the EJP SOIL National Hubs to meet future soil mission needs. PREPSOIL suggests that, for each country, the first step should be a discuss the feasibility, mandate and effective working mechanisms of this proposal.

Consulting with your current EJP-National Hub

It is suggested by PREPSOIL that the first step to establishing a Soil Health National Hub is for the initiating organization or responsible person to consult with their national authorities who are in currently programme owners for EJP SOIL and the national contact point for the EU Soil Mission. It is important to determine from the outset if national authorities agree with the need for a SHNH and indicate what its mandate shall be. A first point of contact can be the EJP SOIL National Communication Representative in your country, who are listed on this page <https://ejpsoil.eu/about-ejp-soil/contact/national-communication-representative>

The mandate of a SHNH may not be universal for all MS, because there may exist different national needs for this body. To guide the process of defining a mandate, PREPSOIL describe a range of options for what a SHNH can be used for (Table 1) and encourage MS to discuss in their consultation process which of these options are most suitable for their country.



Table 1. Options for what a Soil Health National Hub can be used for	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
A. As a forum for stakeholder knowledge exchange e.g., learning about experiences and results from newly established Living Labs, results from research projects, presentations about EU led initiatives etc.	
B. As a forum to debate national and EU policies, laws, incentive schemes which relate to soil management	
C. As a multi-stakeholder consultative body to inform government of how proposed soil related policies may impact diverse stakeholders	
D. As a forum disseminate results and findings from soil mission financed projects	
E. As a technical body to provide expert knowledge and advice regarding soil	
F. As an organizing committee for an annual soil health national conference in each MS	

The reason why it is wise to present national authorities with a menu of options is because there could already be established institutions, communication channels and processes which fulfill some of the options listed above. In addition, different member states may have different ways of arriving at decisions and these differences in administrative culture should be respected. A consultative process at the beginning also prevents a SHNH being established where there is no expressed need or perhaps opposition to its formation. A SHNH should be formed to aid in better soil management but if current processes and institutions are working effectively in a particular country, it may be superfluous to start a SHNH.

The example of the French EJP SOIL National Hub and RNEST

In France, the Ministry for Agriculture launched the French network of scientific and technical expertise on soils (RNEST) in December 2016. The network has brought together stakeholders from academia, policy makers, companies, farmer organizations, and other actors working on soils (forest, agricultural, urban, industrial fallow land, contaminated sites, natural areas, etc.). RNEST has as its main mission to strengthen the coordination among scientific and technical expertise and initiatives on soils to guide public policies, and to answer to the needs of stakeholders concerned by soil management. The network is supported by eleven organizations representing national soil RDI key players: the French ministries in charge of agriculture, environment, and higher education and research, co-chairing the network, three national agencies, a research institute, a research alliance, a learned society, and two agricultural organizations. The RNEST also relies on a scientific, technical and innovation committee, composed of 32 experts with varied and complementary expertise



profiles (pedology, hydrology, sociology, economics, biogeochemistry, etc.), and diverse sectors of activity (academic research, consultancy firm, farmer, local authority, association, teaching, etc.). This committee carries out actions related to the field of public policy, RDI, and diffusion of information on soils. Since its inception, the network has enabled its members to carry out actions to facilitate access to expertise for decision makers as well as interactions between soil RDI stakeholders. When EJP SOIL started in 2021, the RNEST became the embryo for the development of a larger stakeholder group called the EJP SOIL National Hub. In addition to the eleven actors supporting RNEST mentioned above, three organizations were added as members: A federation promoting access to land for farmers and environmentally friendly agriculture (closely linked to a solidarity investment company and a foundation recognized as being of public utility), an agri-environmental consultancy firm and a trade body representing agricultural, agri-food, agro-industrial and forestry cooperatives. At Nov 2022 meeting it was decided to include in the French EJP SOIL National Hub the scientific, technical, and innovation committee of the RNEST network, which associates 30 soil stakeholders from the public and private sectors. A survey conducted in 2021 of the stakeholders involved in RNEST identified the following strengths of the network and what factors are needed for the network to succeed in its work (Fig. 1):



Fig. 1 Results from survey of French RNEST network stakeholders in 2021

Success factors for Soil Health National Hubs

Based on feedback from EJP SOIL and the French RNEST example PREPSOIL proposes the following success factors which should be considered in the design of a SHNH

1. **A dedicated facilitator and secretary** – This person/s ensures that regular meetings are conducted, and puts the necessary energy and attention into the organization, running, documentation and evaluation of the meetings. It may be preferable that the person has qualifications in stakeholder engagement and communication and perhaps is not a soil



expert which may unconsciously steer discussions in a particular direction based on the experts academic experience and research focus

2. **Sufficient funding** – It is unrealistic to expect that the establishment of a permanent and active SHNH in each country can occur without proper funding. Members states should investigate both sources of national and EU funds to make this possible. The largest expense is likely to be funding the wages of a SHNH facilitator / secretary, followed by meeting expenses, and possible honorary fees per meeting for participating members.
3. **A clear mandate and specific objectives** – It is relatively easy to invite and gather a wide range of stakeholders in each country to deliberate on soil health issues. However, without clear objectives and what will be discussed and actioned upon in each meeting, members in the SHNH will quickly see it as a waste of their time, and the group can dissolve again as quickly as it formed. This is where consultation with your national authorities and current EJP-Soil national hub members is important.
4. **Time to grow** - A well-functioning group needs time to really develop good dynamics among members, a shared vision of their role and orientation, and a form of autonomy. In the initial phases it would be wise for the facilitator to have members meet in person and get to know each other well such that they are comfortable in sharing opinions with one another. There can be unseen barriers to effective group communication which facilitators should be aware of. An excellent resource to learn more about how to overcome these barriers is in the book written by Burtis and Turman (2006).
5. **Active involvement from national authorities.** For the SHNH to have an impact towards national policies and implementation by landholders, PREPSOIL suggests there should be a strong and active leadership of the SHNHs by national authorities. As a minimum, the SHNH should include representatives from the ministries of agriculture, forestry and environment in each country. Representative from other ministries with relevance for the use or management of soil could also be invited e.g., ministries of infrastructure, education, climate, and mining. In addition to representatives from the ministries there is likely to be relevant government authorities which work under the ministries of agriculture and environment and have the mandate to execute agricultural and environmental laws and manage subsidy schemes aimed at farmers and landholders. Representatives from these organizations would be also highly relevant to invite.

Other lessons from EJP SOIL regarding the functioning of National Hubs

As part of a qualitative assessment conducted on the functioning of National Hubs, NIBIO drafted the following examples of national hubs that function well and not well.

Elements of a well-functioning National Hub

- Members have a good understanding of EJP SOIL
- Members know one another well and can interact more easily
- Members meet often enough that there is a continuity of discussion and purpose



- Members take ownership over their role and contribute meaningful opinions which can be fed back into the EJP-Soil programme
- Members understand what the function of the NH is – what are they meeting?
- Meetings are convened by programme owner (usually government departments.) which carry more authority in terms of a stakeholder's feeling of obligation to attend meetings

Elements of an inoperative National Hub

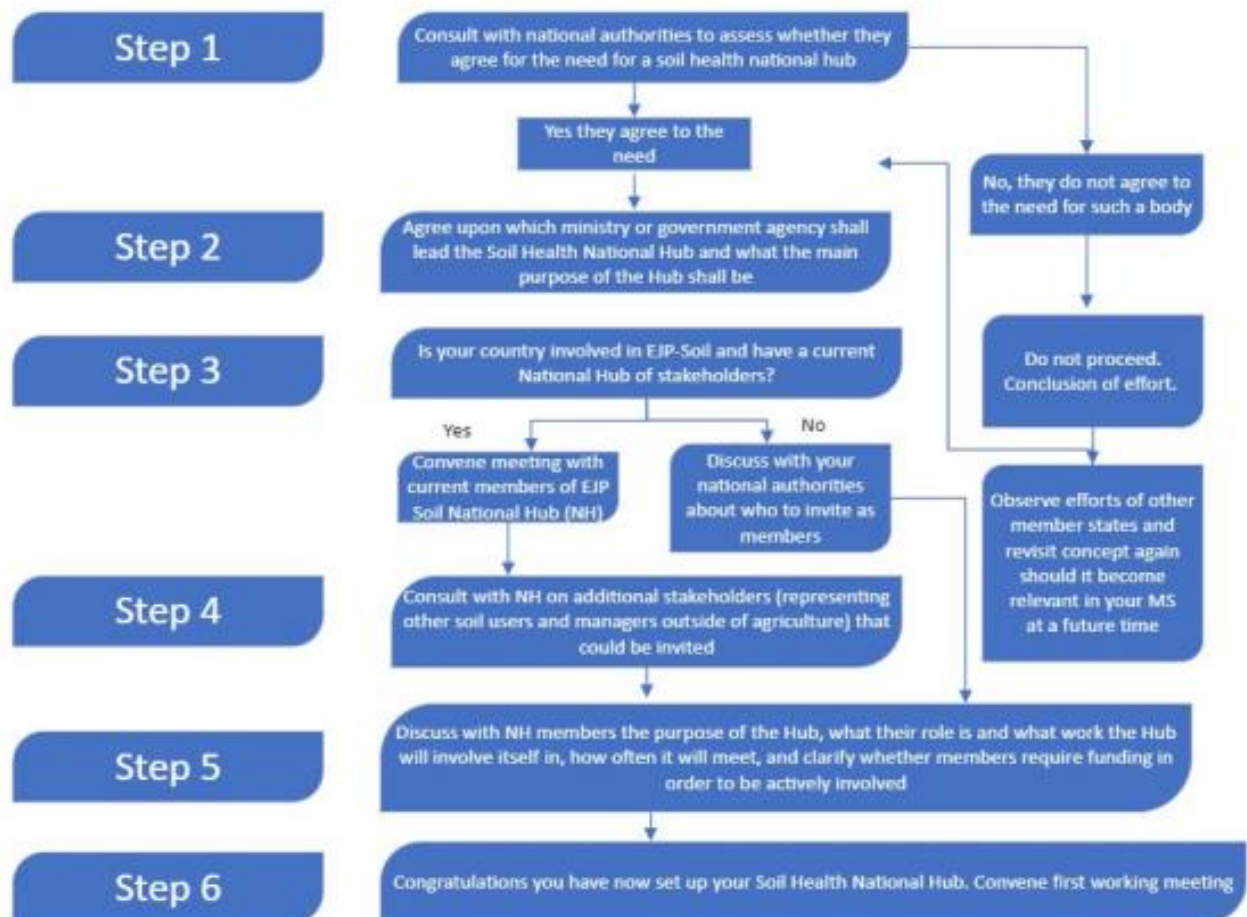
- Members are identified on paper but there are no meetings
- Members do not feel a strong obligation to attend meetings
- Members attend meetings but don't really know why they have been gathered and what their purpose is
- Members do not contribute actively or at all in meetings (one way communication from academics to NH members)
- Members do not really know one another and thus are not comfortable in discussing freely
- Members do not feel as if they are on equal status/authority as other members and remain quiet in meetings

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Getting started

To make it easier to get started PREPSOIL provides the following flow chart to guide the establishment of a soil health national hub in your country



Need more help?

Contact PREPSOIL and we will put you in contact with our relevant project partner who can assist in answering any questions which are not addressed in these guidelines.

Contact: <https://prepsoil.eu/contact-us>

References

Burtis, J. O., & Turman, P. D. (2006). Group communication pitfalls: Overcoming barriers to an effective group experience. SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452204345>