



EU MISSIONS

SOIL DEAL FOR EUROPE

**Mission Soil Board's set of
recommendations for the
establishment of national
Mirror Groups**

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**Independent
Expert
Report**

*Research and
Innovation*

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1.0 Aim of this set of recommendations

The Board of the EU Mission 'A Soil Deal for Europe' (Mission Soil Board) expects Mission Soil Mirror Groups to contribute at the **national level** to the implementation of the Mission's objectives and enhance the conditions for their achievement in Member States (MSs).

The Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the Communication 'EU Missions two years on: assessment of progress and way forward'¹ states that Mission Soil Mirror Groups are said to play an important role for the future set-up of the Mission's implementation nationally and regionally. The Commission's Communication on the Mission's assessment states: 'There has also been important progress on governance at national level: several Member States have established inter-ministerial taskforces and national Mirror Groups to better liaise with the Commission on national implementation.'²

The exact shape and composition of the Mirror Groups are, however, not yet defined in other documents issued by the Mission Soil Board. The main idea for the present document is to provide guidance for each Member State to create or adapt its own Mirror Group with the institutional arrangements adjusted to its own context.

At the start of 2024, some MSs have a Mission Soil Mirror Group in place, and they function in very different ways, with different potentials for contributing to the implementation of the Mission Soil objectives.

With this set of recommendations, the aim is to provide clear guidance from the Mission Board. This set provides some examples of composition, mandate, and functionality to help the MSs put in place or adjust their existing Mirror Groups, which can support the Mission Soil. The Mission Board acknowledges that there is no 'one size fits all' solution, instead noting that different compositions and mechanisms can lead to a dynamic Mirror Group, depending on each Member State's context. The creation of national Mirror Groups is optional. This set of recommendations is therefore just that: recommendations to be used as practical guidance and inspiration according to local needs.

This document reflects a work in progress and can be adjusted following experience accumulated with existing Mirror Groups as well as comments and suggestions from the corresponding Horizon Europe Programme Committee.

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023SC0260>

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0457>

2.0 Tasks of the Mirror Group

The Mirror Group's overall task is to support and report on the Soil Mission implementation at national level and gain support for improving soil health across sectors in each MS, in particular by enhancing national and sub-national efforts to achieve the Mission Soil objectives as defined in its implementation plan.³

The Mirror Group is expected to contribute to raising stakeholder awareness and know-how about the importance of conserving and improving soil health for different land-use contexts, such as agriculture, forestry, (post-)industrial sites and cities, and to support and promote sustainable land management practices in all types of land uses. Inspired by the Australian Soil Advocate task description,⁴ we suggest that one main task is to suggest and engage in activities that will lead to an increased understanding of:

- ▶ the critical role soil health plays in sustainable agricultural and forestry production, and the follow-on social, environmental and economic benefits that can result;
- ▶ how improved soil health will benefit the environment and human health and help to meet global challenges, such as food security, balanced water cycles and biodiversity conservation, and overall climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Furthermore, the Mirror Group tasks are to:

- ▶ provide leadership and gain the support of governments, industry and academia to effect practice change to improve soil health;
- ▶ promote and support networks to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and resources;
- ▶ advise and provide input into the national, regional and local policies which impact soil, from different perspectives.

Therefore, it can be envisaged that Mirror Groups will:

- ▷ respond to demands for advice, which may be articulated/requested by the different sectors in the central/national administration;
- ▷ upon request, suggest guidelines for the soil health initiatives and policies at relevant levels, including regional and local initiatives;
- ▷ respond to demands for participation in the public or in technical debates where soil health is at stake;
- ▷ propose initiatives aligned with different stakeholders.

3.0 Success Criteria

To guide the development of the Mirror Groups, it is crucial to identify success criteria. Considering the roles expected from Mirror Groups, described above, we propose:

- ▷ frequency and type (defined according to the relevance for soil health improvement) of advice requested by different sectors in the central/national administration regarding activities, regulations and incentives;
- ▷ number and type (defined according to the relevance for soil health improvement) of policy orientations and tools issued by the Mirror Groups and adopted at national, regional or local levels;

³ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/document/download/1517488e-767a-4f47-94a0-bd22197d18fa_en?filename=soil_mission_implementation_plan_final.pdf

⁴ <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/agriculture-land/farm-food-drought/natural-resources/soils/national-soils-advocate>. The Australian Soil Advocate mandate ended in August 2023 and by March 2024 the Australian Government is developing a new approach to soils advocacy which will integrate soils within the broader context of sustainable land management, sustainable agriculture and responding to climate change.

- ▷ frequency of participation of the Mirror Group or its representatives in the public or in technical debates where soil health is at stake;
- ▷ number and type of initiatives aligned with different stakeholders.

To start with, we propose an evaluation period of five years, with regular monitoring along the five years. Adjustment of ambition and activities is expected to happen if the monitoring and evaluation demonstrate a non-satisfactory success rate.

4.0 Definition and composition of a Soil Mirror Group

Deriving from the above, for the Mission Soil Board, a Mirror Group consists of a group of individuals within a Member State that works for the translation of Mission objectives into (sub-)national action across sectors and creates a dynamic targeting of soil restoration and soil health.

When forming and assigning the function of a Mirror Group, it is crucial to carefully consider national factors, such as pre-existing national structures, available resources and capacities, as they greatly influence the most effective and impactful configuration and roles of the Mirror Group.

For example, if groups or networks already exist at national level, for which soil health is a major concern and where soil health specialists are gathered, these networks should be considered when constituting the Mirror Group.

To be able to have meaningful impact, it is important that each Mirror Group is designated by the high political level (ministerial level) in each country. It should be institutionally acknowledged on a broad basis and combine representatives of diverse sectors of the administration. In practical terms, this usually implies designating representatives from the ministries in charge of implementing the Common Agricultural Policy at the national level, ministries in charge of the environment and in charge of science and research, as well as of infrastructures. Moreover, the Mirror Group could have members with links to other departments responsible for implementing the proposed Soil Monitoring Law after its adoption and entry into force.⁵ The Mirror Group should have a clearly defined mandate and leadership by one ministry or department, depending on the national context.

For the Mission Board, the mandate is clearly defined: a Mission Soil Mirror Group plays an advisory role across sectors and sectoral legislation and acts as a driver for selected activities, in collaboration with other public or private entities from different sectors. 'Across sectors' because the pathways for soil health involve the agricultural, forestry, environmental, territorial development and nature conservation, as well as science spheres. The Group's advice can be articulated at national, regional or even local level.

Ideally, the Mirror Group is composed of two sub-groups:

1. **Policy Group:** composed of representatives of entities under the sectoral Ministries with relevance for the Mission (Agriculture, Environment, Science, and others) and including the Mission Soil Board member if there is one from the Member State. Mission Soil Ambassadors can also be involved.
2. **Stakeholder Group:** this includes sectoral organisations (e.g. farmers, forest owners, spatial planners, industry), those who provide support to the actual soil managers, as farm and forestry advisors and extensionists, researchers and representatives of key groups in civil society, as well as representatives of Mission Soil Living Labs and existing Communities of Practice (e.g. specific land-use groups that are actively working to promote and enhance soil health and have sometimes done so long before the Mission Soil, such as no-till, conservation agriculture, organic farmers, etc.). It is advisable that four different sub-groups of stakeholders are appointed, to make the meetings and the process in general more operational and relevant for those involved. This would be one group for

⁵ https://environment.ec.europa.eu/publications/proposal-directive-soil-monitoring-and-resilience_en

agricultural soils, one for forest soils and nature conservation areas, one for urban and peri-urban soils and one for industrial zones.

The Policy Group defines the specific scope of the Stakeholder Group and issues the invitations.

For functionality reasons, both the Policy group and each of the Stakeholder sub-groups should not be too large: a tentative number is between five and six individuals for the Policy Group, and a similar number for each of the stakeholder's sub-groups. However, the groups can involve more people, as long as this is functional in the country context and as long as a small, core group is active and maintains the dynamic.

A **coordinator** of the Mirror Group, from the Policy Group, should be designated from the start. A **co-coordinator** from the Stakeholder Group should also be designated. A **secretariat support** is a condition for the Mirror Group to function well. It can work in the premises of one of the Ministries involved, with a relevant entity already in place that dedicates part of its time to the Mirror Group. Another possibility is that projects which have dedicated funds can contribute to supporting the Mirror Group and its activities.

Regarding stakeholders or policy makers, not all have the same weight with regard to a societal topic. There are those who are core players, those who are active but are less central, and those who are not so active nor core players but are still knowledgeable, who can be classified as associated players. The core players can be the decision makers who take decisions on policy strategy and tools, known experts who can have an overview perspective and are asked for advice regularly by the policymakers, and members of the board of the largest sector organisations. Active players can be researchers with acknowledged expertise in specific topics, technical staff involved in the policy process, farm and forest advisers, and representatives of sectoral organisations. Associated players can be representatives of very specific sector organisations, researchers with empirical knowledge on specific questions but who are not usually linked to practice, and local-level organisations. As much as possible, for improving impact capacity, the Policy Group and the Stakeholder Group should be composed of core players.

Including the most meaningful policymakers and stakeholders entails that it may be relevant to include representatives from different scales: at national scale but also regional and local scales. Not all questions related to soil health are manifested equally across scales and across the different contexts, and also regarding policy, effective interventions and tools can be at national, regional or local levels.

5.0 Process towards the constitution of a Mirror Group

Where Mirror Groups already exist, diverse models have been applied to their constitution. These differences regard ownership, coordination, composition, engagement and activities done or planned.

Nominations by a Ministry are mentioned in the above sections. Commitment from specific entities and persons in the related public administration is required. The most obvious sectors are the Ministries of Agriculture and of the Environment, or entities within or representing these Ministries. However, the first initiatives to create a Mirror Group can also originate in the Ministry of Science or be taken by a Mission Board member or Mission ambassador. The latter two are strongly advised to establish contacts and provoke the discussion on a Mirror Group to be set up – in the most effective and productive way for each specific national context.

Upon its nomination, each Mirror Group, with its composition and coordinator, will be listed on the Mission Soil webpage, and regular contacts with the Mission Board and the Mission Secretariat should be planned.

The present document can be used for awareness raising and to launch the process.

When national groups combining stakeholders dealing with soil research, monitoring and management already exist, they can be the obvious starting place from which to select members of the Mirror Group. Existing soil-related networks and partnerships, such as the National Hubs of the European Joint Programme

(EJP) Soil project,⁶ are one possibility. National Hubs exist in 18 out of the 24 MSs countries participating in EJP Soil. They are composed of a broad range of different stakeholders; all include at least policymakers and scientists. The policy brief released in December 2023 on the National Hubs explains what the success factors are for the programme's National Hubs.⁷

6.0 Functioning of the Mirror Group – good practices

In this section, we present some examples of Mirror Groups already launched. The section can be updated as new Mirror Groups are created in different MS.

The example from Germany

Governance and composition:

Coordinating: BMEL: Ministry for Food and Agriculture.

Involved Ministries: BMBF: Ministry for Education and Science; BMUV: Ministry for Environment, Nature Protection, Nuclear Safety and Consumers.

Other institutes involved: Bundesanstalt für Landwirtschaft und Ernährung (BLE); Projektträger Jülich (PtJ); Forschungszentrum Jülich; Thünen-Institut; Umweltbundesamt (UBA); Leibniz-Zentrum für Agrarlandschaftsforschung (ZALF) e. V.; Bundesamt für Naturschutz (BfN); Julius-Kühn-Institut (JKI); Helmholtz-Zentrum für Umweltforschung (UFZ); Nationale Kontaktstelle Bioökonomie und Umwelt.

Involvement of the regional states (*Länder*) is planned, and eventually also of the national soil science association (Deutsche Bodenkundliche Gesellschaft, DBG).

Activities and outcomes:

Since its inception in 2022, the Mirror Group has organised two meetings, and a third one is planned. The main goals of the Group are to:

- inform people about the Mission Soil activities and about relevant plans of the European Commission;
- exchange on soil-related activities between members of the German Mirror Group;
- discuss and identify synergies;
- exchange with members of the Horizon Europe Mission Soil projects (e.g. SOLO, LOESS).

Earlier topics included presentations of the activities of the Mission Soil Board, the BonaRes Zentrum, the Mission Soil Manifesto 2023, and the selection of the Soil of the year 2023 in Germany.

Planned topics: exchange with ORCaSa-Project (Horizon Europe project on capturing and storing carbon in soils), the BMUV's 'bog project', and the new German soil monitoring centre.

The example from Spain:

Governance and composition:

- Created in October 2019 (*Grupo Espejo* in Spanish). Coordinating: Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities.

⁶ <https://ejpsoil.eu/about-ejp-soil/ejp-soil-national-hubs>

⁷ https://ejpsoil.eu/fileadmin/projects/ejpsoil/WP8/Policy_briefs/EJPSOIL_Policy_Brief_Stakeholder_Engagement.pdf

The Core Mirror Group is the Policy Group: Ministry for Science, Innovation and Universities (MCIN); Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA); Ministry of Ecological Transition (MITERD); Representatives in the Working Group for the Soil Mission (INIA-CSIC, CDTI); Spanish Member of the Mission Board; Spanish Member of the Assembly; Spanish funding agencies (AEI, CDTI); Experts of the Programme Committee (CSIC); NCP Soil Mission (CDTI); EJP Soil Spanish Coordinator (INIA-CSIC); Spanish Representative for 4x1.000 Initiative (MAPA).

Additional Members: Stakeholders Group: Experts from Public Research Centres and from academia; PREPSOIL CSA Spanish participants; Climate Change Spanish Office (OECC-MITECO); Regional Institutions for agri-food research (e.g. IFAPA, CITA, IRTA, IVIA, NEIKER, INTIA); Climate KIC – Spain; Private sector; agrarian associations (UPA, ASAJA, COAG, COPLACA); LL/LH Spanish initiatives; NGOs.

Activities and outcomes

Regular meetings are held as needed to inform about Soil Mission activities and plans of the Commission, define Spain's position and comments on Mission documents (mission scope, focus, and alignment with national policies, activities, and capacities), discuss alignment with AEI (funding) and MAPA (CAP/EIP), consider enlargement of the group to incorporate complementary capacities and views, identify examples of resilient communities and regions, identify activities, projects, and plans in Spain within this area, and explore synergies with other Missions (societal engagement and outreach events).

Since its inception in 2019, the Spanish Mirror Group has: held 11 meetings; participated in 17 national and international events; given advice and support to the EJP Soil programme in Spain and to the Mission Soil (mapping of potential living labs and lighthouses in Spain); participated in PREPSOIL (dissemination, exploitation, communication and stakeholder management, identification, mapping and evaluation of EU regional soil needs, web portal, online community engagement and training, knowledge transfer and co-creation in regional living labs, promoting soil education, awareness and engagement of Communities of Practice) and in discussions around the CAP (the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will analyse the carbon content of Spain's agricultural soils to assess the results of the implementation of the new CAP in 2023).

Major achievements include the broad dissemination of information about the Mission Soil to national, regional and municipal institutions; international dissemination has also been achieved.

The example from Finland

Governance and composition:

The Regional Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY Centres), under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and the Ministry of the Environment, will take on the responsibility for the National Mirror Group in Finland. The ELY-Centre of Northern Ostrobothnia is responsible for the national implementation and development tasks on behalf of the central government. The coordination role starts in early 2024. The National Mirror Group will be composed of stakeholders and scientists, including the members of the Mission Board.

