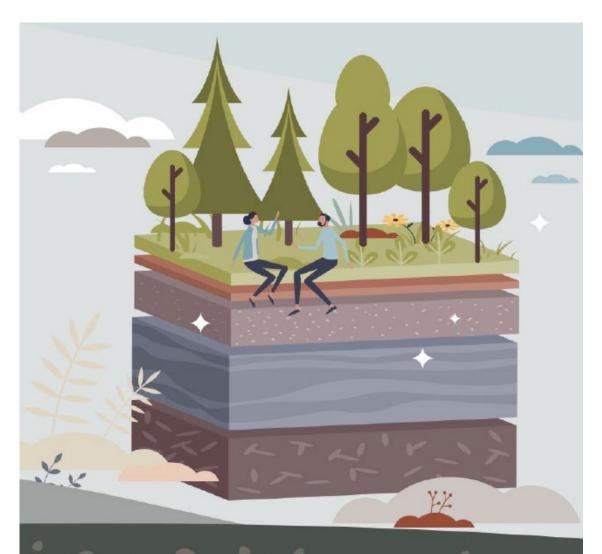


NATIOONS

Deliverable 4.5 – Helpdesk performance report, round #1 and #2



National engagement activities to support the launch of the Mission 'A Soil Deal for Europe' 100 Living Labs and Lighthouses







Data sheet

Project Name	National engagement activities to support the launch of the Mis-
	sion 'A Soil Deal for Europe' 100 Living Labs and Lighthouses
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Website	www.nati00ns.eu
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Task	T4.5 Helpdesk set up and operation
Lead author	Gabriele Quattrocchi (TRUST-IT)
Contributors	Gabriela Rogowska (TRUST-IT)
Peer reviewers	Ulliana Bertelsen (AU)
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Glossary of terms

Term	Description	
AC	Associated Country	
AU	Aarhus University	
D	Deliverable	
DoA	Description of Action	
EC	European Commission	
ENoLL	European Network of Living Labs	
FAQ	Frequently Asked Question	
FSTP	Financial Support to Third Party	
IUNG	Institute of Soil Science and Plant Cultivation State Research Institute	
LH	Lighthouse	
LL	Living Lab	
Mission Soil EU Mission "A Soil Deal for Europe"		
NEE National Engagement Event		
MS	Member State	
POLIMI	Polytechnic University of Milan	
SHLL	Soil Health Living Lab	
REA	European Research Executive Agency	
RES	Research Enquiry Service	
SLU	Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences	
Т	Task	
TRUST-IT	Trust-IT Services	







Keywords

Soil health, Living Labs, Lighthouses, Mission Soil.

Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

The NATIOONS helpdesk is established to serve as a valuable resource for potential soil health Living Labs applicants within the EU Mission "A Soil Deal for Europe" call-dedicated topics in 2023 and 2024. This helpdesk was designed to play a critical role in helping applicants understand and navigate the complexities of the application process. The primary objectives of the helpdesk are manifold, with a main focus on providing comprehensive support to applicants. This includes guidance on the rules of the topics on Living Labs, eligibility criteria, and addressing scientific and technical queries related to soil health, living labs, and land management. This service is maintained and continually upgraded by the project's partners, with a quality-check procedure in place. The helpdesk aims to provide prompt and precise responses to every inquiry it receives. This is achieved by assigning a specific member of the consortium, an expert in the relevant area, to respond to each request. The helpdesk's activities are led and coordinated by Trust-IT Services, with substantial support from task partners. The helpdesk has successfully responded to inquiries from a diverse range of organisations and regions, offering support across various aspects of the EU Soil Mission. The rapid turnaround time in addressing inquiries, 3.9 business days on average, underscores the helpdesk's efficiency. In-depth analysis of received questions has allowed the identification of common topics that applicants seek clarification on. These include questions about the call topic texts, establishing living labs and participation of different entities. Recommendations for enhancing its performance include the continuous update of the FAQs section, active tracking of questions from future related events, and the potential inclusion of the SOILL-Startup helpdesk in official 2025 call topic texts related to future Soil Health Living Labs.







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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Objectives

Deliverable (D) 4.5 "Helpdesk performance report, round #1 and #2" aims to give an overview on the activities carried out by the Task (T) 4.5 "Helpdesk set up and operation" (M1 – M23) - Lead partner: Trust-IT Services (TRUST-IT); Participants: Aarhus University (AU), European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL), Institute of Soil Science and Plant Cultivation State Research Institute (IUNG), Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), Polytechnic University of Milan (POLIMI), COMMpla. The creation and development of the helpdesk has been envisaged and implemented in 2023 and D4.5 actually comes as an update of D4.4 "Helpdesk performance report, round #1", which was submitted in accordance with the timeline and requirements of the Description of Action (DoA). The overarching goal of the helpdesk is to provide support to potential Soil Health Living Lab (SHLL) applicants, as a tool to facilitate the overall comprehension and subsequent uptake of the correlated topics of the EU Mission "A Soil Deal for Europe" topics funding the establishment of SHLLs and Lighthouses (LHs).

The function of the helpdesk, whose maintenance and continual upgrade is carried out by the project's partners on an ongoing basis, aims substantially to deliver contextualised information ranging from explanations about how to apply, eligibility criteria, to scientific and technical questions related to the scope of proposals, Living Labs criteria, and other issues regarding soil health, participatory approaches, conceptual and organisational aspects of living labs and land management. The system has been developed with a view to strictly adhere to a meticulous quality-check procedure: the main goal is to guarantee spot-on assistance to the community regardless of the nature of the inquiry. In order to accomplish this, for every request a specific member of the consortium, with a correlated expertise in the addressed area/niche, is identified and appointed to draft a satisfactory answer, and make sure the draft answer is reviewed by another expert in the same area.

1.2 Task participants

Trust-IT Services (TRUST-IT) leads and coordinates the activities of task 4.5 "Helpdesk set-up and operation". According the DoA, T4.5 was supposed to end in M23 – September 2024 – but it actually ended on the cut-off date for submitting the proposals under HORIZON-MISS-2024-SOIL-01-01: Cocreating solutions for soil health in Living Labs and HORIZON-MISS-2024-SOIL-01-02: Living Labs in urban areas for healthy soils, in October 2024 (M24). This resulted in the extension of the support of the NATIOONS consortium to the applicants until the last useful date. Other partners supporting the implementation of the activities are mainly involved in the elaboration of accurate responses to each of the submitted inquiries and its corresponding quality check, in order to provide correct replies. Partners active in the task are: AU, ENOLL, IUNG, SLU, POLIMI.

1.3 Relations with other deliverables

The coming NATIOONS deliverables which are related to this document are the following ones:

D2.3 Dissemination, exploitation and communication report (M24)







- D2.5 Knowledge transfer report (M24)
- D4.4 Help Desk performance report, round #1 (M11)

Performance metrics of the helpdesk operation during the whole lifecycle of the in D4.5 mirror D4.4's, in order to ensure methodological consistency. Being the helpdesk a major asset of NATIOONS, it is subject of intensive communication campaigns, i.e. through digital communication channels and during in-person events.

The helpdesk system and related results are also mentioned in the *D2.5 Knowledge Transfer report* (M24), as a sort of key exploitable result, whose underpinning knowledge will be handed over to SOILL-Startup ("Startup of the SOILL support structure for SOIL Living Labs" – GA 101145592, https://www.soill2030.eu/).

2 Helpdesk Setup and Operation

The NATIOONS helpdesk¹ offered assistance to:

- 1) applicants to topics HORIZON-MISS-2023-SOIL-01-08: Co-creating solutions for soil health in Living Labs and HORIZON-MISS-2023-SOIL-01-09: Carbon farming in living labs of the 2023 call for proposals of the EU Mission "A Soil Deal for Europe", and
- 2) applicants to HORIZON-MISS-2024-SOIL-01-01: Co-creating solutions for soil health in Living Labs and HORIZON-MISS-2024-SOIL-01-02: Living Labs in urban areas for healthy soils of the 2024 call for proposals of the EU Mission "A Soil Deal for Europe".



¹ https://nati00ns.eu/helpdesk



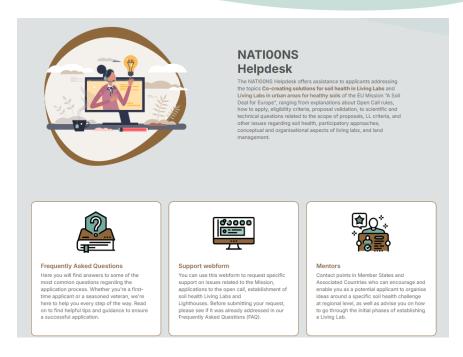


Figure 1. The structure of the helpdesk on the NATIOONS website

The support the helpdesk provided ranged from explanations about rules, how to carry out the application process, eligibility criteria, to scientific and technical questions related to the scope of proposals, Living Lab (LL) criteria, and other issues regarding soil health, participatory approaches, conceptual and organisational aspects of living labs, and land management.

2.1 FAQ - Frequently Asked Questions

The initiation and execution of the Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) system within the NATIOONS project is a testament to our commitment to enhancing stakeholder engagement and information dissemination. This section outlines the evolution as a dynamic resource from March 2023 to October 2024. The period from March 2023 to September 2023 was covered by D4.4 and will then be recalled here in a nutshell.

2.1.1 FAQ Creation and Validation – In a nutshell

In March 2023, NATIOONS began developing a two-tiered FAQ system in response to numerous queries raised during the National Engagement Events (NEEs). The first tier, a public FAQ system, was designed to provide quick, accessible answers on topics like the EU Mission Soil, Open Call topics, and Soil Health Living Labs. A second, internal repository was also created to collect questions from various channels, supporting helpdesk operations and identifying knowledge gaps. After rigorous validation by project partners and the Mission Secretariat, the FAQ was launched on the NATIOONS website on 1 June 2023, alongside other helpdesk resources. See D4.4 for additional details.

2.1.2 A Living Product: Future Evolution and Re-evaluation

The public FAQ system is not a static repository but a living product. The dynamic nature of the project demands ongoing adaptation and improvement. From October 2023 onwards, additions to the FAQ were planned to capture insights from various project activities, including NEEs (WP3),





coaching sessions (T4.1), and feedback from the broader helpdesk operation. The FAQ has undergone an update, demonstrating its responsiveness to user feedback and evolving needs. This proactive approach to the system's development reflected the project's commitment to continuous enhancement, effective stakeholder support, and the assimilation of emerging questions.

The Consortium Meeting in Novi Sad, Serbia, in October 2023, was the first opportunity to analyse the questions received through the support webform over the 2023 proposal preparation phase and take stock of the questions the consortium collated during the implementation of first round of NEEs and webinars. A plan for developing a compilation of quality checked questions and answers based on all questions received from helpdesk, Webinars, NEE was presented by AU on behalf of the knowledge provision task force, which was made up of AU, ENoLL, IUNG, POLIMI and SLU. The compilation was made available for national organisers and mentors and was leveraged as future trajectory for the FAQs area. The content is also relevant for the SOILL-Startup helpdesk.

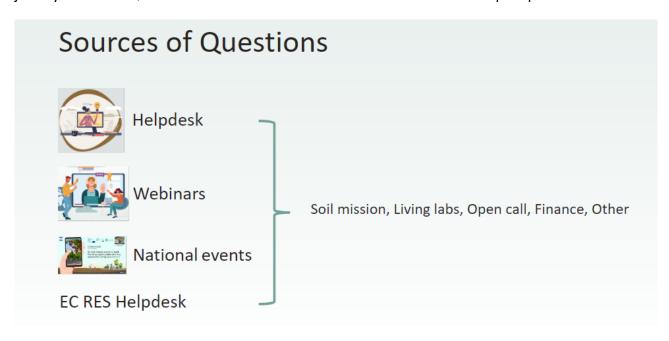


Figure 2. Sources of Questions

The purposes of collating questions and answers from multiple sources mirror the need to help mentors find answers/references to certain questions applicants could ask, but mostly to feed the FAQ and assist national event organisers. As a matter of fact, these process and asset are and will be crucial to establish a database for long-term use also for SOILL-Startup. The last batch of updates to FAQ, reviewed by REA and Mission Soil secretariat, ENOLL and AU was executed on 4 September 2024. The FAQ system stands as a valuable tool in enhancing engagement and fostering the promotion of the topics funding the establishment of SHLLs and LHs beyond the duration of NATIOONS.





	Question selection and collection	Check if relevant or already answered	Draft answer	Review	Evaluate use of question and an- swer
Helpdesk	All Q&As quality checked				
Webinars	Organising partner	AU for 2023 Qs, ENOLL for 2024 Qs	AU/ENoLL (POLIMI/IUNG/ SLU)	AU/ENoLL (POLIMI/IUNG/SLU)	AU
National events	Organising partner	AU for 2023 Qs	AU/ENOLL (POLIMI/IUNG/ SLU)	AU/ENOLL (POLIMI/IUNG/SLU)	AU
Research Enquiry Service	AU (ENoLL did first screening)	AU	AU/ENoLL (POLIMI/IUNG/ SLU)	AU/ENoLL (POLIMI/IUNG/SLU)	AU

Table 1. 2024 Plan for Question collection and data input - Manage questions - Quality check

2.2 Support webform

Through the support webform, the NATIOONS project offered a dedicated helpdesk in support of applicants to the Mission Soil interested in addressing those topics funding the establishment of the SHLLs and LHs.

The webform facilitated the answers to specific inquiries related to the Mission, open call topics, the establishment of Living Labs and Lighthouses and "Other" questions.

This system allows applicants to submit specific questions related to the topics, seeking guidance and information to address any uncertainties on the proposal preparation. The submitted queries were reviewed and addressed by experts from the NATIOONS consortium, and the responses were provided directly via email. This tool ensured a streamlined and organised approach to applicant support, helping individuals navigate the application requirements and procedures effectively. It played a key role in fostering transparency, offering guidance, and enhancing the overall applicant experience in the application process.

The inquirers were always encouraged to consult the FAQ page before submitting inquiries. Applicants are made aware that relevant questions submitted through this channel may be subject to publication, in accordance with the website privacy policy and GDPR rules, alongside the corresponding answers as part of the FAQ.





For questions concerning national events or other activities within the NATIOONS initiative, a separate contact form was available². Legal or financial inquiries were redirected to the official European Commission helpdesk³.

2.2.1 Structure and types of assistance offered

The webform has a simple structure allowing for data collection, including name, email, organisation type and country/region of the user. The process structure, the team and the types of assistance offered are extensively described in D4.4. Hereby, it is sufficient to mention that the internal workflow designed in 2023 (Figure 3) was confirmed in 2024, as it proved to be successful despite minor shortcomings regarding the number of passages and potential bottlenecks that could undermine the rapidity of the service provision. They were ultimately deemed as necessary to keep a high quality service.

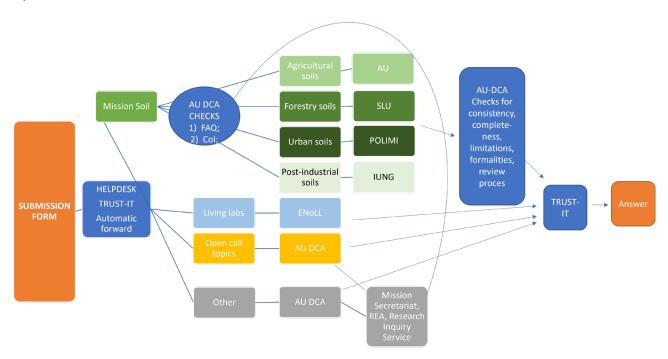


Figure 3. Helpdesk internal workflow

Questions which are outside the remit of the helpdesk, e.g., topic text interpretations, are not answered by NATIOONS. Instead, the enquirer was redirected to the research enquiry service (RES), and if it was a question for the Mission Secretariat, the question was at the same time sent to the Mission Secretariat and REA for information. Within the timeframe of the NATIOONS helpdesk operational activities, no relevant question addressing the Mission Secretariat was received.





² https://nati00ns.eu/form/contact.

³ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/contact-us/research-enquiry-service_en.



2.3 Mentors

NATIOONS Mentors were contact points in Member States (MS) and Associated Countries (AC) who could encourage and enable national applicants to organise ideas around a specific soil health challenge at regional level, as well as advise on how to go through the initial phases of establishing a SHLL. The mentors were trained by NATIOONS as described in D4.1 Coaching and capacity building report, round #1, and its updated version Deliverable D4.2 – Coaching and capacity building report, round #1 and #2. The contact list of mentors was under the helpdesk umbrella on the NATIOONS website.

3 Performance Metrics and Results

3.1 Statistics on the questions received through the NATIOONS helpdesk

In 2024, the helpdesk has received **17 questions** from a diverse range of organisations and individuals. These questions have covered a broad spectrum of topics related to soil health, spanning from details about the topics to details of SHLLs and LHs, the Mission Soil, and project timeframes. Among them 7 out of 17 regarded technical aspects related to the organisation of the events, the publication of the recordings or offers for collaborations. These questions were considered out of scope, and despite they were regularly addressed and provided with an appropriate answers, they were not considered in the following statistics as the answers did not require a quality check or could not be inscribed within established enquiry topics.

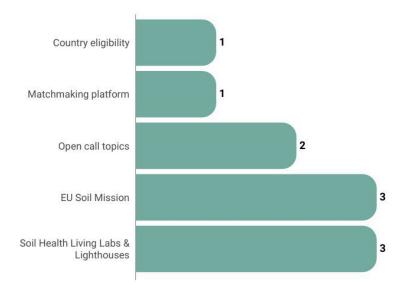


Figure 4. Helpdesk Enquiries by Topic

One key message emerging from this analysis of the data is the commitment of the helpdesk team to prompt responses. On average, in the running period, it took **4.3 business days** to provide answers to these inquiries. This quick turnaround time is consistent with provisions and estimations in the DoA (i.e., 3 to 5 business days).





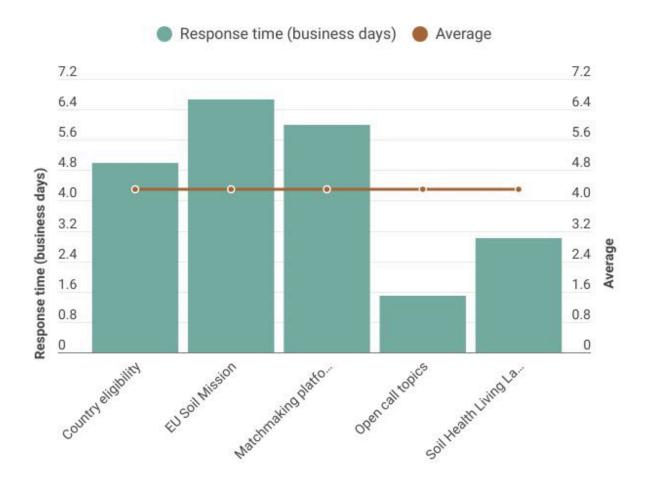


Figure 5. Average response time in relation to the topic

Questions have originated from multiple countries and regions, such as Germany, Norway, Belgium, Greece, Portugal, etc.





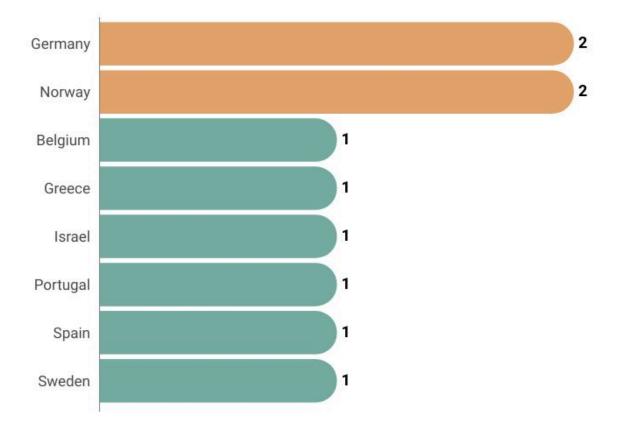


Figure 6. Helpdesk inquiries by country

Simultaneously, questions have come from various types of organisations, including land manager, national authorities, academia, living labs, and more. This diversity indicates a broad interest in soil-related topics from different categories of stakeholders. This data is however too limited to consider this set as a sample of the applicants to the LL topics. Nonetheless, this provides an indication of which categories of stakeholders were interested in the LL topics at the time of writing.





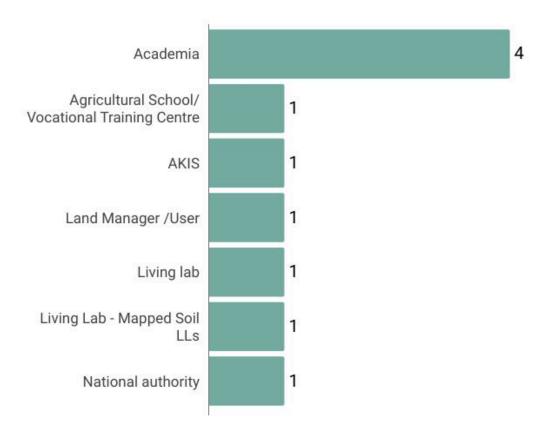


Figure 7. Diverse inquiry sources by organisation type

The analysis of the text of the received questions allowed the consortium partners to aggregate the main asked topics according to 3 main categories:

1. EU Soil Mission

Questions regarding participation in the Soil Mission projects, available support programmes, and funding details. Examples:

"Hello, I am from the [omissis], Greece. Which programs that support experiments in soil sustainability are available in Greece?"

2. Soil Health Living Labs & Lighthouses

Specific queries about Living Lab setups, spanning different countries, stakeholders' roles, and public authorities' involvement. Examples:

- "Can we have one of our Living Labs spanning different countries and addressing the same soil health challenge?"
- "Could you please clarify the co-funding rate from the EC for the call HORIZON-MISS-2021-SOIL-01-01?"





- "Is it possible to participate as a Living lab in more than one project within the call 'Co-creating solutions for soil health in Living Labs'?"
- "What is the best way to have public authorities in a Living Lab proposal?"

3. Open Call Topics

Questions regarding the funding, budget allocation, and guidelines for proposals, including examples of Financial Support to Third Party (FSTP) implementations. Example:

- "What is the average budget for one proposal? How many projects is the 12 Mio budget distributed across?"
- "Do I need to include at least two other potential LH or LL in other EU countries?"
- "Is there some opportunity to include Canadian Living Labs in the cluster? Must they be funded by Canadian funds?"
- "How do we set reasonable amounts per farmer across different countries for the support to third parties?"

There have not yet been technical or scientific questions to be answered by the Knowledge Provision Task Force from IUNG, POLIMI or SLU.

3.2 Satisfaction survey

The helpdesk Satisfaction Survey has been designed as a tool for monitoring and assessing the service provided by the NATIOONS helpdesk. The primary purpose of this questionnaire was to collect feedback from individuals and organisations that have interacted with the helpdesk, and to understand their experiences and gauge their satisfaction with the service.

The form was designed to help improve the helpdesk's performance. By gathering user feedback, the team would make data-driven decisions to enhance the quality of service provided. Nonetheless, the consortium experienced a low turnout for satisfaction surveys over the period of activity (June 2023 – October 2024). This is a common challenge in various organisations and projects. In NATIOONS, it is particularly interesting because the helpdesk service has received positive feedback from a small number of respondents in 2023. People are swamped with surveys from various sources. It's possible that respondents are fatigued with surveys in general. At the same time, users may be satisfied with the service but don't see the need to provide feedback, especially if they had a straightforward and positive experience.





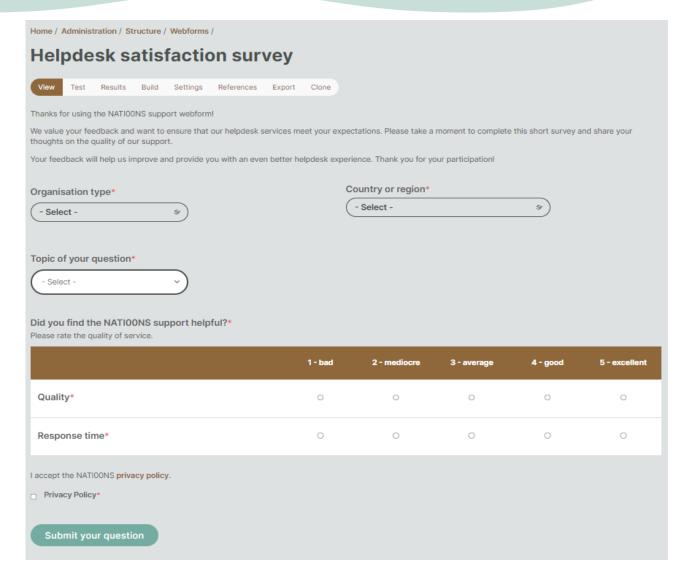


Figure 8. Helpdesk satisfaction survey

The partners involved in the helpdesk activities appropriately communicated to users that their feedback leads to improvements, via both email and intro to the satisfaction survey.

Although low response rates are frustrating, it is important to recognise that the consortium has received valuable feedback from those who do respond.





4 Conclusion and Recommendations for SOILL-Startup

The analysis of the quantitative data allows us to state that the NATIOONS helpdesk has been effective in responding to inquiries from a diverse range of organisations across different regions, showing a clear dedication to promoting soil health and addressing various topics related to the Mission Soil. The average response time is satisfactory and in line with the requirement of guaranteeing the highest quality in the delivering the answers to the inquirers.

The role of the helpdesk is instrumental to identify the most widespread misgivings among the community of potential applicants, with a view to enable them to carry forward their application(s). The nature of the received inquiries in 2024 mostly confirms the analysis in D4.4. The inquirers aimed at obtaining further information on the call topic rules on the whole. These inquiries allowed NATIOONS to understand that the most needed support revolves often around the overall understanding of the eligibility criteria and its high-level scope (from a scientific and technical standpoint). However, some issues span to the conceptual organisational aspects of the LLs (like LLs criteria and participatory approach) as well as to the land management.

The set-up and management of LLs is one of the main obstacles that prospective applicants seem to be facing and to be overcome. It is recommended that SOILL-Startup takes into account the received questions and provided answers through updating of the FAQs section of the SOILL Hub platform (https://soill2030.app/). It is recommended to provide an appropriate resource to the SOILL-Startup helpdesk to ensure that this service infrastructure is properly manned over and guarantee quick and knowledgeable guidance, especially on hot topics like the organisation of LLs and the call topics.

One of the explanation of the decrease in the number of the submitted inquiries can be due to the regular update of the FAQs section. This positive "knock-on" effect was actually expected and mentioned in D4.4. It is likely that users to looking for information through the helpdesk found it on the FAQs, without the need to pose a question via the webform. The enhancement of the helpdesk helpfulness and efficiency is indeed closely related to the regular updates of the FAQs section: the more inquiries collected (and timely answered) through the projects' lifecycle, the more complete the hub of information for the community (and future applicants) will be. It is then highly recommended to ensure the continuous alignment of the inquiries submitted and correlated answers with its upload in the FAQ section.

An important lesson learned from the rounds of NEEs is the importance to attentively run a tracking of the questions from the audience. The hybrid nature of those event made the collection of inquiries not always so straightforward: it would be nonetheless useful to have a dedicated person responsible to keep track of the questions during the events organised by SOILL-Startup. The gathering of these questions could effectively compensate for the regular update of the inquiries coming from the helpdesk source and turn out to be a supportive measure to obtain a wider and richer FAQs area.





References to the SOILL-Startup helpdesk is recommended to be included in the 2025 call topic texts, to direct all applicants to the SOILL-Startup website. Specifically, to add "Projects should benefit from the services of SOILL-Startup", and thereby feature the helpdesk (and all other SOILL-Startup activities). This could be an additional source of accessible and "ready-to-grasp" information for prospective applicant, which would raise the quality of the submitted applications.

In addition to these points, it would be useful to hand the evaluation summary reports of the submitted proposals in an anonymised form to the SOILL-Startup consortium. These reports would be a valuable resource for the helpdesk, allowing SOILL-Startup to gain deeper insights into the specific challenges faced by applicants in the previous round of calls for proposals. The consortium considers it as a formal recommendation to ensure that the helpdesk and other NATIOONS legacies are well-informed and equipped to assist applicants in an even more effective manner from 2025 onwards.



5 Annex – Received questions in 2024

In anonymised form. Information that might lead back to the person asking the question has been replaced by [omissis].

Date	Organisation type	Country / region	Topic of the question	Question
10/01/2024	Agricultural School/ Vo- cational Training Centre	Greece	EU Soil Mission	Hello, i am from the [omissis], Greece. Which programs that support experiments in soil sustainability are available in Greece? and from where can we get more information about it? Thank you
05/06/2024	AKIS	Belgium	Country eligibility	[omissis] Is there some opportunities to include Canadian LL in the cluster? Must they be funded by Canadian founds? Are there some bilateral collaboration engagement?
24/07/2024	Academia	Germany	Soil Health Living Labs & Lighthouses	Dear NATIOONS support team [omissis]. We are finalising our living lab concept for the call. Our consortium would have four living labs [omissis] with associated lighthouses, and one lighthouse site in [omissis]. The question to you is whether we can have one of our four living labs within the same agroecological zone and addressing the same soil health challenge but SPANNING DIFFERENT COUNTRIES? In this case specifically [omissis], addressing water-logging in compacted clay soils. We have a clear focus in terms of approach (successional or syntropic agroforestry) as well as a good coverage of the soil health challenges and mission goals. But we need to pool knowledge and resources to support each other across national boundaries. Many thanks for a response please let me know whether you need further info.
30/08/2024	Living Lab - Mapped Soil LLs	Sweden	EU Soil Mission	Hi, Is it possible to participate as a Living lab in more than one project within the call "Co-creating solutions for soil health in Living Labs"?





Date	Organisation type	Country / region	Topic of the question	Question
05/09/2024	Academia	Norway	Open call topics	Hi, We are working on a [omissis] proposal [omissis] We plan to use support to third parties mainly for farmers. We would need guideline as to: - how to we set reasonable amount per farmer in the different countries. Do you have example for this Is there a limit to the total amount allocated to FSTP (we were thinking possibly 1/3 of total budget)? - We would want to make it nominative (given that we have already worked with selected farmers on the proposal). How do we justify that? Should they be named in the proposal. A full example of implementation of FSTP for a LL proposal would be extremely useful. Thanks in advance
05/09/2024	Academia	Spain	EU Soil Mission	Dear team, we are in the process of putting together a project under the call HORIZON-MISS-2021-SOIL-01-01: Co-creating solutions for soil health in Living Labs, and I can not find anywhere what is the co-funding rate from the EC. Could you please clarify or point me where I should look at? many thanks!
13/09/2024	Land Manager /User	Portugal	Soil Health Living Labs & Lighthouses	I am keen to submit a proposal to create a LH here in Northern Portugal and would appreciate some advice as to how to move forward. I have land, experience - both in agricul-



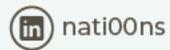
Date	Organisation type	Country / region	Topic of the question	Question
				ture and project management. Do I need to make an application that encompasses at least two other potential LH or LL in other EU countries? Is it still possible to participate in an application submitted by someone else and are you able to facilitate that kind of 'matchmaking?'. Thank you in advance,
16/09/2024	Academia	Norway	Soil Health Living Labs & Lighthouses	What is the best way to have public authorities in LL proposal (e.g. regional authorities involved or coordinating the LL), as partners, associated partners or just stakeholder? (I assume that they are not paid by the EU LL project). What is usually done?
03/10/2024	Living lab	Germany	Open call topics	What is the average budget for one proposal? What does it mean that the total budget is 12 Mio for all projects? On how many projects is that distributed? Is there a maximum number of countries participating per proposal and how many are that? Would 6 countries be possible? Would nano bubbles to improve soil health be a technology to be accepted in the proposal?













We will publish contents and materials and host training sessions to support the submission of high-quality application forms for the EU Mission Soils Open Calls.





