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Exploring Operational Procedures to Assess Ecosystem Services on Farm Level, including the Role of Soil Health

Bouma J.¹, J.J. de Haan² and M.F. Dekkers²

¹ Em. Prof Soil Science, Wageningen University, 6708 PB Wageningen, The Netherlands;

² Wageningen University & Research Field Crops, the Netherlands;

* Correspondence: johan.bouma@planet.nl

Abstract: Reaching the land-related UN-Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and similar goals articulated by the EU-Green Deal (GD) by 2030 presents a major challenge and requires a pragmatic approach to be focused on joint learning by land users (mostly farmers), researchers and other stakeholders in “Living Labs” and system experiments at experimental farms of research organizations. Defining specific indicators and thresholds for ecosystem services in line with land-related SDGs, are crucial to establish: “Lighthouses” that can act as inspiring examples if they meet the various thresholds. This exploratory paper discusses indicators and thresholds for an arable farm operating on marine, calcareous light clay soils in the Netherlands. Studies of a system experiment are used to discuss and test operational methodology to be widely applied when characterizing many “Living Labs” in future as planned by the European Union. The important role of soils, contributing to ecosystem services, is discussed in terms of soil health. Recommendations are made for innovative methodology to be associated with all land-related SDGs. Satisfying thresholds of ecosystem services, that will vary by soil type, region and farm-type, can be the basis for farm subsidies such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Research on Living Labs and in system experiments has to be judged by different criteria than those associated with traditional linear research. Important contributions by soils to achieve ecosystem services are framed in terms of soil health and are the most effective way to promote soil science in a by now widely desired inter- and transdisciplinary context.

Keywords: keyword 1; keyword 2; keyword 3

1. Introduction

1.1. Sustainable Development Goals

The Brundtland report of 1988: “Our Common Future” has been instrumental in emphasizing the urgency to put the issue of sustainable development on the international policy agenda, be it that the concept remained rather vague. The need for an integrated approach combining economic, societal or environmental issues when dealing with societal development has changed the sustainability discourse. The introduction of seventeen Sustainable Development Goals by the General Assembly of the United Nations (<https://sdgs.un.org>), approved in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by 193 countries in 2015, provided a welcome focus for the sustainability effort that was, in essence, also adopted by the Green Deal of the European Union of 2019 (<https://ec.europa.eu/greendeal>). Both policy documents emphasize the need for a practical approach resulting in visible results.

Green Deal targets and land-related SDGs are strongly affected by agricultural practices and soils play an important role [1]. When focusing on agriculture, primary attention will not only be on the traditional role of producing healthy crops to combat hunger (SDG2 & SDG3), but also on clean ground- and surface water (SDG6), on increasing carbon sequestration and limiting greenhouse-gas emissions for climate mitigation (SDG13) and on reduction of land degradation and biodiversity preservation (SDG15). Also,

energy use (SDG7) and sustainable production and consumption (SDG12) are relevant, where the latter has much in common with SDG2 & SDG3. The indicators and thresholds of the Green Deal and the SDGs specify the required “*clear and concrete objectives*” of [2]. They are strongly interrelated. Some form of multifunctional soil use and management has therefore to be realized in agriculture and this can be assessed in “Living Labs” which will certainly be very different in different regions.

A focus on the SDGs serves to connect with the international discourse on sustainable development. Each of the five major land-related SDGs can be reached when adequate ecosystem services are provided that are defined in terms of “*services provided by ecosystems to mankind*”, as first proposed by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment of 2005 (<https://www.millenniumassessment.org>). Soil functions contribute to ecosystem services in line with the SDGs [3,4]. Man is a recipient of such services that cannot be taken for granted. Adequate levels can only be reached by applying appropriate management measures. Ecosystem services can only be reached by an interdisciplinary effort, aside from soil scientists also involving agronomists, hydrologists, climatologists, ecologists, economists, sociologists and others. This represents a key message for all disciplinary researchers involved in the sustainability effort.

Each SDG is so far specified in terms of targets and indicators (<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata>). that do not, however, address operational methods and procedures by which these targets can be reached in the real world, presenting a key challenge to not only the scientific arena but to society at large.

Where to start? The SDGs will only be reached when land users, most of them farmers, are willing to embrace management procedures that result in providing ecosystem services in line with the SDGs. Farmers have been interviewed many times and their questions, concerns and demands need particular attention before new activities are started. Their major concerns are about unsure economic prospects, unclear and dysfunctional environmental rules and regulations in their perception as well as about not receiving independent advice [5,6,7]. These economic prospects are significantly affected by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union, supporting farmers with 350 billion € for the period 2021-2027, including a provision now that 25% of the funds, and perhaps more in future, will be allocated to support the realization of ecosystem services. This justifies the need for an operational assessment of ecosystem services allowing a functional link with the CAP.

Considering the role of soils in this broad ecosystem context, soil health was defined in terms of: “*the continued capacity of soils to contribute to ecosystem services in line with the SDGs and the Green Deal*”. [8]. At first sight this may seem to be a rather politically inspired definition but it, rather, emphasizes two key aspects: (i) soils cannot do it alone but contribute to ecosystem services. Its importance is determined by its contributions, and: (ii) by referring to the SDGs and the Green Deal, all environmental objectives beyond the classical production function are considered.

1.2. Research on wicked problems

To reach the thresholds derived from SDGs, farmers need to adapt their management to fulfill at least five ecosystem services while also having to adapt to changing weather conditions that are unpredictable beyond at most a ten-day period. That is why farms are complex systems, where no simple solutions are available to solve problems but only a set of alternative options that produce acceptable overall results. Problems encountered when researching such complex systems are “wicked”. Studying “wicked” problems cannot follow the standard linear research protocol producing a single answer based on reductionistic experiments where with sufficient replicates to allow a statistical analysis resulting in “significant” results. The standard protocol has many shortcomings. As an example, in the comparison of ploughing and non-inversion tillage much more differences are relevant than only replacing the plough by a cultivator. Timing of operations are different, but also other aspects such as crop rotation, choice of cover crops, weed control and

fertilization levels that need to be adapted to the new tillage method. It is not possible to take all aspect in to account in factorial experiments.

The European Commission recognizes the need for other forms of research by supporting the establishment of “Living Labs” and “Lighthouses” on farm level, following the advice of the Mission Board of Soil Health and Food [8]. “Living Labs” are defined as: *“spaces for co-innovation, through participatory, transdisciplinary systemic research”* that *“contribute to Green Deal targets for sustainable farming, climate resilience, biodiversity and zero-pollution”* and “Lighthouses” as *“single sites, like a farm or a park, where to showcase good practices. These are places for demonstration and peer-to-peer learning.”*

In Living Labs, farmers, researchers and other stakeholders jointly are creating knowledge [2,8] to develop suitable field-tested management methods that result in achieving several ecosystem services. Besides, Living Labs function to inspire colleague farmers to adopt certain management options that fit their particular farming style.

In Living Labs, the practical feasibility of management options can be well tested. However, possibilities for experiments on commercial farms are highly limited for financial and operational reasons. This aspect has not received adequate emphasis when promoting the “Living Lab” concept. Links with existing experimental farms of research organizations and universities can therefore be highly effective in designing and executing relevant experiments, including development of operational monitoring methods that can be applied at farm level. Next to more classical research, research projects and experiments on integrating management options into farming systems are important to test the feasibility of individual measures within systems and to assess the effects of the system on various ecosystem services. This can be done with more accuracy and precision on experimental farms than on commercial farms in “Living Labs”. In this type of research, farmers and other stakeholders need to be involved as well in the set up and execution of the research. Methodologies for these types of research are already existing in e.g. the prototyping methodology [9,10]. Besides, the value of the combination of research on experimental farms together with commercial farms was described before [11]. These system experiments are also important in dissemination of knowledge through field days, excursions and open discussions.

1.3. Objective of this paper

The objective of this exploratory paper is to present: (i) a case study on reaching the targets of the SDGs and the Green Deal for arable farming on a prime agricultural soil in the Netherlands and assessing the role of soils; (ii) a discussion of operational methods and criteria to define and measure indicators for ecosystem services and soil health, including threshold values; (iii) possible future developments in terms of innovative research in :“Living Labs” focused on alternative management practices that can improve ecosystem services and (iv) implications for research, research communication and environmental policy. All of this considering the agreed SDG deadline of 2030.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Characterizing ecosystem services and corresponding thresholds

Studying ecosystem services on farm level involves several steps, summarized in Figure 1. Attention is focused on the level where management decisions are made, that is the business unit, the farm. Ecosystem services are distinguished and indicators, measurement techniques and thresholds have to be determined, allowing a judgment as to whether or not ecosystem services provided are adequate. Targets are described in general terms in the SDG protocol, while thresholds define boundary values for ecosystem parameters in terms of “good” or “not good enough”. If ecosystem services don’t meet the threshold, the farming system must be re-evaluated, redesigned and the judgement procedure has to be repeated [9,10]. Thresholds should have a regional character as they are influenced by climate and local conditions, as will be discussed in the following sections. Note that not only soils determine ecosystem services at farm level as many other

factors and processes are involved. The major role of soils can, however, be assessed, as explored in this paper, in terms of contribution to ecosystem services.

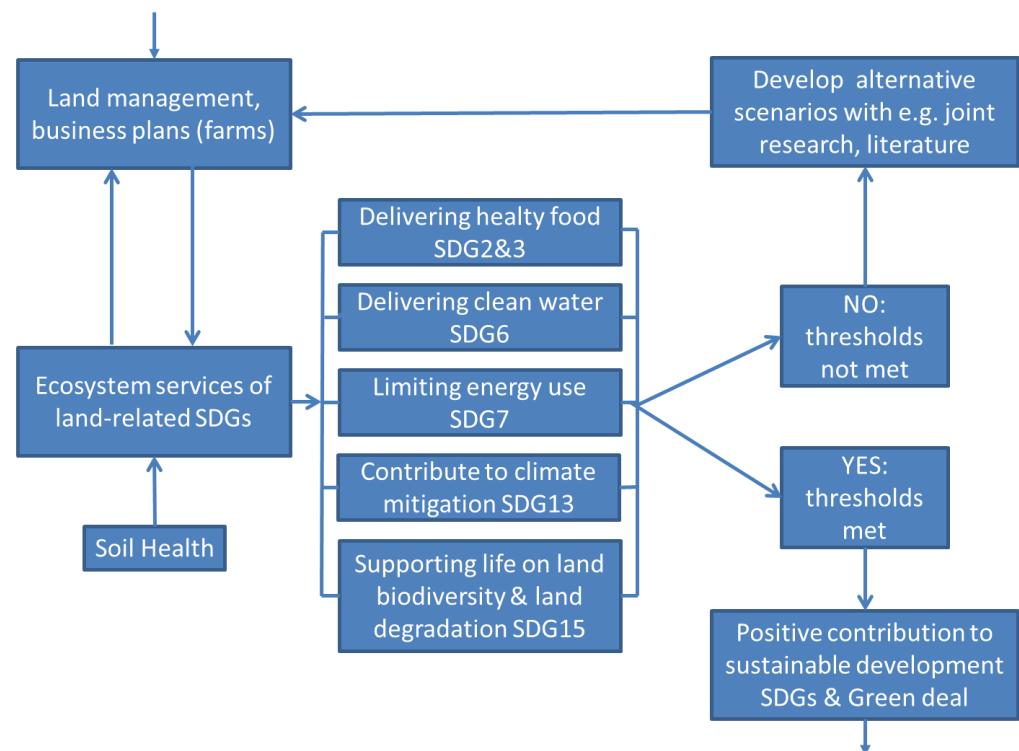


Figure 1. Flow chart demonstrating the procedure to test whether ecosystem services, contributing to achieving SDGs and the goals of the Green Deal, meet regional thresholds.

The following indicators are available for the ecosystem services contributing to the SDGs:

Crop production levels are important to provide sufficient food to avoid famine (**SDG2, Zero hunger**) and can be derived from economic statistics, where attention is needed for differences between years reflecting weather conditions. Translated to the Netherlands, where hunger is no issue, this SDG is about producing reasonable amounts of food, feed and fiber to supply mankind. In the Netherlands, reliable statistics on crop yields are available, allowing a judgement as to whether yields at a given farm are satisfactory (<https://opendata.cbs.nl/>) [12]. More and more farm management systems monitor crop yields on farm level, eventually supported by remote and proximal sensing tools. A theoretical general yield-gap approach is therefore more appropriate to define production levels where a water-limited yield (Y_w) can be simulated, assuming there are no pests and diseases while nutrient levels are optimal [13]. A level of 80% is considered satisfactory and can function as a threshold. Simulations provided by the WaterWorks program in the Netherlands can be used to estimate Y_w (<http://waterwijzerlandbouw.wur.nl/>) [14].

Producing healthy crops (**SDG3, Good health and well-being**) implies application of existing crop quality standards. Thresholds for chemical pollutants in crops are defined by regulations in the EU General Food Law, national regulations and in the “from Farm to Fork” EU program for a series of chemical compounds.

Clean surface- & groundwater (**SDG6, Clean water & sanitation**) is determined by sampling and laboratory analysis of N and P contents in water and is being judged by ecological thresholds for aquatic biodiversity, as specified by the EU Water Framework Directive [15]. Also, critical thresholds for biocides and other pollutants as heavy metals are regulated within the WFD. Assessment of soil management on groundwater quality is relatively straightforward with direct relations and generic thresholds. Assessment of soil management on surface water quality is more difficult to define as relations are often indirect and thresholds for surface waters vary, depending on the desired ecological

quality [15]. Because of expensive N and P measurements, proxies are defined in the Netherlands for N and P emissions to ground- and surface water in terms of the mineral nitrogen content in soils before the start of the leaching season and of the overall nutrient surpluses on farm level.

Agriculture has only a small share in total energy use (**SDG7, affordable & clean energy**) as only 6% of total energy use in the Netherlands is assigned to agriculture (www.compendiumleefomgeving.nl). Thresholds for energy use in crop production are lacking on farm level. However, 45% of the farmers are already involved in renewable energy production, mainly by solar panels and wind turbines.

Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (**SDG13, Climate action**) are widely studied and an excellent recent review [16] shows that many methods and models are now being used and applied. So far, there is, however, no agreement on a general methodology that can be applied in practice. Greenhouse gas emissions for a given farm are not only determined by the soil as there are many other sources as well. GHG-emission values are currently estimated with modeling through with rough estimates at farm level can be generated [17]. So far, no thresholds have been defined.

SDG15, Life on land mentions a series of goals of which “*halt and reverse land degradation and biodiversity loss*” is most relevant for agriculture. Land degradation has a strong soil component and can be characterized by indicators for soil health that also allow an estimate of soil biodiversity (see section 2.2). Another component is above-ground biodiversity, that can only partly be assessed at farm scale as there is a large regional component. In the Netherlands 162 nature areas have been established in the EC- NATURE 2000 program (<https://www.natura2000.nl>). If several of these occur in a given region there could be more room for agriculture but so far policy decisions on future land-use scenarios have not been reached. Plans to define exclusive agricultural areas of prime agricultural soils have not been approved. Of course, avoiding negative environmental effects of farming, such as pollution of soil, water and air, directly affect the quality of nature areas nearby in a positive way and can be seen as an indirect contribution to biodiversity. But for above ground biodiversity, indicators or proxies are still lacking.

2.2. Characterizing soil health as it contributes to ecosystem services

In the introduction, the soil health concept is presented [8]. In simple terms: the healthier the soil, the better the contribution to SDG's. To characterize soil health, a limited number of indicators are suggested to produce an operational, not too complex and expensive system that is essential to facilitate adoption in practice by 2030 [8]. The indicators are based on *needs of growing roots*: (i) lack of pollutants; (ii) good soil structure; (iii) relatively high organic matter contents, (iv) high soil biodiversity, (v) favorable soil moisture regimes (newly added) and (vi) favorable soil fertility.

Procedures are summarized in Figure 2. Representative sampling patterns are part of the procedure as well as documentation of the dominant type of soil, allowing future extrapolation of results obtained to other locations with the same soil type. The soil pollution indicator first separates polluted from unpolluted. Remediation may lead to the possibility for further judgment later. Indicators must be measured and appropriate thresholds need to be selected. If thresholds are met, contributions to ecosystem services are satisfactory. If not, the procedure is repeated. The “one-out, all-out” principle can apply: when one indicator is negative, the soil is unhealthy.

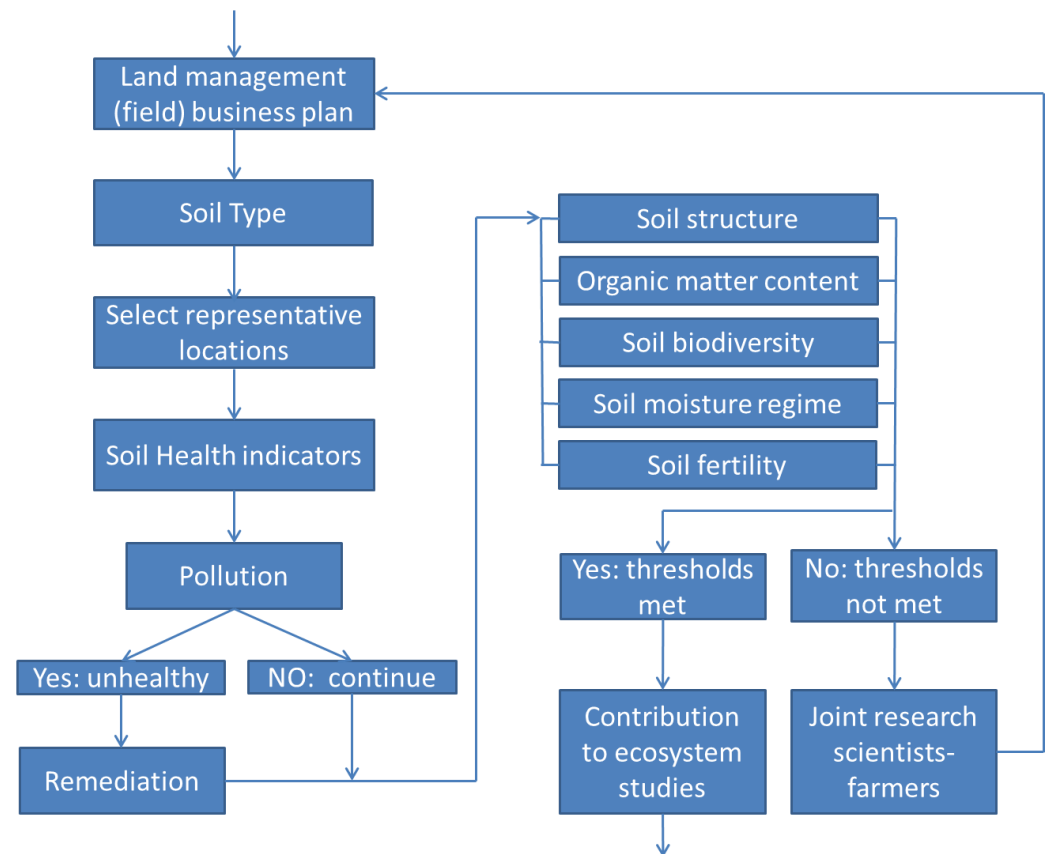


Figure 2. Flow chart demonstrating the procedure to test whether soils are healthy with the objective to maximize soil contributions to ecosystem services (see text).

Indicators and measurement methods for soil health and corresponding thresholds can be summarized as follows.

Thresholds for **pollutants in soil** are defined by current legislation. A form of what could be called “biological” pollution is formed by the (unintended) introduction of soil born pests and diseases in fields of the farm like nematodes with e.g. seeds or attached ground to machines.

Soil structure is described in soil survey reports in terms of structure types and degrees of development and standard methods to measure bulk density and mechanical resistance with penetrometers are available [18,19].

Standard laboratory measurement methods are also available to measure **soil organic matter** contents, requiring field sampling and laboratory measurements that are costly and time consuming. Thresholds for organic matter contents of different soils are not yet defined in general protocols but can be derived for separate types of soil that have characteristically different ranges of organic matter content as a function of management [20,21]. Higher organic matter contents are not only relevant for carbon sequestration as they will also improve nutrient dynamics and soil resilience, as well as increase the water holding capacity and water delivery to plant roots.

Soil biodiversity can be characterized more specifically than just measuring the organic matter content by determining the variety of soil organisms and by the Soil Proteine Index, soil respiration and active carbon [22] as well as the microbial and fungal biomass, their ratios and the potential mineralizable N pool. So far, these detailed studies have not yet resulted in recommendations for routine application based on well documented results focused on realizing ecosystem services. Until such data becomes available, organic matter content will have to function as a proxy value without clear threshold values.

The **soil moisture regime** is important for all land-related SDGs. Regimes have been defined in traditional soil surveys in terms of descriptive drainage classes (well drained, poorly drained etc.). Rooting requires a well-drained soil profile that is not too wet nor

too dry, containing sufficient air during root growth. Descriptions are inadequate for modern demands and water regimes can now also be measured by modern monitoring equipment, like tensiometers and probes measuring water contents [18].

Soil fertility is characterized directly by applying well established fertilizer-application protocols, including field sampling and laboratory testing, in the Netherlands available at www.handboekbodemembemesting.nl.

New methods will be discussed when analyzing future developments and the need for new methodologies in chapter 4.2.

2.3. Arable farming in Flevoland on calcareous light clay soils

This exploratory paper reflects results obtained from the BASIS long-term system experiment in the period of 2009-2018 on soil functions and soil quality at WUR Field Crops Experimental Farm, Lelystad [23,24]. BASIS is an example of a farming system experiment, designed and executed together with farmers and other stakeholders.

The experimental farm is representative for arable farms on marine, calcareous light clay soils, a prime agricultural soil in the Netherlands. The soils at BASIS consist of 55-65% sand, 20-24% silt and 15-20% clay (Mn15A in the Dutch soil classification), occupying 121 867 ha in the Netherlands, which is 23% of the total area of arable land. The BASIS, conventional system consists of a 4-year crop rotation with crops including: seed onions (average crop yield 63 tonnes/ha), seed potato (33 tonnes/ha), sugar beet (100 tonnes/ha) and summer barley (8 tonnes/ha). These are average yields over the period 2009-2018. Average yields are used since no trend over time was found. Soils are plowed in autumn. Average fertilization rates are 110 kg N/ha, 60 kg P/ha and 140 kg K/ha, applied with chemical fertilizers only, following standardized Dutch fertilization advice (www.handboekbodemembemesting.nl). The input of crop protection agents is on average 8.5 kg active ingredients/ha. All these management data are used as they are needed for communication purposes when describing arable farming on marine calcareous light clay soils, using this soil type as a “carrier of information” for farmers operating on the same type of soil.

The experiments in BASIS are, aside from monitoring the existing farming system, focused on two aspects that were considered to be potentially important for future management as indicated by farmers, citizen groups and experts: (i) reduced tillage: replacing ploughing by non-inversion tillage; (ii) conversion to organic farming, which so far is only practiced in 7% of the farms in Flevoland. These questions require experiments that were beyond the capability of individual farmers, if only because of financial requirements. Reduced tillage was applied for the same crop rotation and consisted of replacement of ploughing in autumn by non-inversion tillage in spring. The organic system had a different crop rotation with different crops consisting of ware potatoes, grass clover, white cabbage, spring wheat, carrot and spring wheat – faba bean mixture and no use of chemical fertilizers and biocides. Results of the effects of reduced tillage and organic farming will be discussed in section 3 in terms of possible future developments.

3. RESULTS

The ecosystem services contributing to the various SDGs and the soil contributions to the ecosystem services will now be discussed as they apply to the BASIS arable farm. This will include an analysis of available thresholds and of promising future forms of innovative management.

3.1. Ecosystem services contributing to SDG2&3 (zero hunger and good health and wellbeing) focusing on production of healthy crops

Actual conditions and thresholds

Current production levels in the BASIS-experiment were reported in section 2.3. Target levels of crop yields on clay soils in general are 40 t/ha for seed potatoes, 60 t/ha for seed onions, 95 t/ha for sugar beet and 6.4 t/ha for summer barley [12]. Actual yields reported in section 2.3, indicate that only the yield of seed potatoes is 7 t/ha (=18%) lower

than the threshold, suggesting attention to possible causes, while the other yields are much higher. The conclusion is justified that the threshold for SDG2 is met. This conclusion is supported by the simulation analysis that produced, for example a value of 7.3 t/ha for summer wheat which is above the 80% Yw value [13,14]. The Yw value is important to assess the general production level to be applied when comparing soils in an SDG context. Regular monitoring by regulatory bodies indicate there are no problems with remnants of pesticides or too high concentrations of pollutants in crops [25].

This issue is however, highly dynamic as new chemicals are (unintentionally) introduced in the ecosystem (e.g. PFAS, microplastics, drug remnants) requiring increased attention by the research community.

In summary: thresholds for ecosystems in line with SDGs 2 and 3 are satisfied.

Soil health contributions

Pollutants are absent in the soils being discussed. Rooting depth is directly affected by **soil structure**, as expressed by visual observations, supported by measured bulk densities and penetration resistances (Table 1, column Conventional ploughing). Bulk density is measured with soil sampling rings and penetration resistance with a penetrometer.

Table 1. Latest measured values for soil health indicators for systems conventional ploughing, conventional non-inversion tillage and organic farming including standard deviations (between brackets). The latest measured values are used, since soil properties have changed over time. Measurements from 2015 and 2016.

Indicator	Conventional ploughing	Conventional non-inversion tillage	Organic ploughing
Bulk density g/cm ³ (2-7 cm)	1.35 (0.08)	1.35 (0.06)	1.30 (0.09)
Bulk density g/cm ³ (14-19 cm)	1.43 (0.07)	1.47 (0.06)	1.40 (0.09)
Penetration resistance MPa (15-30 cm)	0.67 (0.31)	1.90 (0.61)	1.38 (0.58)
Organic matter % (0-30 cm)	3.0 (0.3)	3.1 (0.3)	3.3 (0.3)

Bulk densities for conventional ploughing were somewhat lower when compared with data in the national soil data base for light clay soils, that does, however, not report penetration resistances [26]. Calculated (not measured) bulk densities in the national database had a median value of 1.47 g/cm³ and a range of 1.45 g/cm³ to 1.51 g/cm³ for topsoils and 1.53 g/cm³ for subsoils with a range of 1.41-1.61 g/cm³. The Indicative threshold for bulk density is 1.55 g/cm³ (NEN-EN-ISO 11272:2017). The relatively low values for bulk density and penetration resistance, below the thresholds for root development, illustrate the young character of the soils in Flevoland, developed since the 1950's, as compared with other marine clay soils in the Netherlands. A penetration resistance of 1.5 MPa is assumed to hamper root growth and above 3 MPa root growth is not possible (www.handboekbodemembemesting.nl).

The **organic matter** content of the soils in BASIS is determined with loss on ignition and given in Table 1. The national soil database reports a range of values between 1.0% and 2.2% for surface soil with a median value of 2.0% for light clay soils. A formal threshold is lacking but 3.0% organic matter would seem to be adequate to qualify as meeting a tentative threshold value of 2.0% organic matter. Organic matter can also function as a proxy indicator for **soil biodiversity** until a more representative and operational parameter can be obtained (see section 2.2.).

Well designed and maintained drainage systems establish favorable water table levels in BASIS which range from an average lowest water table level at 120 cm below surface at the end of the growing season in late summer to 60 cm below surface in early spring. Simulation results of **soil moisture regimes** for the type of soil being discussed, determined by the methods presented by [14], do not result in a significant reduction of production levels as observations indicate that soils are neither periodically saturated nor too dry, thus meeting the threshold.

BASIS management strictly follows the Dutch **fertilization recommendations**, which defacto provides thresholds based on extensive field research.

In summary, the soils of the BASIS experiment are healthy and this conclusion remains valid when considering all land-related SDGs.

Future prospects

Questions raised by farmers, citizens and the policy arena resulted in experiments on reduced tillage and organic farming, during the last decade. Non-inversion tillage did overall not lead to changes in production levels (Table 2). Further reduction of tillage intensity, in terms of no-till practices, is not seen as an option because of the root crops in the rotation scheme. A shift to organic production leads generally to lower production levels, confirming results of other studies [27].

Table 2. Crop yields in tonnes fresh product/ha for conventional ploughing and non-inversion tillage and crop yields for conventional and organic farming both derived from BASIC experiments. Average yields over the period of 2009-2018. Conventional reference based on [12].

Reduced tillage			Organic farming		
Crop	Yield		Crop	Yield	
	Ploughing	Non-inversion		Conventional reference	Organic system
Seed potato	43	44	Ware potatoes	52	39
Sugar beet	99	99	Grass clover	n.a.	74
Spring barley	7.6	7.8	Cabbage	84	59
Onion	74	71	Spring wheat	7.3	5.0
			Carrot	85	68
			Wheat-faba bean	n.a.	5.0

Even though the thresholds for SDGs 2 and 3 are met for the farm being discussed, there is still interest in other options to affect production conditions of healthy crops in future as compared with the traditional approach discussed so far. This includes reduction of biocide application, crop breeding and precision fertilization and irrigation. Reduction of biocide application can also be achieved in other ways than just omission: (i) rather than have very large fields with single crops, in which pests and diseases can rapidly develop and spread, successful experiments have been made in Flevoland with strip cropping: growing different crops on adjacent small strips of land. This strongly enhances biological pest control [28]. The increased labor demand can be solved in future by applying robots. (ii) Robots are available now as well to recognize infected plants and restrict application of biocides to such plants only, realizing savings of up to 80%. This is part of precision technology, also extending to fertilization and irrigation, and to be discussed in section 4.2.

Crop breeding can result in new varieties that are more drought, pest and disease resistant, while nutrient uptake efficiency may be enhanced. Current crop breeding is mainly focused on crop yield and pest and disease control, while it is known that large differences exist between varieties in water and nutrient efficiency and root development. Besides, improving the energy uptake efficiency by chlorophyll in plant leaves (which is now low at appr. 4%) can have a major effect on yields.

3.2. Ecosystem services contributing to SDG6 (clean water and sanitation) focusing on clean surface & groundwater

Actual conditions and thresholds

For groundwater, the following N and P thresholds apply for the region Flevoland: 50 mg/l nitrate and 3 mg/l phosphate in groundwater (<https://www.rivm.nl>). Surface and groundwater quality have not been measured in BASIS directly. However it is known that nitrate levels in groundwater on clay soils in Flevoland are generally below the threshold of 50 mg/l of the EU-Nitrate directive (EU 2000, <https://www.rivm.nl>). Because soils are

calcareous, phosphate adsorption is relatively high and phosphate contents in groundwater will most likely be low. In the area of the BASIS experiment, nitrogen and phosphate levels in some of the surface waters are inadequate and some biocides are found above threshold levels due to rapid runoff and drainage losses during the growing season (www.zuiderzeeland.nl). The proxy indicators show that: (i) the nitrogen level in the soil before the leaching season in winter is 58 kg/ha, this is lower than the threshold for clay soils of 70 kg N/ha; (ii) the yearly nitrogen and phosphate surpluses for the farm are 8 kg N/ha and 11 kg P₂O₅/ha, this is below and above the thresholds of 88 kg N/ha and 0 kg P₂O₅/ha [29].

In summary: thresholds for ecosystem services in line with SDG6 are not satisfied as the proxy for P is negative and the situation for surface waters unknown.

Future prospects

In BASIS, reduced tillage and organic farming did not result in lower risks of nitrogen leaching looking at the residual N in the soil at the start of the leaching season. Other measures to improve water quality are: (i) a sound crop rotation design where residual nutrients are used by following crops or catch crops; (ii) crop breeding to improve nutrient use efficiency, and (iii) various hydrological measures and removal of nutrients in drains and agricultural ditches that can improve water quality [30,31]. As phosphate thresholds may not be met in the soil being considered, high-tech precision procedures, to be discussed in section 4.2, are now available to fine-tune fertilizer applications to the needs of the plant, that vary during the growing season.

3.3. Ecosystem services contributing to SDG7 (energy use)

Actual conditions and thresholds

On a national level, contributions by agriculture to energy consumption are relatively low at 6% of the total energy use of 2939 pJ (www.cbs.nl). In a study on energy use in Dutch agriculture average energy use in conventional arable farming on clay soils was calculated in a model study to be only 41 GJ/ha/year [32]. There are yet no legislative thresholds to energy use for open field crop production although a general reduction of use of fossil fuels is a current policy objective. Lack of a threshold for energy use at individual farms does not allow a judgement as to whether a threshold is reached for a given Living Lab. Considering the low values involved, energy use should not affect the ultimate sustainability conclusions about the BASIS experiment.

Future prospects

Reduction of energy use is desirable in future also in agriculture, if only because it is associated with reducing costs. Reduced tillage requires less power and allows use of lighter tractors. Organic farming reduces the energy needs to produce chemical fertilizers and biocides, but more energy is needed for mechanical and thermal control of pests. Besides, crop yields are lower resulting in a higher energy use per unit of output. A fundamental change can occur by introducing new small-scale automated mechanization based on robots and solar energy (section 4.2).

3.4. Ecosystem services contributing to SDG13 focusing on carbon sequestration and GHG-emission reduction

Actual conditions and thresholds

There are no measurements nor thresholds available for GHG-emissions of arable farms on marine calcareous light clay soils. Modeling results for the Netherlands have been reported based on IPCC criteria [17]. Agriculture in the Netherlands emits 15% of all greenhouse gasses, of which half is CH₄, which is mainly associated with dairy farming (www.emissieregistratie.nl). Carbon capture is seen as a soil contribution to ecosystem services focused on SDG 13. As discussed in section 3.1.2, soil organic matter contents are

above a preliminary threshold value of 2.0 g/cm³ thus providing a positive contribution to carbon capture.

In summary: thresholds for ecosystem services in line with SDG13 are satisfied for carbon capture but lack of data on greenhouse-gas emissions does not allow an overall positive conclusion on the contribution of this ecosystem service.

Future prospects

The contribution of reduced tillage to carbon sequestration is under debate, also in the BASIS experiment. A significant increase was not observed in a ten-year period (Table 1) [33]. An increase in carbon sequestration is possible by incorporating more crops in the crop rotation with large amounts of crop residues like cereals, growing cover crops and applying (more) organic manure [33]. This was done in the organic system leading to an almost significant increase in organic matter content (Table 1). Defining thresholds of carbon content for different soils could focus efforts to guide suitable management practices with the objective to increase the carbon content to locations with carbon contents well below the threshold and where effects would have the highest potential.

3.5. Ecosystem services contributing to SDG15 focusing on reduction of land degradation and biodiversity preservation

Actual condition and thresholds

Soils at the BASIS experiments were healthy (see sections 3.1.2) so land degradation, characterized by poor soil health, appears not to be a problem here. Thresholds for farms when considering biodiversity in a landscape context are not yet defined and are subject to political debate (section 2.1).

In summary, ecosystem services in line with SDG15 are satisfied in terms of soil health, defining lack of soil degradation. But lack of criteria to define biodiversity in a regional context does not allow a conclusion on biodiversity preservation and thus on the ecosystem service involved here.

Future prospects

Soil degradation is not a problem in the healthy soils of the BASIS experiment, but this is an exception worldwide. The EU Joint Research Center reported that 60-70% of European soils are degraded in various ways [8]. This will have a strong negative effect on ecosystem services that increase when effects of climate change are considered. Studies in Italian soils confirm this alarming conclusion [34,35,36,37].

The biodiversity discussion on farm level not only relates to soil biodiversity, for which in this analysis the organic matter content is considered as a rough proxy, but also to farms in a landscape context. As discussed, this is subject of a heated political debate, that will soon have to result in policies that provide clarity allowing formulation of future business plans, including long-term investments, by land users of which farmers form the largest category.

In summary: assuming that the BASIS experiment is representative for well managed commercial farm, ecosystem services in line with the SDGs 6,13 and 15 don't meet requirements either because of lack of data or lack of policies on biodiversity. The experiment does therefore not yet qualify as a "Lighthouse", even though its soils are healthy!

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Implications for environmental rules and regulations and support programs.

The proposed system of evaluating ecosystem services in line with the SDGs can be the basis for an attractive and relatively simple regulatory system based on comparing indicator values, as discussed above, with thresholds, that still need to be developed in most cases. Such a system should be based on measurements in system experiments on experimental farms and in "Living Labs", applying relatively simple field methods, which farmers will welcome, as they complain about current complex systems. This requires the

development of new measuring methods that can produce a lot of data in a short period of time, allowing a scientifically sound evaluation of spatial variability (see section 4.2). Soil health studies are important as soil health makes major contributions to achieving ecosystem services. as was shown with modeling studies for some Italian soils [34,35,36,37].

Of particular interest is a link with the future Common Agricultural Policy (2021-2027) where payments for ecosystem services are now one of the options being discussed. This could mean a substantial payment when alle ecosystem services have a sufficiently high level. If one or more of the services are inadequate, a focused subsidy on lacking services can be considered, as a case study in Switzerland has shown where subsidies were based on introducing cover crops and on applying minimum tillage to enhance carbon sequestration. This program turned out to be highly successful [38].

The system presented in this paper is based on the selection of a limited set of relatively simple indicators directly coupled to an ecosystem service linked to SDGs or, separately, to soil health contributing to ecosystem services. Along these lines, application of a soil indicator set is being explored in the Netherlands [39].

4.2. Need for operational measuring and monitoring methods.

4.2.1. Ecosystem services for farming systems

Ecosystem services for farming systems were only partly adequate as demonstrated in section 3. As discussed, production levels were well documented and can be supported by modeling the soil-water-atmosphere-plant system. Several well tested models are available [40,41,42]. Basic soil data, like texture, bulk density and organic matter content are used in so-called pedotransfer functions to predict hydraulic soil characteristics needed for modeling such as hydraulic conductivity and moisture retention [43,44]. But aside from modeling, measurements of real yields are still necessary also to validate the models. We advocate attention for climate change that will have major effects on food production. Obviously, only modelling can handle future climate scenario's. **(SDG2)**. Healthy food, based on healthy crops, can be assessed by existing health regulations defining thresholds. This is however, a highly dynamic field of study as new pollutants arrive **(SDG3)**. The quality of ground- and surface waters **(SDG6)** could only be derived from national monitoring systems and are not yet part of monitoring systems on farm level. This would be required when assessing "Living Labs" in future. Modern automated monitoring systems are available to obtain hard data that don't depend on debatable interpolations from current often far-away measurement locations. Energy use **(SDG7)** is less relevant from a national point of view but is important for individual farmers as a cost item to be reduced. Emission of greenhouse gasses **(SDG13)** is important and is now being estimated by modeling, even though the particular soil being considered here was not yet covered. However, modeling is only justified when models are properly validated with measured data. This validation process is still rather undefined and direct measurements are therefore needed. Available measurement methods, using small on-site chambers are cumbersome and costly while only providing point data at specific moments in time. Applying frequent satellite images would be highly attractive, as is explored now by the European Space Agency (<https://www.esa.int>). This type of work needs a high priority and strong support. **(SDG15)** refers to land degradation where the indicators for soil health are relevant to assess soil degradation. Biodiversity (as discussed in sections 2.1 and 3.5) is however, still undefined in terms of specific indicators for the entire farming system. Policy decisions on future land-use scenarios are therefore urgently needed. Innovative methods for measuring ecosystem services are summarized in Table 3.

4.2.2. Soil contributions to ecosystem services

Soil contributions to ecosystem services can be framed in terms of soil health for which several indicators have been defined as discussed in this paper. Soil as a favorable environment for root growth is key for all ecosystem services contributing to the five SDGs being considered. Soil structure, the organic matter content and soil moisture

regimes are key indicators for soil health, assuming lack of pollutants and adequate levels of nutrients by fertilization. Current standard methods assessing **soil structure**, as reviewed above for bulk density, use relatively small soil samples and are costly and laborious as they require laboratory analysis, not providing instant data. Standard deviations among replicate measurements are relatively high due to small sample volumes (see Table 1) and considering 95% confidence intervals hardly allow distinction of differences among treatments, let alone among different soils. Measuring the penetration resistance is attractive as many observations can be instantly made. An important factor causing variation among measurements is moisture content; so, measurements will have to be made at certain periods only, preferably only when the soil is at field capacity. Innovative techniques are available to allow rapid multiple and cheap measurements for both **organic matter** content and bulk density once equipment has been obtained. Application of proximal sensing for organic matter [45,46,47], and further testing of radiation techniques for measuring bulk density (e.g. [17]) is highly recommended. Field research on the impact of present and past soil management on the organic matter content of a given type of soil can provide valuable insights on effects of management that differ significantly among soils. Organic matter contents were sampled at fifty farms on two prominent Dutch soil types and the study could relate actual organic matter content very well ($R^2 > 0.8$) with current and past management providing valuable suggestions for future management practices [20,21]. There are thousands of experiments out there in the field waiting to be discovered! **Soil biodiversity** is widely being studied but so far standard techniques have not been suggested and approved. Doing so is a high priority as soil biodiversity plays a key role in soil functioning (see section 2.2.). Applying proxies, such as the organic matter content as in this study, needs improvement.

Simulation of **soil moisture regimes** combined with nutrient dynamics in the soil-water-atmosphere-plant system can provide important information for precision agriculture where nutrient inputs are fine-tuned to the needs of plants, optimizing the **soil fertility** regime. This can result in substantial savings of fertilizer input and costs of up to at least 10% thereby also reducing leaching and groundwater pollution by excess nutrients. A study on precision fertilization consisted of preparation of a functional soil map with four different soil units, derived from interpolation of point data, with a distinct behavior in terms of water regimes and nitrogen dynamics. Modeling was applied to determine the critical moment when the available nitrogen reached a threshold. Then fertilization was needed. This moment was different for the different soil units, providing a basis for applying precision techniques [48]. Again, robots can in future perform the task of fertilization, strongly reducing labor demand and reducing pressures on soil by traditional fertilization equipment.

Innovative methods for measuring ecosystem services and soil health indicators are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of methods to be used for characterizing ecosystem services in line with the SDGs and the Green Deal and the contributions by soil health as discussed in this paper.

	<i>Methods for measuring ecosystem services</i>	<i>Methods for assessing soil contributions to ecosystem services</i>
SDG 2/3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• governmental statistics• remote sensing• modeling the soil-water-atmosphere-plant system, also considering climate change	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• new methods to characterize soil structure: radiation methods for bulk density; proximal sensing for organic matter• modeling the soil-water-atmosphere-plant system
SDG 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• automatic monitoring equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• modeling soil nutrient regimes to support precision techniques
SDG13	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• satellite remote sensing for measurement of emissions• validated models estimating greenhouse-gas emissions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• proximal sensing of organic matter content focused on carbon capture
SDG 15	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• soil health• biodiversity on a landscape scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• all the above

4.3. Need for a paradigm shift in research

To reach the targets of the SDGs farmers have to adapt their soil management and farming system to meet the thresholds of at least five ecosystem services. This presents “wicked” problems that cannot be solved with linear research approaches as discussed in section 1.2.

A farmer will choose the option or elements of different options that corresponds best with his particular farming style [49]. Researchers should therefore preferably act as honest brokers considering the various options fitting the targets of the SDGs and the farming style of the farmers [50]. Then, producing “storylines” for particular soil types is an effective procedure for communication purposes, linking particular soil types to successful management plans [51]. This approach is, by the way, also followed in business courses at Harvard University [52].

There are already many storylines on management systems in the Netherlands and elsewhere that are actively promoted on social media and the internet: organic, bio-dynamic, circular, nature-inclusive, regenerative [53], enriching, high-tech precision etc. But all these systems can be judged the same way by considering whether an adequate level of ecosystem services is provided, including the contributions by soil science. This will create much needed clarity to the farming community and society at large, allowing a more effective focus on the SDGs to be achieved.

But defining best practices when working in :“Living Labs” has broader dimensions. A recent EC document specifying the Mission approach to the European Science and Innovation program: Horizon Europe 2021-2027 [2] included a statement for the “Soil Deal for Europe” Mission: “people from all works of life and businesses can co-create knowledge and solutions in real life conditions and demonstrate their value”. Also: “Introducing Citizen Science and citizens becoming soil stewards are desirable innovative approaches” that do, however, require “clear and concrete objectives”. Working in “Living Labs” does, therefore involve more than researchers and farmers working together. Frequent communication with society and involvement of citizens is needed to establish agriculture as a major positive contributor to environmental health and sustainable development, rather than as a persistent polluter as seems to be a persistent message from some quarters.

But broad and effective multi-stakeholder efforts in “Living Labs”, ideally resulting in the establishment of :“Lighthouses” where all ecosystem services meet their thresholds, will have little effect when not incorporated in Governmental rules and regulations and subsidy schemes, as discussed above for the CAP 2021-2027. In this context, the recent Berlin communiqué by 68 ministers of agriculture, following the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture, is very important.[54].They discuss sustainable land use and

conclude: “Food security starts with the soil”. Not only the importance of soil health is emphasized but also the role of soils in addressing 24 issues, related to the SDGs. As in other publications [2], [8], operational methods and criteria needed to achieve the goals are not discussed, justifying the focus of this paper on methodology.

Finally, ten challenges for future soil research have been defined, reflecting discussions within the IUSS-PEDOMETRICS working group [55]. Their Challenge 7 focuses on recognizing, quantifying and mapping soil functionality and challenge 10 on how to generate quantitative soil contributions to realizing ecosystem services. Discussions in this paper can therefore, be seen as a contribution to these important and crucial PEDOMETRICS discussions. Clearly, more research is needed to develop protocols of general validity.

5. CONCLUSIONS

1. The proposed joint establishment of “Living Labs” and system experiments at research farms to develop sustainable land use systems in line with the SDGs and the Green Deal requires a yet not existing methodology that allows assessment of ecosystem services and thresholds to assess system functioning. “Lighthouses” can only be established when these thresholds are satisfied.
2. Soils can make crucial contributions to ecosystem services by assessing and improving soil health to be demonstrated in interdisciplinary case studies.
3. Development of new innovative monitoring techniques is essential to assess sustainable development of land use systems, where farms constitute the largest group. Current laboratory tests are often too costly and time consuming. Studies on new monitoring techniques, among them proximal and remote sensing, need strong support.
4. A focus on documenting indicators and thresholds for ecosystem services when working with farmers is particularly relevant as the future Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) intends to focus its support partly on provision of such services.
5. Adaptive management by farmers implies not only producing healthy food but also protecting ground- and surface water quality, restricting greenhouse gas emissions, increasing carbon capture, combatting land degradation and protecting and improving biodiversity. This presents a “wicked” problem that cannot be approached by linear research but needs stakeholder oriented more holistic approaches and can be expressed by well documented “storylines” that are also effective for communication with the policy arena, farmers and citizens at large.

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Conflicts of Interest:

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