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Digital Soil Mapping and Predictive Soil Analytics: Emerging Tools for Sustainable Agricultural Planning

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Soil is the living skin of the earth, which supports plant growth and facilitates animal and human life on this planet. Approximately 1.2 billion hectares of the world's land area suffer moderate to severe soil degradation driven by intensive tillage, inadequate crop rotations, overgrazing, and systematic removal of crop residues, all of which either individually or through synergistic effects compromise soil health. Therefore, a comprehensive knowledge of the spatial distribution of soil quality indicators, their correlation and land resource inventory are required for the sustainable management of soil resources. The only way to do that is to accurately map the soil in great detail. Unfortunately, conventional mapping is very laborious, exceedingly time-consuming, expensive, coarse-scale, and unable to offer the current state of resources, and lack compatibility with grid based geospatial frameworks required by many modern land surface models. Furthermore, variability within the polygons restricts the site-specific management under traditional soil mapping. India ranked seventh in geographical area (328 million hectares) but feeding second-largest population (1.37 billion) in the world, (Government of India, 2020) which is expected to be 1.65 billion by 2050 (Vision, 2015). Therefore, this massive population pressure on land resources causes severe land degradation, desertification, low soil quality, and multi-nutrient deficiencies gradually decreasing the area of agricultural land, crop yields and increasing food demand threatens India's food security.

Therefore, in order to sustainably manage land resources, a new sound approach is needed to accurately map soil with details of its physical, chemical biological properties and that takes into account the spatial differences in these variables.

Emerging developments in remote sensing (RS) platforms, including ground-based, airborne, and satellite systems, have potential of reliable predictive mapping of soil parameters with good precision at finer spatial scales. The evolution of computational capacity and geo-information technology has opened significant avenues for refining and modernizing soil mapping methodologies.

Digital soil mapping (DSM) has gained popularity in recent years as a way to map and access global soil resources. Already published literature, bulletins, application modules, manuals and research studies help in making a thorough understanding of DSM and explains the 'what, wherefore and in what way' of DSM, its advantages and disadvantages, accomplishments, challenges and future aspects.

Digital soil mapping (DSM), also termed predictive soil mapping refers to development and generation of spatial soil information systems through the use of numerical models that predict the spatial and temporal variability of soil types and properties based on soil observations and their relationships with environmental factors (Lagacherie and McBratney 2007). Embracing DSM is therefore essential for India to generate high resolution data that supports more effective soil conservation and site-specific agriculture. Indian agriculture is characterized by extreme land fragmentation, with majority of farmers possessing holding of less than two hectares (Agriculture Census Division, 2019). Hence, the existing conventional soil survey maps which have very coarser spatial scale and lacks sufficient information, are not suitable for managing soils at finer levels. Therefore, adopting DSM to generate digital soil maps at fine resolutions to manage soils more accurately benefits India

The rise of digital soil mapping

I. Early Origins (18th – 19th Century) – The first maps were formed during the mid-18th century, to identify homogeneous soil areas for land management. Agro-geologists began using topographic maps to represent different soil types. During 19th century, the Russian system focused on the genetic system (soil formation), while the US system prioritized intrinsic soil properties. Dokuchaiev, known as the Father of Soil Science, produced a human-centric map of Russia utilizing point-based observations.

II. The Scientific Foundation (1941 – 1960s) - In 1941, Hans Jenny established the scientific foundation of traditional mapping by defining the five factors of soil formation: Climate (cl), biosphere (b), Relief (r), Parent Material (p), and Time (t). In the 1960s, France published "Fundamentals and Techniques of Soil Mapping" by Marcel Jamagne, which standardized methods that were later exported to other countries, particularly in Africa.

III. Conventional/Traditional Mapping Era - Traditional mapping relied on the conceptual soil-landscape models of soil surveyors which was based on past experience, aerial photographs, and manual interpretation of landscape features to create soil profile descriptions. Collaborative efforts (such as French activities in Africa) led to the creation of databases that eventually supported continental and worldwide assessments.

IV. Transition to Quantitative Techniques (2000s) - Over the past decade, conventional concepts have been modernized through quantitative techniques. Developed in the early 2000s, this provided the high-resolution spatial and temporal data necessary for modern mapping. In 2003, McBratney *et al.*, officially defined Digital Soil Mapping (DSM) as the integration of these quantitative techniques.

V. The Evolution of Global DSM (2004 - Present) - In 2004, France hosted the First Global Workshop on DSM in Montpellier, cementing its role in global soil projects. Several factors accelerated the advancement of DSM as the availability of digital spatial data (DEM, satellite imagery), high-performance computing and processing efficiency, and advancements in GIS and data mining (Machine Learning and Deep Learning). Organizations like the European Soils Bureau (Joint Research Center) created the first standardized geographical databases and soil maps for the continent.

Principles and concepts of DSM

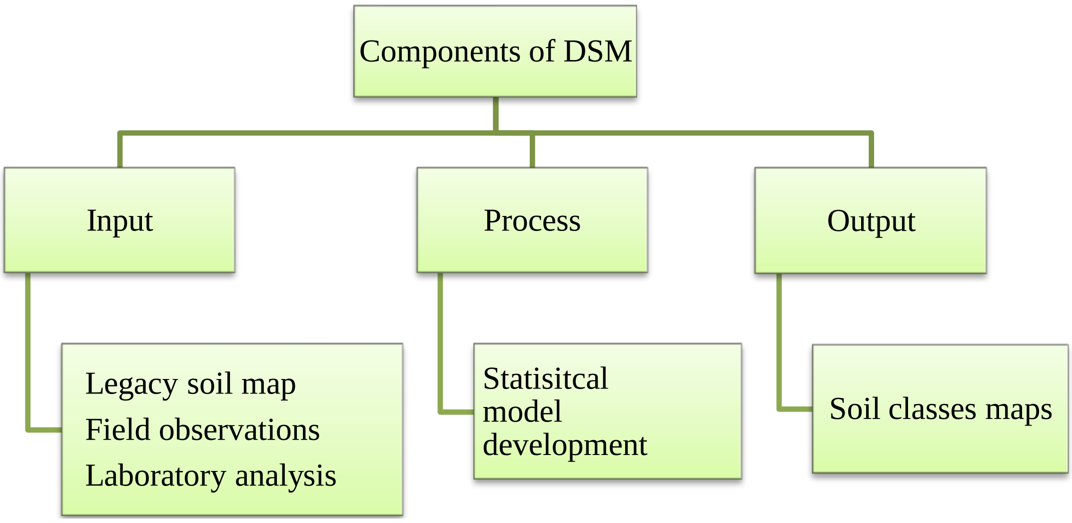
While Jenny’s fundamental equation effectively describes qualitative soil formation, it lacks the structure required for the quantitative prediction of specific soil properties or classes. To address this limitation, McBratney *et al.*, (2003) introduced the SCORPAN model, which provides a mathematical approach for modelling the formal relation between soil data and various environmental covariates. This model mathematically can be expressed as:

$$S_{c,a} = f\,(s, c, o, r, p, a, n)$$

Where, $S_{c,a}$ refers to soil class (S_c) or attribute (S_a) at a specific point of space in a specified time and is an empirical or quantitative function of seven environmental factors or covariates such as soil (s), climate (c), organism (o), relief (r), parent material (p), age (a), and spatial location (n).

The SCORPAN model enables spatial prediction of any soil class or property by quantifying the empirical link between that soil attribute and environmental variables. Beyond mapping, this approach also enables us to estimate the prediction error or uncertainties present in resulting digital soil products.

In essence, DSM refers to creating geographically referenced soil databases or soil maps based on quantitative relationships between spatially explicit environmental covariates and the observations and measurements made at the field level and laboratory (McBratney *et al*., 2003). It is also known as "predictive soil mapping," "computer-assisted soil cartography," etc.



Conventional *vs* digital soil mapping

Particulars	Conventional Soil Mapping (CSM)	Digital Soil Mapping (DSM)
Scientific Basis	Conceptual/qualitative soil-landscape models	Quantitative soil-landscape models (e.g., SCORPAN)
Reproducibility and Flexibility	Irreproducible and difficult to update once created	Reproducible and can be updated easily
Purpose and Uncertainty	General-purpose and uncertainties are not quantified	Specific-purpose and quantifies prediction uncertainties and confidence intervals.
Spatial Detail	Often lacks spatial detail	Provides spatial variations
Standardization	Highly standardized technique (Soil Survey Manual-NRCS).	Currently lacks a single standardized technique.
Data Requirements	Can maintain accuracy even with limited datasets.	Challenging to produce high accuracy with limited data.
Complexity	Excellent at representing soil forming processes.	Often struggles to capture the full complexity of soil formation.

Stages of digital soil mapping

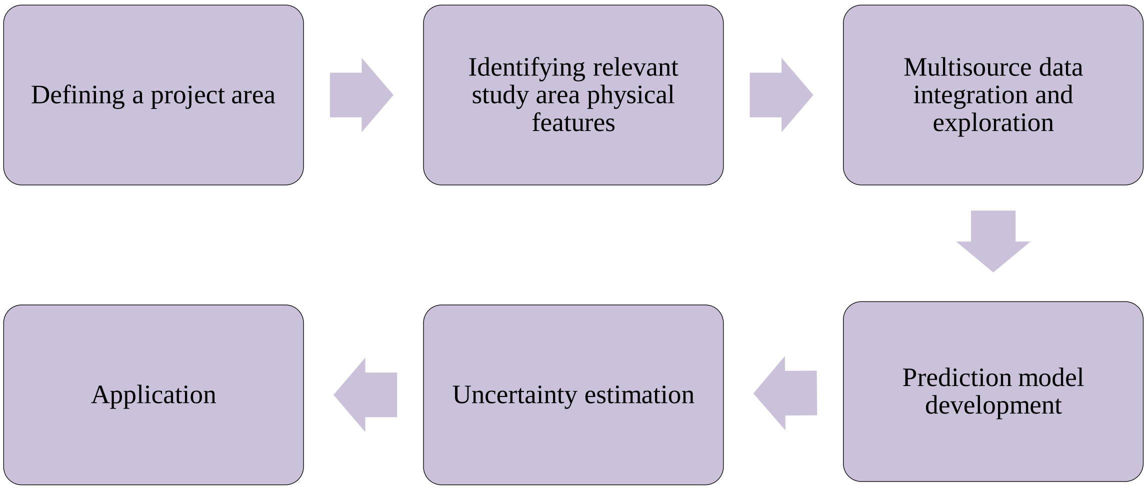


Fig. 1. Different stages of digital soil mapping

Applications of digital soil mapping

i. Land and Water Resource Management - DSM is used for land cover and land use classification to help policymakers in land-use planning. For specific field conditions, fine-scale digital maps of hydraulic properties (field capacity, permanent wilting point) allow farmers to optimize irrigation. Recent advances in remote sensing enable the formation of surface soil moisture (SSM) maps for irrigation scheduling.

ii. Predictive Mapping of Soil Properties - DSM facilitates high-resolution predictive mapping (down to 10 m scale) of essential soil physical and chemical properties for effective farm-scale management. It also helps to predict soil textural classes across global, national, and subnational scales by utilizing feel method and previous reports.

iii. Environmental Monitoring and Climate Change - Spatial distribution maps of carbon stocks are vital for identifying carbon sequestration zones, managing global emissions, carbon trading, and climate change mitigation. DSM products help in identifying risks related to soil erosion, desertification, and drought, allowing for region-specific action strategies. It also serves as tool for monitoring large-scale soil constraints, such as acidity, salinity, waterlogging, and general land degradation.

iv. Agricultural Policy and National Programs - Programmes like "Soils2026" in the US aim to create 30 m resolution digital maps to develop new soil inventories and identify ecological sites. Government bodies and the private sector use DSM to assess contamination levels, formulate fertilizer recommendations, and drive agricultural policy. In the Indian context, a major implication is assisting the Soil Health Card program by enabling the rapid preparation of soil health data for millions of farmers.

v. Biophysical and Ecological Modelling - Programs like "Global-Soil-Map" provide data formats that comply with biophysical modelling requirements, making soil data accessible for diverse research applications. It also supports ecological modelling and the identification of ecological sites for conservation efforts.

Limitations of digital soil mapping

1. Technical and Methodological Constraints - Unlike Conventional Soil Mapping (CSM), DSM is not yet a standardized technique globally, leading to inconsistencies in model application and interpretation. DSM often struggles to represent complex, long-term soil-forming processes accurately, whereas conventional methods can incorporate these through expert conceptual models. Furthermore, although DSM provides the advantage of quantify uncertainty, the persistence of prediction errors remains a significant challenge for maintaining model accuracy.

2. Data-Related Limitations - DSM is heavily reliant on the availability and spatial distribution of high-quality data. In data scare regions, achieving high predictive accuracy is difficult, especially when training datasets fails to cover the study area adequately. Additionally, the quality of final digital output is often constrained by resolution and accuracy of legacy soil maps used as primary inputs.

3. Practical and Implementation Hurdles – DSM requires statistical modelling (like boosted decision trees or geostatistical approaches) and technical skills in GIS and remote sensing, which can be a barrier to widespread adoption. Furthermore, a disconnect often exist between visual patterns and quantitative accuracy metrics and fail to match with real world field observations.

4. Regional Adoption (Specific to India) - Despite its potential for managing soil health and ecosystem services, very few comprehensive studies have been conducted on various soil properties using DSM in India compared to other developed nations. The inherent complexity of creating accurate large-scale maps is compounded by intricate interactions between elevation, topography, and climate, which heavily influence the spatial distribution of soil properties across diverse landscape.

Future prospects of digital soil mapping

To overcome the current limitations of Digital Soil Mapping (DSM), future research must integrate optimized sampling designs and more robust modelling frameworks. Studies indicate that utilizing conditioned Latin Hypercube or grid-based sampling significantly enhances predictive precision. Furthermore, issues such as overfitting can be mitigated by calibrating single models to address multiple soil properties or various depth intervals simultaneously. While machine learning currently offers superior predictability over traditional geostatistical methods, its successful application requires a strong foundation in soil-related processes. Consequently, the next generation of DSM must prioritize scientific validity, ensuring models align with established knowledge, as well as interpretability and explainability to ensure that complex model outputs are transparent and understandable to practitioners.

Conclusions

Digital soil mapping (DSM) represents a critical shift from qualitative to quantitative soil science, offering a reproducible and high-resolution alternative to conventional mapping that is essential for managing India's fragmented land resources and ensuring food security. By utilizing the SCORPAN model to establish mathematical relationships between soil attributes and environmental covariates, DSM enables the prediction of physical and chemical soil properties while simultaneously quantifying prediction uncertainties. Although it has diverse applications ranging from optimized irrigation and carbon sequestration monitoring to supporting national initiatives like the Soil Health Card program, the technology is currently hindered by a lack of global standardization, heavy data requirements, and the need for high technical expertise. Moving forward, the success of DSM will depend on adopting optimized sampling designs and ensuring that advanced machine learning frameworks remain scientifically valid, transparent, and aligned with established soil-forming processes.

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