Reference Soil Groups Map of Ethiopia Based on Legacy Data and Machine Learning Technique: EthioSoilGrids 1.0

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Abstract. Up-to-date digital soil resource~~s~~ information, and its comprehensive understanding, are ~~is~~ crucial to supporting ~~support~~ crop production and sustainable agricultural development. Generating such information through conventional approaches consumes time and resources, and~~which~~ is also difficult for developing countries. In Ethiopia, the soil resource map that was in use is qualitative,

dated (since 1984), and small-scaled (1:2 M) which limit~~s~~ its practical applicability. Yet, a large legacy soil profile data accumulated over time and the emerging machine learning modelling approaches can help in generating a high-quality quantitative digital soil map that can provide better~~accurate~~ soil information. Thus, a group of researchers formed a coalition of the willing for soil and agronomy data sharing and collated about 20,000 soil profile data and stored them in a central database. The data were cleaned and harmonis~~z~~ed using the latest soil profile data template and ~~prepared~~ 14,681 profile data were prepared for modelling. Random Forest was used to develop a continuous quantitative digital map of 18 World Reference Base (WRB) ~~reference~~ soil groups at 250 m resolution by integrating environmental ~~variables~~ covariates representing major ~~Ethiopian~~ soil-forming factors. The map was validated by experts through a rigorous process involving senior soil specialists/pedologists checking the map based on purposely selected district level geographic windows across Ethiopia. The ~~validated~~ map is~~will~~ expected to have tremendous value~~significance~~ in soil management and other land-based development planning, given its improved spatial resolution ~~nature~~ and quantitative digital representation.

Keywords: soil profiles, environmental covariates, modelling, expert validation, Reference Soil Group

1 Introduction

Soils are important resources that support the development and production of various economic, social, and ecosystem services, and are useful in climate change mitigation and adaptation (Baveye et al., 2016). Data on soils' physical and chemical characteristics and their spatial distribution are needed to define and plan their functions over time and space, which are~~is an~~ important steps towards~~ the~~ sustainable use and management of soils (Elias, 2016; Hengl et al., 2017).

In Ethiopia, soil surveys and mapping have been conducted at various scales with varying scopes ~~scope~~, approaches, methodologies~~y~~, qualities~~y~~, and levels of detail (Abayneh, 2001; Abayneh and Berhanu, 2007; Berhanu, 1994; Elias, 2016; Zewdie, 2013). The most recent country-wide digital soil mapping efforts focused primarily on soil characteristics (Ali et al., 2020; Iticha and Chalsissa, 2019; Tamene et al., 2017), although soil class maps are equally important for allocating a particular soil unit for specific use (Leenaars et al., 2020a; Wadoux et al., 2020). Many ~~notable~~ attempts have been made to improve digital soil information systems (Hengl et al., 2021, 2017~~;~~, 2015; Poggio et al., 2020). However, the ~~such~~ initiatives were based on limited and unevenly distributed soil profile data (e.g., 1.15 soil profiles per 1,000 km^2 for Ethiopia) which restricts ~~limits~~ the accuracy and applicability of the products.

In Ethiopia, t~~T~~housands of soil profile data have been ~~were~~ collected since the 1960s (Erkossa et al., 2022), but these data ~~were hardly accessible as they~~ were scattered across different institutions and individuals (Ali et al., 2020). Furthermore, country-wide quantitative and gridded spatial soil type information does not exist ~~is hardly available~~ (Elias, 2016). The Ethiopian Soil Information System (EthioSIS) project attempted to develop a countrywide digital soil map focusing on topsoil characteristics, including plant nutrient content, but overlooked soil resource mapping (Ali et al., 2020; Elias, 2016), despite a strong need for a high-resolution soil resource map (Mulualem et al., 2018).

Ethiopia has an area of about 1.14 mill. km^2 consisting of varied environments, making its soils extremely heterogeneous. ~~; thus c~~Capturing the heterogeneity using conventional soil survey and mapping approaches is an ~~resource-~~ expensive and time-consuming endeavour (Hounkpatin et al., 2018). This can be circumvented using available legacy soil profile data accumulated over decades ~~time~~ and tapping into the potential of ~~coupled with~~ advanced analytical techniques to develop high-resolution digital soil maps (Hounkpatin et al., 2018; Kempen, 2012, 2009).

Therefore, t~~T~~he objectives of this study were to (1) develop a national legacy soil profile dataset that can be used as an input for various digital soil mapping exercises, and (2) generate an improved 250 m digital ~~International Union of Soil Science (IUSS) World Reference Base (WRB)~~ Reference Soil Groups (RSGs) map of Ethiopia ~~using the legacy soil profile dataset and advanced machine learning techniques~~.

2 Methods

2.1 The study area

The study area covered the entire area of Ethiopia (1.14 mill. km^2) located between 3°N and 15° N, and between 33° E and 48° E (Figure 1). The topography of the country is marked by a large altitudinal variation, ranging from 126 meter~~s~~ below sea level at Dalol in the northeast to 4,620 m at Ras Dashen Mountain in the northwest ~~part of the highlands~~ (~~Billi ,~~Billi, 2015; Enyew and Steeneveld, 2014). ~~The country embraces diverse agroecological zones and farming systems.~~ Ethiopia's wide range of topography, climate, parent material, and land use types created conditions for the formation of different soil types (Abayneh~~.~~, 2005; Berhanu and Ochtman, 1974; Donahue, 1972; Mesfin, 1998; Nyssen et al., 2019; Virgo and Munro, 1978; Zewdie, 2013, 1999). More than 33% of the country is covered by the central, upper and highland complex (Abegaz et al., 2022), which embraces Africa's most prominent mountain system~~, reaching a maximum altitude of 4,620 m above sea level~~ (Hurni,1998).

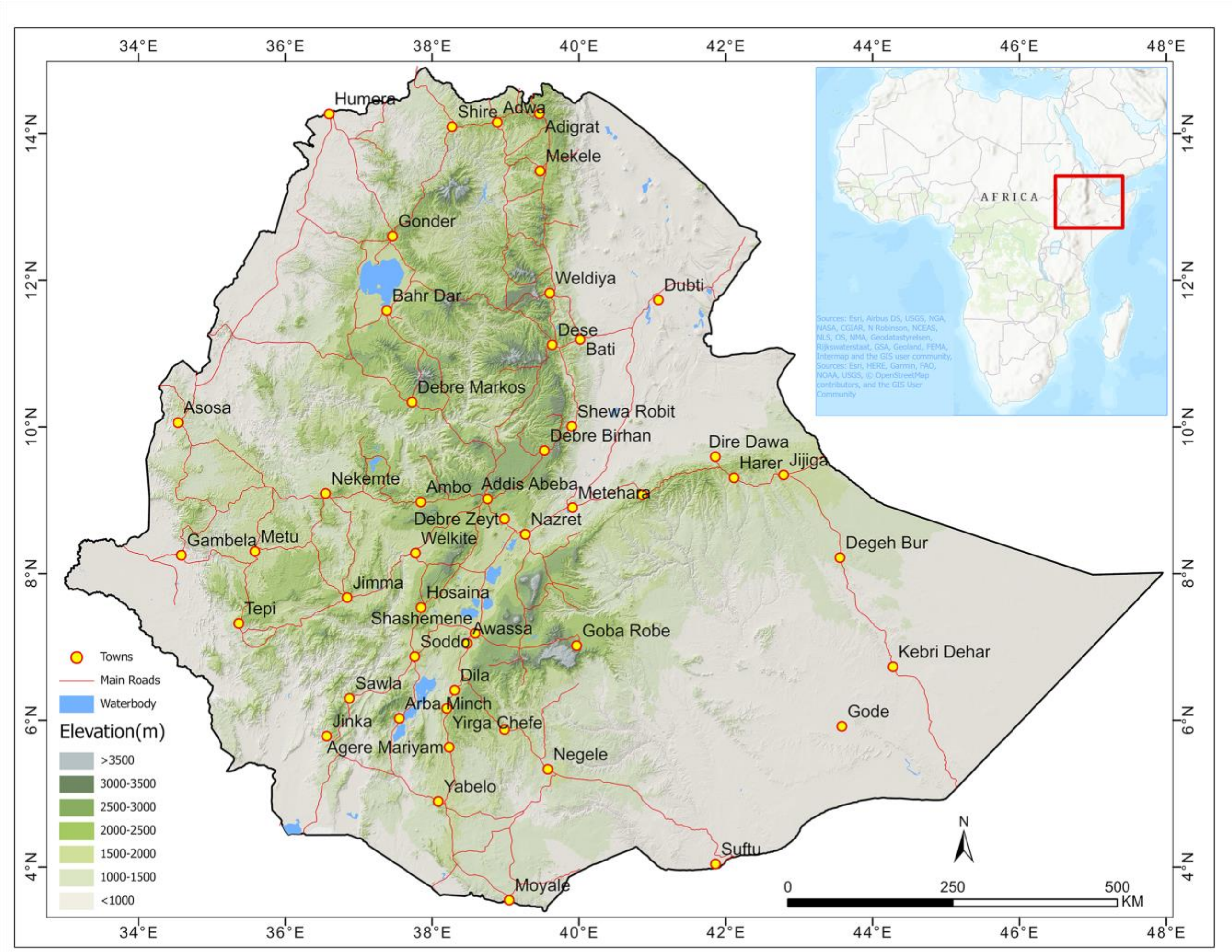


Figure 1. Location map of Ethiopia, overview map © Esri World Topographic Map.

The country's complex topography strongly determines~~defines~~ both rainfall and temperature patterns, by modifying the influence of the large-scale ocean-land-atmosphere pattern, thus creating diverse localised climates. Spatially, rainfall is characterised by a general decreasing trend in the direction from the west- ~~to~~ to east, ~~south~~ north~~south – north~~, ~~west~~ north-east, south and ~~west~~ southeast. The lowlands in the southeast and northeast, covering approximately 55% of the country's land area, are characterised by~~under~~ arid and semi-arid climates. Annual rainfall ranges from less than 300 mm in the south-eastern and north-western lowlands to over 2,000 mm in the southwestern (southern portion of the western highlands). The eastern lowlands get rain twice a year, in April–May and October–November, with two dry periods in between. The total annual precipitation in this region~~me~~ varies from less than 500 to 1,000 mm. The driest of all regions is the Denakil Plain, which receives less than 500 mm and sometimes none (Fazzini et al., 2015). Temperatures are also greatly influenced by the rapidly changing altitude and the mean monthly values vary from ~~about~~ ∼35ºC~~,~~ in the northeast lowlands to less than 7.5ºC over the north and central highlands.

The country is characteris~~z~~ed by a wide variety of geological formations (Abyneh, 2005; Alemayehu et al., 2014; Elias., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2011; Zewdie, 2013). These include (i) recent and old volcanic activities; (ii) the highlands consisting of igneous rocks (mainly basalts); (iii) steep-sided valleys characterised by strong colluvial and alluvial deposits; (iv)~~ denudation process exposed~~ metamorphic rocks exposed by denudation process; and (v) ~~occurrence of~~ various sedimentary rocks like limestone and sandstone in the relatively lower areas.

Diverse biophysical factors affecting the spatial distribution of vegetated land cover which in turn both as single and combined factors result in diverse soil types and properties across Ethiopia's landscapes (Hurni, 1998; Nyssen et al., 2019; WLRC, 2018). The spatio-temporal vegetation cover of the country has been characteris~~z~~ed by a long history of ~~the~~ landuse~~-~~/landcover changes~~settings~~ (WLRC, 2018). In terms of the type and spatial coverage of major landuse/landcover classes, ~~taking the national 2016 map (WLRC, 2018),~~ woody vegetation (forest, woodland, and shrub and bush lands) covers about 57% of the country in accordance with the national 2016 map (WLRC, 2018). This is followed by cultivated land (20%) and grasslands (12%). Barren lands are estimated to cover about one-tenth of the area of the country while other minor lands ~~covers~~ with ecological significance (i.e., wetlands, water bodies and sub-afro-alpine and afro-alpine ~~afroalpine~~) cover about 1.2% of the country's land mass.

2.2 Legacy soil profile data collation and preparation

~~In Ethiopia,~~ The soil profile data ~~have been~~ generated over decades through various soil survey missions were ~~but~~ kept in a variety of formats ~~and quality~~ with limited accessibility. There has been no institution with a ~~national~~ mandate to coordinate the generation, collation, harmonis~~z~~ation, and sharing of soil profile data. This ~~has~~ led to the formation of a group of individuals and institutions who were willing to exchange soil and agronomy data. Established in 2018, the group known as ~~t~~he

Coalition of the Willing (CoW) was committed to addressing ~~in 2018 – a group of individuals and institutions willing to exchange soil and agronomy data to overcome~~ the challenges posed by the lack of the soil and agronomy data access and sharing ~~mechanism~~ in the country (Tamene et al., 2021).

The CoW conducted a national soil and agronomy data ecosystem mapping which revealed that a plethora of legacy soil resource data sets do exist ~~but are scattered~~ across different institutions and individuals (Ali et al., 2020). The assessment also revealed that a sizable proportion of the data holders were willing to share the data in their custody, provided that some regulations are put in place to administer the data. The CoW developed and approved internal data-sharing guidelines (Ref), and ~~supported and~~ facilitated data collation campaigns, which involved both formal and informal approaches to data holders.

Through a data collation campaign, ~~S~~soil profile data collected between~~from~~ the 1970s and~~to~~ 2021 were acquired from over 88 diverse sources ~~through a data collation campaign~~ (Ali et al., 2020; Tamene et al., 2021~~2~~). Initially, 8,000 profile data points were collated and subjected to improved modelling techniques to create a provisional WRB reference soil group map of Ethiopia. This was presented to~~for~~ various partners and data-holding ~~data holding~~ institutions to demonstrate the power of data sharing. This created awareness and enabled us to mobilise and collate over 20,000 legacy soil profile data. These data ~~date~~ were then added to the national data repository.

The data had varying levels of completeness in terms of soil field and environmental descriptions and laboratory analysis. These~~is~~ required a rigorous expert-based quality assessment and standardis~~z~~ation before compiling~~ation~~ into a harmonis~~z~~ed format. The expanded version of the Africa Soil Profile (AfSP) database (Leenaars et al., 2014) template was used for standardis~~z~~ing and harmonis~~z~~ing the data. Out of the collated soil profile data, 14,681 georeferenced data points were extracted based on completeness and cleanness for the purposes of modelling. The cleaned soil profile data set contained~~s~~, at least, the reference soil group (RSG) nomenclature as outlined in the WRB legend. While the original soil profile records were set in different coordinate systems, all were projected into the adopted standard georeferencing system, namely WGS84, decimal degrees in the QGIS (3.20.2) environment (QGIS Development Team, 2021). To verify their position, soil profile locations were plotted using a standard WGS84 coordinate system to verify that points are matching with the site description, geomorphological settings, and at the very least the source project boundary outline.

The accuracy of the data depends on the quality and reliability of the survey data itself which in turn requires expert knowledge and experience in soil description and classification (~~(~~Leenaars et al., 2020a). In this study, data cleaning, validation, reclassification, and verification were carried out by a team of prominent national pedologists and soil surveyors, including those involved in the generation of some of the soil profile data themselves (Figure 2).

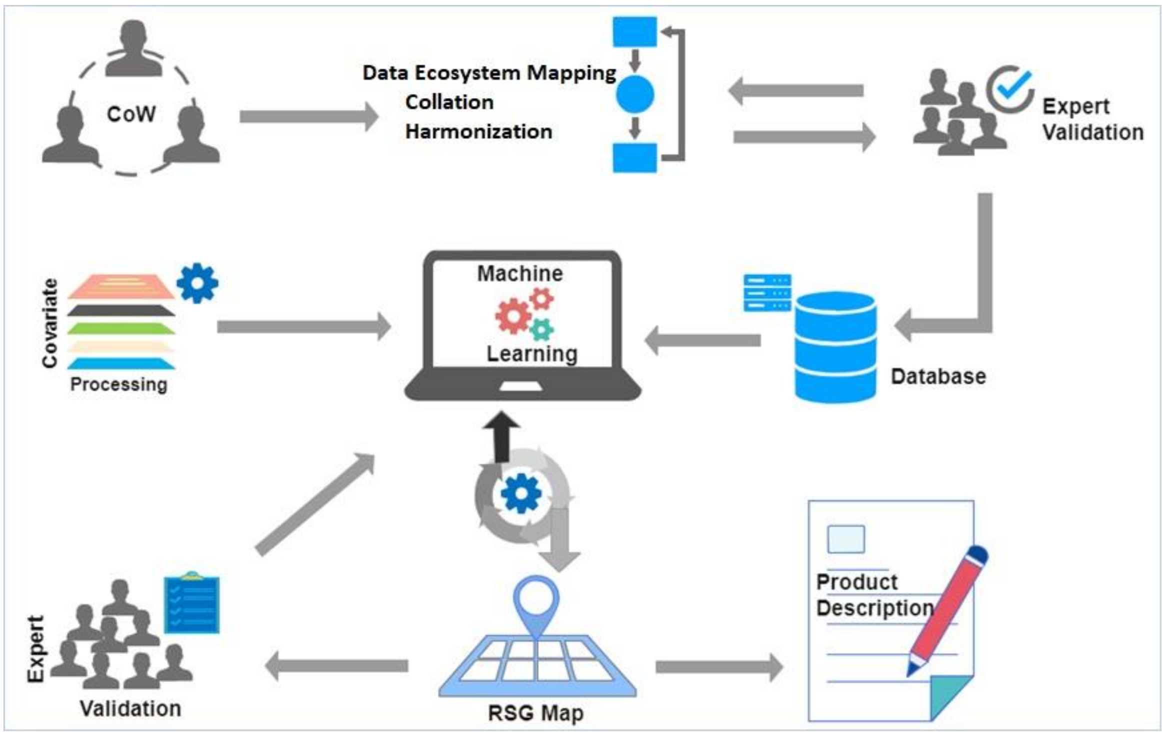


Figure 2. Schematic presentation of data acquisition and workflow.

In addition, the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) soil survey and mapping experts and other volunteers have validated the legacy soil profile observations. This led to the reclassification of the soil types as deemed necessary. Such validation and reclassification involved re-examining the geomorphological setup of the soil profile locations using Google ~~e~~Earth as well as reviewing the site and soil descriptions and the corresponding laboratory data and reviewing the proposed soil type. The harmonised data sets in the database were used as input soil profile data for modelling and mapping IUSS WRB reference soil groups.

2.3 Preparation and ~~S~~selection environmental ~~and pre-processing~~ of covariates

2.3.1 Covariates acquisition and preparation

In order to develop spatially continuous soil class/type maps, data on environmental covariates that represent directly or indirectly the soil-forming factors have to be integrated with soil profile data (Hengl and MacMillan, 2019). Environmental covariates are spatially explicit proxies of soil-forming factors based on the soil-environment relationship (McBratney et al., 2003, Shi et al., 2018). Acquisition and preparation of covariates is a crucial step in digital soil mapping using machine learning algorithms (McBratney et al., 2003; Miller et al., 2021). In this study, 68 potential candidate environmental variables were compiled from different sources and prepared in GeoTiff format. Environmental covariates representing soil-forming factors (climate, organisms, relief, parent material, and time) were derived from diverse remote sensing products and thematic maps (Hengl and MacMillan~~-~~, 2019; McBratney et al., 2003). ~~Selected environmental covariate layers were then used to predict the soil property across the full extent of the prediction area using the soil observation data from the sampling locations (McBratney et al., 2003,; Miller et al., 2021).~~

~~In this study, a set of 27 covariate layers (Appendix B), from 68 potential covariates, were prepared in GeoTiff format with 250 m resolution and Lambert azimuthal equal-area projection with the latitude of origin 8.65 and centre of meridian 39.64 which is the centre point for Ethiopia. This projection was selected since it is effective in minimising minimizing area distortions over land. All layers were masked for buildings and water bodies by the national boundary of Ethiopia and stacked using the stack () function of the raster package in R [version 4.05] (R Core Team, 2020). A 250 m spatial resolution was chosen to accommodate both the spatial resolution of the major covariates variate inputs and make it applicable for large-scale analysis~~.

Relief and topography-related covariates ~~The covariates included terrain variables~~ were derived from ~~the 9~~30-meter Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM) digital elevation model (DEM) (Vågen, 2010), Climate-related ~~climatic~~ variables including long-term mean, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation temperature, and precipitation data for the period between 1983 and 2016 (Dinku et al., 2014) were acquired from Enhancing National Climate Services (ENACTS-NMA) initiatives with 4 km resolutions (Dinku et al., 2014).~~,~~ Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) imagery raw bands and derived indices (Vågen, 2010), were downloaded from USGS

EarthExplorer (https://earthexplorer.usgs.gov/) to represent vegetation-related factors. N~~n~~ational geological~~y~~ ~~map of Ethiopia~~ (Tefera et al., 1996), and land use and~~/~~ land cover ~~map of Ethiopia~~ (WLRC-AAU, ~~2010~~2018) thematic maps of Ethiopia were gathered to represent parent material and organisms, respectively (Table 1).

~~A 4 km climate grid data from the National Meteorological Agency's (NMA) ENACTS initiative was used because it addresses the spatial and temporal gaps and quality problems of other climatic data sources for Ethiopia (Dinku et al., 2014). The long-term mean, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation temperature, and precipitation data for the period between 1983 and 2016 from the ENACT-NMA initiatives (Dinku et al., 2014) were used. In addition, the~~ H~~hydrologically corrected DEM of the Africa soil information service (Vågen, 2010) and DEM derivatives were calculated using SAGA-GIS version 7.3.0 (Conrad et al., 2015) for topography as a soil-forming factor. We used national geological (Tefera et al., 1996) and land use/land cover (WLRC-AAU, 2010) thematic maps of Ethiopia to represent parent material and organisms, respectively.~~

Downscaling (disaggregating) or upscaling (aggregating) of rasters was also performed to match the target resolution. A 250 m spatial resolution was chosen to accommodate both the spatial resolution of the major covariates-variate inputs and make it applicable for large-scale analysis.All layers were masked for buildings and water bodies by the national boundary of Ethiopia and a stacked layer was created using raster package (R Core Team, 2020) to extract covariate values at the locations of soil profiles. One-hot encoding technique using dummyVars function available in Caret package (Kuhn, 2008) was used to pre-process and convert categorical covariates into a binary vector. Each element of the binary vector represents the presence or absence of that category. One-hot encoding is beneficial because it allows machine learning algorithms to interpret categorical variables as numerical features. The covariate pre-processing, visual inspection for inconsistencies, and resampling to a target grid of 250 m ~~and compilations~~ were conducted in QGIS [3.20.2] (QGIS Development Team, 2021), SAGA GIS [7.8.2] (Conrad et al., 2015) and R [version 4.05] (R Core Team, 2020) software packages. All input data were projected to a common Lambert azimuthal equal-area projection with the latitude of origin 8.65 and centre of meridian 39.64 which is the centre point for Ethiopia. This projection was selected since it is effective in minimising area distortions over land. ~~Once e~~Each covariate was adjusted to have an identical spatial resolution, extent and projection using two resampling methods.~~,~~

~~c~~Continuous covariates were resampled using the bilinear spline method, whereas categorical covariates were resampled using the nearest neighbour method.

2.3.2 Covariates' selection

Selecting an optimal set of covariates for effectively represent the soil–environment relationship is a key step in Digital Soil Mapping (DSM) since improper selection of covariates will affect the quality of model outputs (Shi et al., 2018; Huang et al. 2020). In this study, ~~Tthe~~ near-zero variance assessment was conducted using ~~, available in the~~ nearZeroVar function available in R *caret* package ~~in R~~ (Kuhn, 2008) ~~was used~~ to identify and remove environmental variables that have little or no variance. in addition, preliminary Random Forest model training was performed to assess and identify covariates having high variable importance. After expert judgement ~~to determine the type of covariates for modelling RSGs and near-zero variance analysis~~, a total of 27 environmental variables (24 continuous and 3 categorical) were selected ~~used~~ for ~~the~~ modelling and predicting Reference Soil Groups.

2.4 Modelling and mapping soil types/reference soil groups

2.4.1 Model tuning and quantitative evaluation

~~Recent developments in data analytics showed the potential to undertake sophisticated analysis involving large datasets within a relatively short time using models.~~ In digital soil mapping, machine-learning techniques have been extensively used to determine the relationship between soil types and environmental variables (McBratney et al., 2003). Many machine-learning models were developed in the past decades for digital soil mapping to spatially predict soil classes based on existing soil data and soil-forming environmental covariates (Heung et al., 2016). Random Forest (RF), a tree-based ensemble method, is one of the most promising machine learning techniques available for digital soil mapping (Breiman, 2001; Heung et al., 2016), which has gained ~~tremendous~~ popularity due to its high overall accuracy and has been widely used in predictive soil mapping (Brungard, 2015; Hengl et al., 2018).

Examples of the main strengths of the RF model are its ability to handle numerical and categorical data without any assumption of the probability distribution; and its robustness against nonlinearity and overfitting (Breiman, 2001; Svetnik et al., 2003). While builidng~~In~~ the RF model, data was~~are~~ split into training (80 %) and testing (20 %) components using random sampling for training ~~building~~ the model and evaluating its performance~~model testing~~, respectively (Kuhn, 2008). Hyper-parameter optimization and repeated cross-validation on the training dataset were~~have been~~ performed for optimal model application using the ranger~~using ranger~~ method of~~the~~ Caret package. The three tuning parameters for ranger method are mtry, splitrule, min.node.size. Generally this function is used to tune the parameters in modelling in an automated fashion, as this will automatically check all the possible tuning parameters and return the optimised parameters on which the model gives the best accuracy~~-e (Kuhn, 2008).~~ Model tuning was performed with a repeated 10-fold cross-validation procedure applying~~and applied~~ multiple combinations of hyper-parameters for the ranger method. This is a ~~, which is a~~ fast implementation of RF~~,~~ particularly suited for high-~~-~~dimensional data (Wright and Ziegler, 2017). Then~~ree parameters, i.e.,~~ the number of covariates used for the splits (mtry), splitting rules (splitrule) and minimum node size (min.node.size) were optimised. The values of 1,000 number of trees (ntree) with mtry ranged from 10 to 20, min.node.size ranged from 5 – 15 with an interval of five and extra trees as split-rule ~~splitrule~~ fed for the optimization procedure. ~~“expand.grid” function in Caret package was used to create a set of different tuning features while training the model. The three tuning parameters for Ranger method in Caret package are mtry, splitrule, min.node.size. Generally this function is used to tune the parameters in modelling in an automated fashion, as this will automatically check all the possible tuning parameters and return the optimisedoptimized parameters on which the model gives the best accuracy~~.

The accuracy of the testing dataset was related to the model performance for the new dataset, indicating the capacity of the model to predict at the unsampled location. A confusion matrix was also used to calculate a cross-tabulation of observed and predicted classes with associated statistics i.e., producer’s accuracy and user’s accuracy.

2.4.2 Software and computational framework

In this study, various open-source software packages that provide a comprehensive set of tools and diverse capabilities were used for data preparation, analysis and visualisation. Data pre-processing and preparation were performed using QGIS (QGIS Development Team, 2021) and SAGA GIS (Conrad et al., 2015). For statistical analysis and machine learning modelling, R (R Core Team, 2020) and relevant libraries were installed Windows server 2016 standard with 250 GB of working memory ~~The computational framework was based on open-source software and was~~

~~performed~~ on a ~~w~~Windows server 2016 standard with 250 GB of working memory to handle the challenges associated with large-scale data processing and analysis.

2.4.3~~2~~ Expert ~~Qualitative~~ evaluation of spatial patterns of the beta-version soil map

Visual inspection of the DSM output over the terrain was ~~can be~~ used to identify abnormalities and assess how effectively it depicts landscape components (Rossiter et al., 2022). For ~~To address~~ this, we employed an expert-based qualitative assessment of the model output. This technique was used to complement model-based accuracy assessment and confirm agreement or indicate areas of concern. This was implemented by a panel of senior soil specialists/pedologists checking the map based on purposely selected district-level geographic windows across Ethiopia, representing different agro-ecological zones known to have diverse soil occurrences, and familiar to the panel of experts. Accordingly, an expert validation workshop was conducted using the first version of the reference soil groups (RSGs) map. About 45 multi-disciplinary scientists including soil surveyors, pedologists, geologists, and geomorphologists were drawn from national and international research, development, and higher learning institutions to review the draft RSG map in plenary. This was followed by breakout sessions where groups of experts evaluated the map based on their experience and knowledge of soil-landscape relations of the country and examined geographic windows.

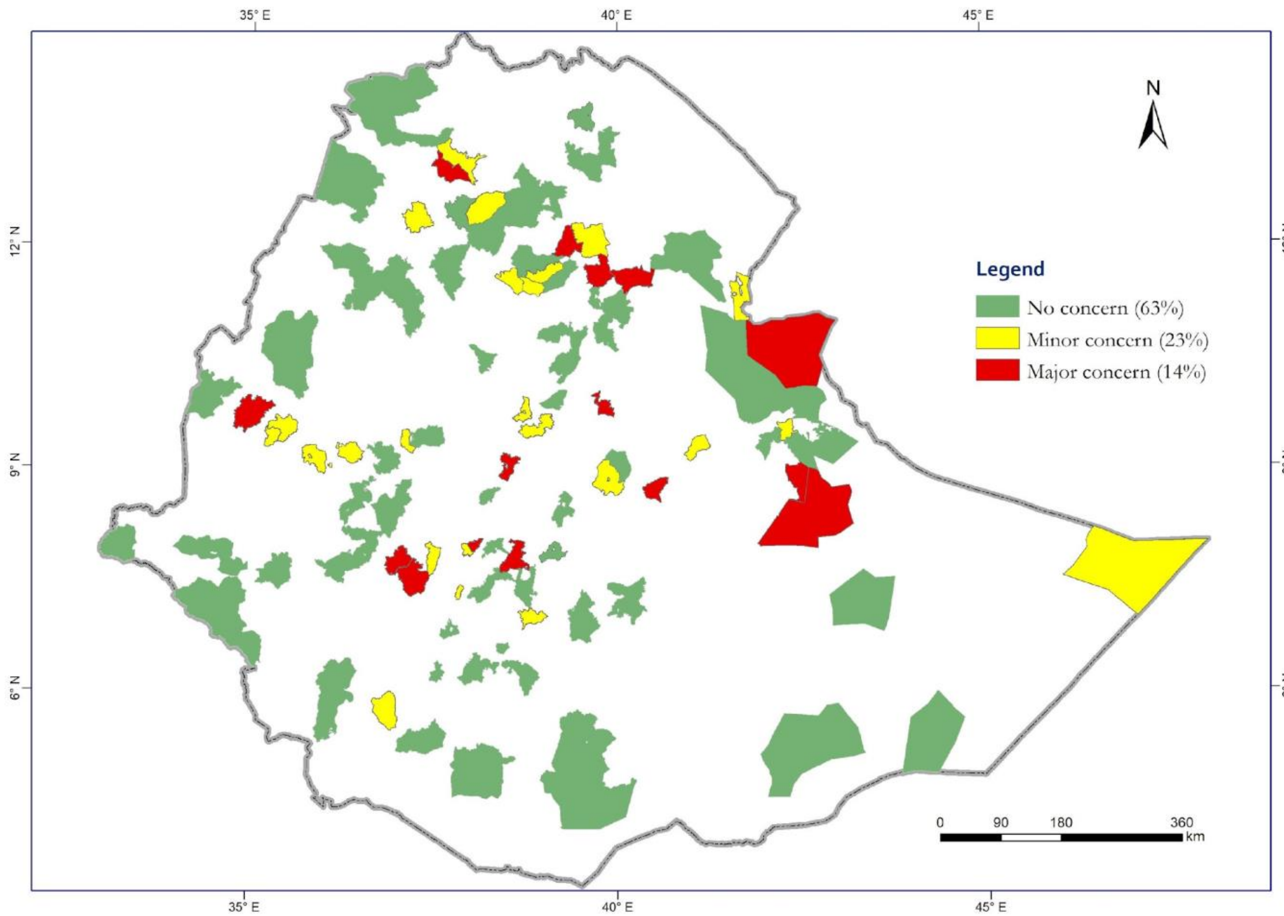
Most importantly, disagreements regarding ~~of~~ RSGs occurrence and patterns of the modelling outputs across topo-sequences ~~topo-sequenses~~ and contrasting soil-forming ~~soil- forming~~ factor sequences were identified and discussed. Further, inferences on parts of the DSM framework that require improvement were recommended. After finalising the evaluation at the group's level assessment, each group presented the results in the plenary followed by a discussion to get feedback from other participants. Following the plenary discussions, the participants created a group of six senior pedologists to work on the recommendations including ~~which is mainly related to~~ changing the quality mask layer, validation of the additional data obtained during the event, and assessment of re-modelling outputs.

After the second model was re-run, the group of senior pedologists ~~group~~ together with ~~nominated six soil scientists and~~ geospatial experts re-evaluated the output using the selected districts ~~selected~~ based on the feedback from the first review, which was mainly on areas where there were ~~was~~ "minor" and "major" concerns. C~~As a c~~onsequently~~ce~~, some improvements were made~~observed including~~ ~~For instance,~~ e.g., in the areas where Vertisols, Fluvisols, and Leptosols were ~~reported to be~~ overestimated~~, improvements were observed.~~ Further, underestimated RSGs (Alisols, Solonetz~~s~~, Planosols, Acrisols, Lixisols, Phaeozems, and Gleysols) showed a slight increase in area coverage and pattern improvements. However, the total area of~~for~~ Leptosols and Cambisols increased from the first run due to the partial exclusion of the mask layer used in the first round of modelling. ~~modeling effort.~~ The mask layer used in the first run was criticis~~z~~ed for quality issues as it excluded significant soil areas and due to its weakness in ~~limitation to~~ capturing non-soil areas such as rock outcrops~~/rocky surfaces~~, salt flats, swamps and sand dunes.~~ across the different Ethiopia's landscapes.~~ Nevertheless, the spatial patterns of these soils occurring across previously considered "non-soil areas'' were examined by the panel of experts. In parallel, geospatial and soil experts checked the raster map of the RSGs in the GIS environment to ensure areas with 'no concern' before re-running the model are kept the same or changes are accepted by the panel of experts. The map from the second run is presented in this paper as EthioSoilGrids version 1.0 product.

~~Expert knowledge of soil-landscape relations and soil distribution remains important to evaluate the predictive soil mapping results and assess if predicted spatial patterns make sense from a pedological viewpoint (Hengl et al., 2017; Poggio et al., 2020). An important step in model evaluation is, therefore, expert assessment whereby professionals with broad experience in soil survey and mapping can evaluate and improve the quality of the soil resource map. Accordingly, an expert validation workshop was conducted using the first version of the reference soil groups (RSGs) map. About 45 multi-disciplinary scientists including soil surveyors, pedologists, geologists, and geomorphologists were drawn from national and international research, development, and higher learning institutions to review the draft RSG map in plenary. This was followed by breakout sessions where groups of experts evaluated the map based on their experience and knowledge of soil-landscape relations of the country.~~

~~While the plenary discussion provided an overview of the approaches followed in developing the map, the facilitated group discussion helped to have an in-depth review of the selected polygons of the map assigned to them. Participants were split into five groups (with 8-10 members each) and have chosen up to 60 polygons representing areas with which at least one of the group members has sufficient information, including data sources. Overall, the groups have checked a total of 126 polygons (Figure 3) which were fairly distributed across the country. In cases where there is ambiguity, the experts overlaid the soil profile locations on Google earth map to evaluate the description and soil lab results. The group members displayed the polygons one by one in a GIS environment and discussed the predicted dominant and associated soil reference soil groups and labelled them in one of three~~

~~confirmation categories: 1. confirmed with '*no concern*', 2. confirmed with "*minor concern*", and 3. confirmed with '*major concern*'. Confirmation with '*no concern*' was made when all members of a group agreed on both the types and relative coverage of the predicted soils within the polygon. Confirmation with '*minor concern*' was made when all or some of the team members agreed on the predicted soil types within the polygons but did not agree on the order of abundance or the probability occurrence of one or two soils, while confirmation with '*major concern*' was made when all members of the team did not agree on the predicted soil type, or when the presence of another soil type, other than the predicted ones is noted.~~



~~**Figure 3.** The spatial distribution of districts validated by stakeholders and feedback categories according to the level of concerns raised.~~

~~After finalising the evaluation at the group's level assessment, each group presented the results in the plenary followed by a discussion to get feedback from other participants. Following the plenary~~

~~discussions, the participants created a group of six senior pedologists to work on the recommendations, including validation of the additional data obtained during the event. Based on these outputs, the model was re-runto produce the current version of the soil map.~~

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Soil profile datasets

Using the IUSS WRB, 2015, the preliminary identified 14,742 georeferenced legacy soil profiles were classified/reclassified into twenty-three reference soil groups (RSGs). Nearly 90% of the soil profile points represented Vertisols, followed by Luvisols, Cambisols, Leptosols, Fluvisols, and Nitisols, which were found to be the dominant soil types in Ethiopia (Figure 4). The remaining 10% represented the Regosols, Alisols, Andosols, Arenosols, Calcisols, Solonetz~~s~~, Lixisols, Phaeozems, Solonchaks, Acrisols, Planosols, Gleysols, Umbrisols, Ferralsols, Gypsisols, Plinthosols, and Stagnosols.

According to this ~~In the present~~ study, ~~The results suggest that~~ about 72% of the IUSS WRB (2015) RSGs were confirmed to occur in Ethiopia. This reconfirms the characterization of ~~claim that~~ ~~In this regard,~~ Ethiopia ~~is considered~~ as a land of soil diversity ~~soil museum~~ having endowed with a diverse range of soil types ~~owing to the diversities in the pedogenetic factors~~ (Elias, 2016; ~~), which is known to have most of the reference soil groups in varying frequencies depending on existing physiographic and agroecological positions (~~Mishra et al., 2004).

One of the limitations ~~challenges~~ with legacy soil data in categorical mapping is the~~that of~~ imbalanced soil samples, in that all classes were not equally represented ~~equally~~ (Wadoux et al., 2020). For this study, soil profiles with less than 30 observations were objectively excluded from the model after examining the accuracy and spatial distribution of each reference soil group. Five reference soil groups (Umbrisols, Ferralsols, Gypsisols, Plinthosols, and Stagnosols) were excluded from the model and the ~~left unmapped in this~~ EthioSoilGrids version 1.0 map.

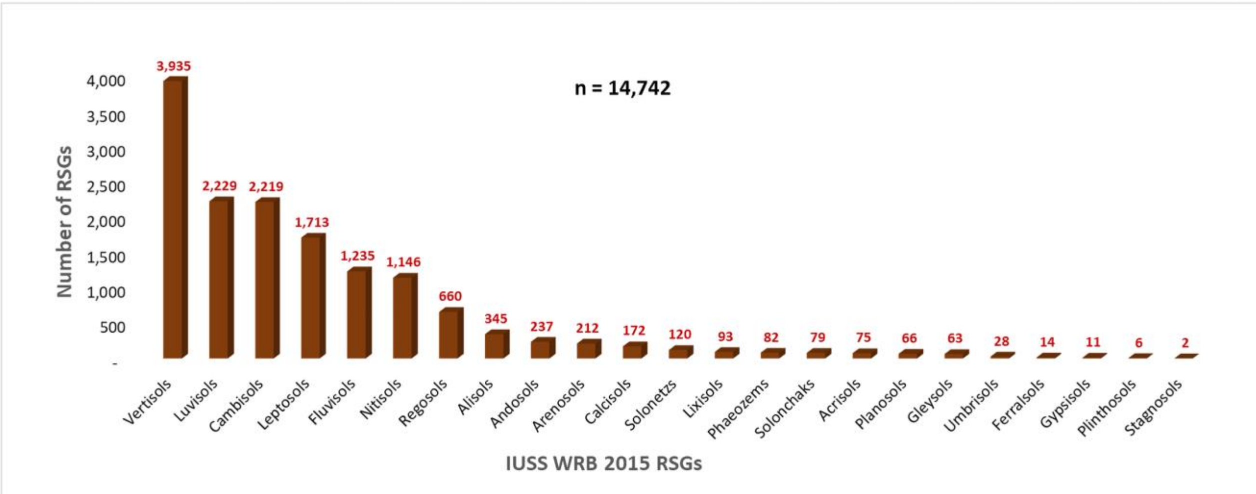


Figure 43. Number of soil profile points per WRB reference soil groups.

After ~~excluding With regards to the total area of Ethiopia and~~ excluding the built-up ~~(urban~~) and water surface areas~~, and,~~ the average soil profile ~~spatial distribution (Figure 45) represented an average~~ density was ~~of~~ 13.1 ~~soil profiles~~ per 1,000 km^2 (Figure 4), but the ~~. The~~ actual density ~~of observations~~ varied ~~greatly~~ across the ~~between~~ different parts of the country. The variation tends to follow river basins, sub-basins, and agricultural land-use types-based studies from which most of the legacy data ~~soil observations~~ were pulled. ~~for the present study~~. For instance, in 30 intervention districts of the Capacity Building for Scaling up of Evidence-Based Best Practices in Agricultural Production in Ethiopia (CASCAPE) project, the average profile density was ~~was 1 profile per 11.5 km² (~~about 87 profiles per 1,000 km^2~~)~~ for a total area of about 26,830 km^2 (Leenars et al., 2020a). Similarly, semi-detailed soil mapping missions in 15 districts ~~were~~ conducted through the Bilateral Ethiopia-Netherlands Effort for Food, Income and Trade (BENEFIT)-REALISE project ~~which~~ generated about 217 observations per 1,000 km^2 (Leenars et al., 2020b).

A soil type and depth map compilation and updating mission at a 1:250,000 scale by the Water Land Resource Centre (WLRC) of Addis Ababa University collated and used about 3,949 legacy soil profiles for the entire country (Ali et al., 2020), which is about 3.5 profiles per 1,000 km^2. ~~The existing accessible compiled legacy soil profile database of Ethiopia prepared by the~~ Although the distribution is not even and the eastern lowlands are sparsely~~thinly~~ represented, the number of data used in this study is 8.5 times higher than the 1,712 legacy soil profiles data currently existing in the Africa soil profile database ~~consisted of 1,712 legacy soil profiles are from Ethiopia, which is about observations~~

~~or 1.5 profiles per 1,000 km^2~~ (Batjas et al., 2020; Leenaars et al., 2014). ~~indicating , which indicates that the number of data used in this study is 8.5 times higher than that was used in the former. However, the soil profile distribution across the country was uneven; additional soil survey missions are needed for the eastern lowlands and other less represented areas in the future.~~

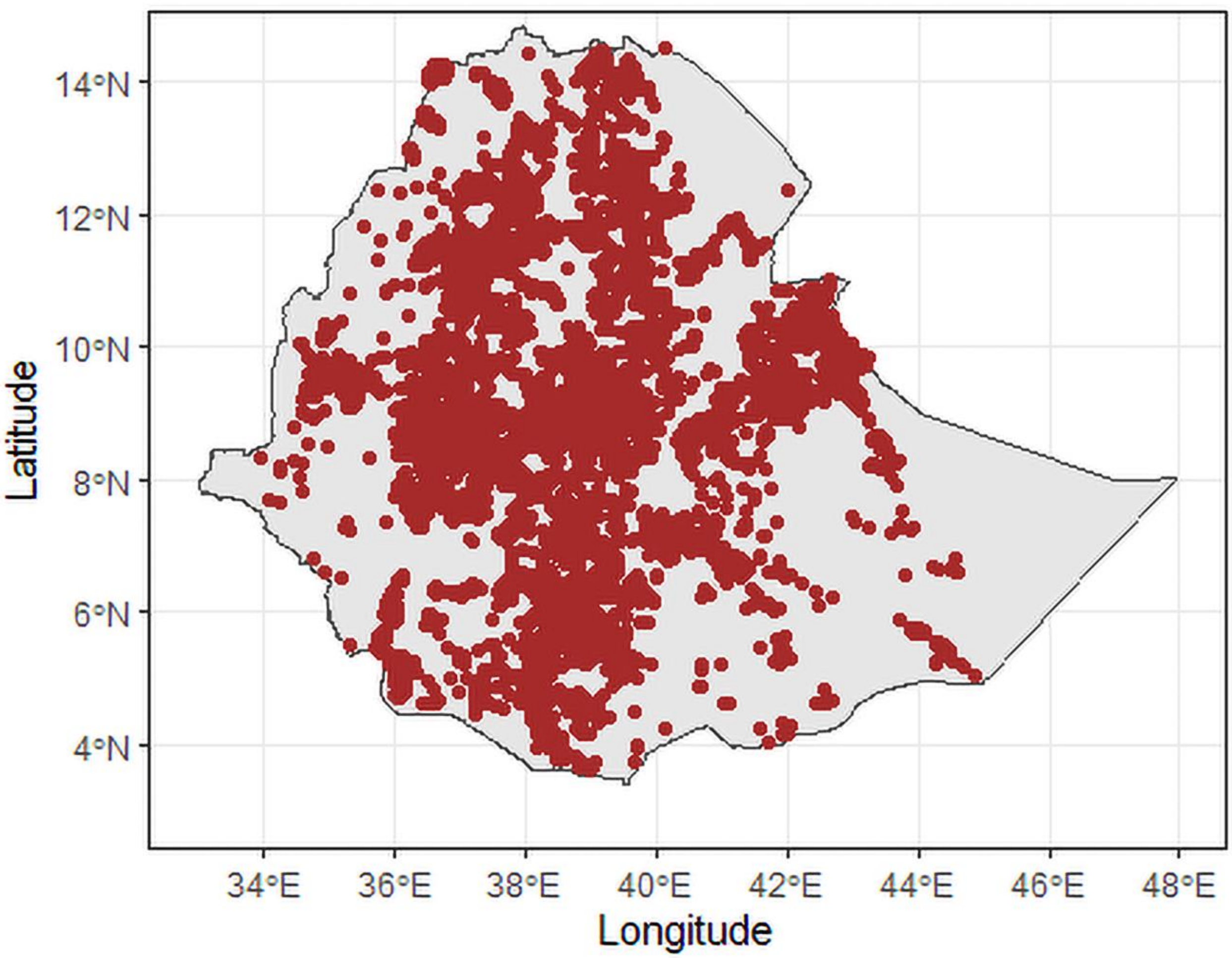


Figure ~~5~~4. Spatial distribution of collated legacy soil profile data.

The soil profiles distribution across the 32 agro-ecological zones (AEZ) of Ethiopia revealed that all, except two–tepid per-humid mid-highland ~~mid- highland~~ (0.13% landmass) and very cold sub-humid sub-afro alpine to afro-alpine (0.03% landmass)–were represented by soil profile~~s~~ observations. Furthermore, about 95% of the profile observations represented 91% of the AEZs aerial coverage (Appendix A). The distribution of legacy soil profiles varied across AEZs. In general, the top-ranked lowland AEZs with roughly 56% area coverage were represented by~~obtained~~ 23% of the total profile observations, whereas~~while~~ top-ranked highland AEZs with 20% area coverage received 47% of profile observations. For instance, warm desert, warm moist, hot arid, and warm sub-moist lowlands with area coverage of around 20%, 15%, 11%, and 10%, were represented roughly by 3%, 11%, 2%, and 7% of the total profiles, respectively. Tepid moist mid highlands (8% area coverage), tepid sub-humid mid highlands (7% area coverage), and tepid sub-moist mid highlands (5% area coverage) each were represented by 20%, 15%, and 12% of the profiles, respectively.

3.2 Modelling and Mapping

3.2.1 Variable importance

The reference soil group spatial pattern is primarily influenced by long-term average surface reflectance, flow-based DEM indices, and precipitation. Figure ~~6~~5 shows variables of importance for determining RSGs spatial prediction. The top-ranked variables were (i) long-term MODIS Near-Infrared (NIR) reflectance; (ii) multiresolution index of valley bottom flatness, (iii) long-term mean day-land surface temperature; (iv) long-term mean soil moisture; (v) standard deviation of long-term precipitation; (vi) long-term mean precipitation; and (vii) topographic wetness index.

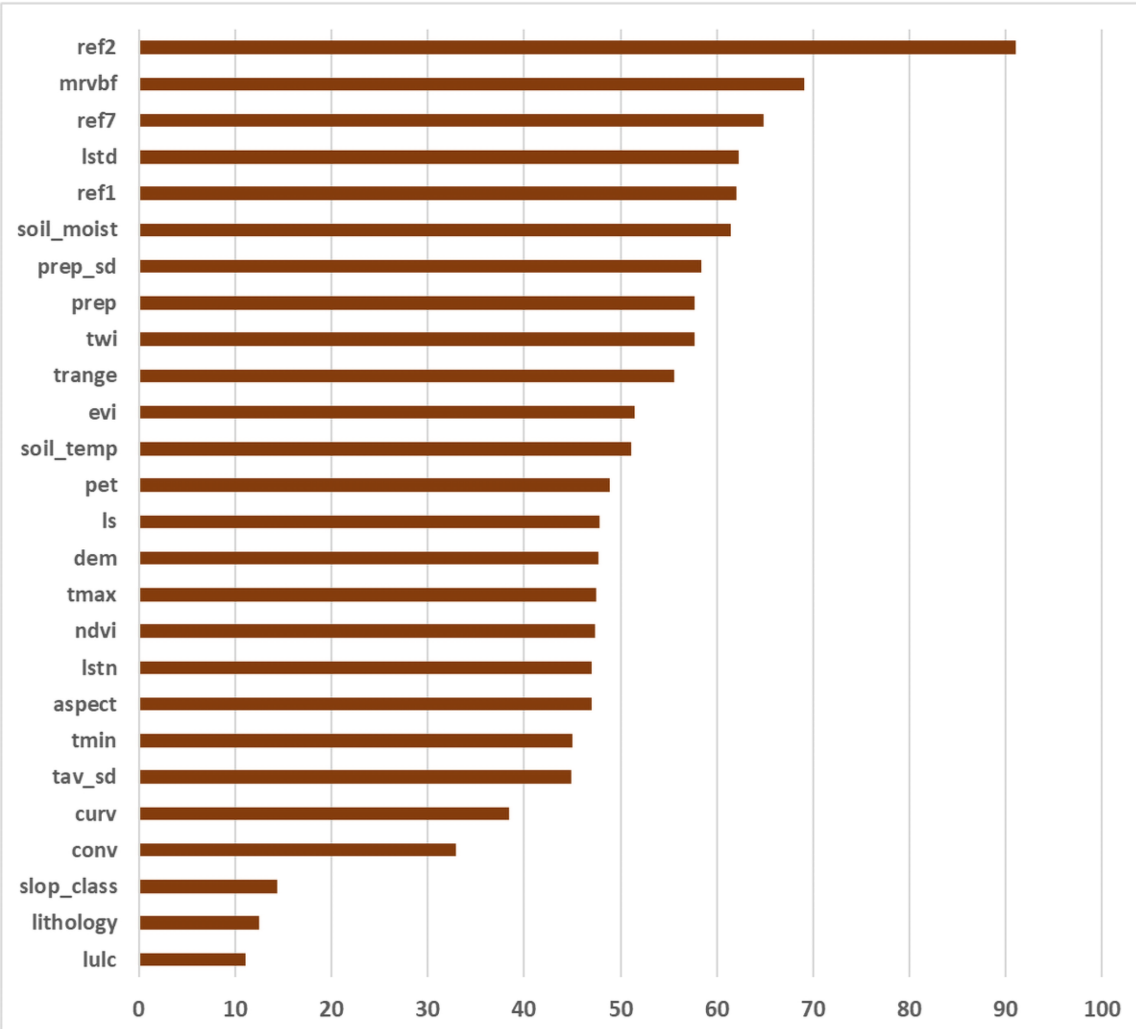
MODIS long-term mean spectral signatures showed high relative importance. According to Hengl et al. (2017), accounting for seasonal vegetation fluctuation and inter-annual variations in surface reflectance, long-term temporal signatures of the soil surface, derived as monthly averages from long-term MODIS imagery, were more effective. Furthermore, Hengl and MacMillan (2019) explained that long-term average seasonal signatures of surface reflectance provide a better indication of soil characteristics than only a single snapshot of surface reflectance.

The Multi-Resolution Valley Bottom Flatness Index, a DEM-derived topography index, is the second top-ranked covariate driving soil variability across Ethiopia. This hydrological/soil removal and accumulation/deposition index is used to distinguish valley floor and ridgetop landscape positions (Soil Science Division Staff, 2017) highly responsible for multiple soil-forming processes to operate over a particular landscape, resulting in a wide range of soil development. The influence of topography on spatial soil variation is manifested in every landscape of Ethiopia (Belay, 1997; Mesfin, 1998; Nyssen et al., 2019; Zewdie, 2013).

Long-term daily mean land surface temperature, mean soil moisture, rainfall standard deviation and mean annual rainfall were among the top-ranked covariates for predicting reference soil groups' spatial variation across the country. In Ethiopia, different soil genesis studies revealed that climate has a significant influence on soil development and properties and is, therefore, responsible for having widely varying soils in the country (Abayneh, 2006, 2005; Fikru, 1988, 1980; Zewdie, 2013). ~~Rainfall variability in Ethiopia is governed by global, regional, and local factors. Ethiopian climate is substantially governed by local factors in which the topography is powerful. It is known as a country of natural contrast; characterised by a complex topography that strongly defines both rainfall and temperature patterns, by modifying the influence of the large-scale ocean-land-atmosphere pattern, thus creating diverse localised climates.~~

~~Spatially, rainfall in Ethiopia is characterised by a decreasing trend in the direction from west to east, south-north, west-north-east and west-east. The lowlands in the southeast and northeast, covering approximately 55% of the country's land area, are under arid and semi-arid climates. Annual rainfall ranges from less than 300 mm in the south-eastern and north-western lowlands to over 2,000 mm in the southwestern (southern portion of the western highlands). The eastern lowlands get rain twice a year, in April-May and October-November, with two dry periods in between. The total annual precipitation in this regime varies from 500 to 1,000 mm. The driest of all regions is the Denakil Plain, which receives less than 500 mm and sometimes none (Fazzini et al., 2015). Temperatures are also greatly influenced by the rapidly changing altitude in Ethiopia and mean monthly values vary from about 35ºC, in the northeast lowland to less than 7.5ºC over the north and central highland.~~

Among the most important covariates for predicting reference soil groups in the Ethiopian highlands, ~~(Leenars et al., 2020a),~~ are monthly average soil moisture for January (ranked 3rd), long-term average soil moisture (ranked 4th), and monthly average soil moisture for August (ranked 5th) (Leenars et al., 2020a). In the current ~~Similarly, in this~~ study, soil moisture was among the ten top ~~ten~~ ranked covariates in modelling and explaining long-distance soil type variability across the country.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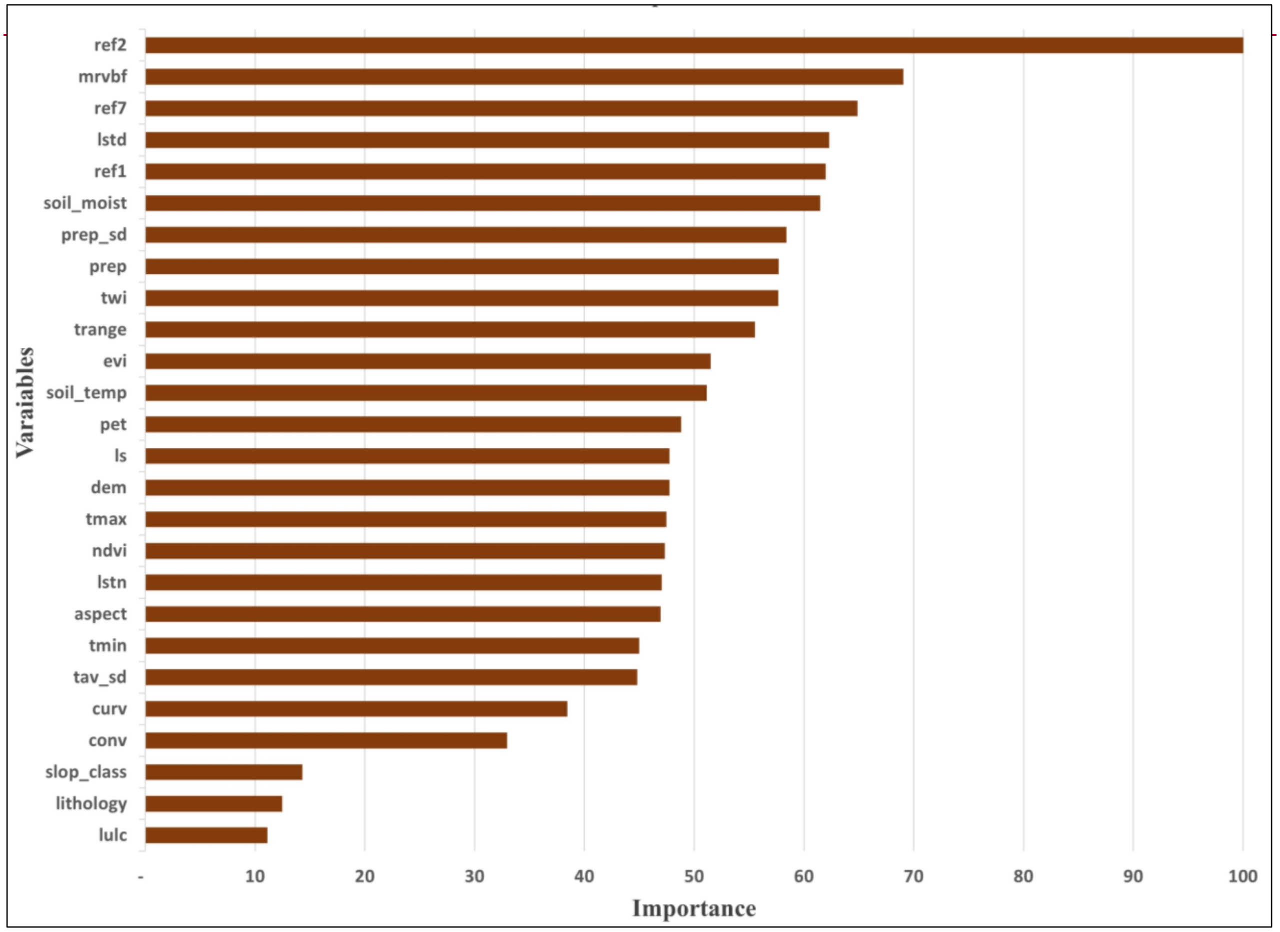

Figure ~~6~~5. Random forest covariate relative importance for modelling RSGs. See Appendix B for abbreviations.

Note: prep=Precipitation; prep_sd=The standard deviation of precipitation; tmax=Maximum Temperature; tmin=Minimum Temperature; trange=Temperature range; tav_sd=Standard deviation of average temperature; pet=Potential evapotranspiration; lstd=Land surface temperature- Day; lstn=Land surface temperature-Night; soil_moist=Soil Moisture ; soil_temp=Soil temperature; DEM =Digital elevation model (Elevation); twi =Topographic wetness Index; aspect=Topographic Aspect; curv=Topographic Curvature; conv=Topographic convergence index; ls=Slope Length and Steepness factor (ls_factor); morph=Terrain Morphometry; mrvbf=Multiresolution index of valley bottom flatness; slope=Slope class (%); ndvi=Normalised Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI); evi=Enhanced Vegetation Index (EVI); lulc=Land use/ landcover; lithology=Geology; ref1=Red band ;ref2=Near-Infrared; ref7=Mid-Infrared.

In this study, lithology showed a relatively low influence on soil variability~~. This is against the long-standing fact that Ethiopia is believed to be a land of geologic contrast (Abyneh,2005; Alemayehu et~~

~~al., 2014; Elias., 2016; Jarvis et al., 2011; Zewdie, 2013) characterised by (i) recent and old volcanic activities; (ii) the highlands consisting of igneous rocks (mainly basalts); (iii) steep-sided valleys characterise by strong colluvial and alluvial deposits; (iv) denudation process exposed metamorphic rocks; and (v) occurrence of various sedimentary rocks like limestone and sandstone in the relatively lower areas. The low influence of lithology may be related may be due to~~ may be due to the use of a coarse-scale and less detailed lithology map, which may not sufficiently capture the spatial variability of the parent materials.

3.2.2 Model performance

The parameter optimization process resulted in mtry = 20, split rule= extra trees and minimum node size= 5. The overall accuracy of the model was 56.24% which ranged between 54.43% and 58.1% with a 95% confidence interval. The kappa values based on the internal cross-validation and testing dataset showed that the overall model performance produced using 10–fold cross-validation with the repeated fitting was 48%. Considering similar area-based digital soil class mapping efforts, the overall ~~purity (~~accuracy~~)~~ was in line with the accuracies that were typically reported for soil class maps developed with random forest model (Leenaars et al., 2020a) and statistical methods (Heung et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2015). Table 1 shows the confusion matrix at validation/testing points i.e., 20 % of the observation. Further, the matrix indicates the producer's accuracy (class representation of observed versus predicted) and user's accuracy ~~(map purity)~~ were not similar for all RSGs. The map purity is in the order of Lixisols, Calcisols, Alisols, Phaeozems, Vertisols, Andosols, Solonchaks, Fluvisols, Arenosols, Leptosols, Luvisols, Nitisols, and Cambisols. However, Vertisols, Calcisols, and Andosols are the observed classes that are best represented by the map followed by Fluvisols, Alisols, Nitisols, Leptosols, Luvisols and Cambisols.

Global Soil Grids at 250 m resolution used machine learning algorithms to map the global WRB reference soil groups with map purity and weighted kappa of 28% and 42%, respectively (Hengl et al., 2017). The Soil Grids 250 m WRB soil groups/classes prediction output-spatial soil patterns were not evaluated based on expert knowledge while in this study we did an extensive back and forth qualitative assessment by a panel of pedologists. The quantitative accuracy in the present study (about 56%) coupled with an expert-based qualitative evaluation of the predicted maps indicated the development and achievement of a substantially enhanced national product for users of spatial soil resource~~s~~ information. This finding is a step forward and acceptable considering that Soil Grids are not expected to be as accurate as locally produced maps and models that use much more local point data and finer local variables (Mulder et al., 2016). Further, the data and findings in this study can help improve the soil maps of Africa as it partially addresses the concern by Hengl et al. (2017) who recognised that WRB RSGs modelling in the global Soil Grids 250 m is critically uncertain for parts of ~~Africa~~Africa. This is mainly attributed to limited access to more local point data by regional and global modelling initiatives, unlike ~~which~~ the present study which ~~has overcome and get~~ accessed a large number of ~~to the most possible exhaustive~~ legacy soil profile datasets ~~of Ethiopia~~.

Table 1. Confusion matrix of random forest RSG prediction (at validation/testing observations).

	Reference																			
Prediction	Acrisols	Alisols	Andosols	Arenosols	Calcisols	Cambisols	Fluvisols	Gleysols	Leptosols	Lixisols	Luvisols	Nitisols	Phaeozems	Planosols	Regosols	Solonchaks	Solonetzs	Vertisols	User Accuracy	Total
Acrisols	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0.33	3
Alisols	0	40	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	9	4	0	0	2	0	0	2	0.68	59
Andosols	0	0	28	1	1	3	5	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.64	44
Arenosols	0	0	0	11	0	2	1	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.55	20
Calcisols	0	0	0	0	21	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0.72	29
Cambisols	2	3	6	9	1	197	28	2	35	2	47	16	5	1	16	3	3	28	0.49	404
Fluvisols	1	0	3	5	1	34	144	0	9	0	15	7	0	0	1	5	5	17	0.58	247
Gleysols	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0.40	5
Leptosols	0	1	4	3	3	47	11	0	176	0	27	7	1	0	32	0	0	24	0.52	336
Lixisols	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1.00	1
Luvisols	2	16	3	8	0	34	13	2	33	3	216	30	3	0	25	1	0	41	0.50	430
Nitisols	6	8	0	0	1	23	8	3	18	8	29	132	0	1	8	0	1	21	0.49	267
Phaeozems	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0.67	3
Planosols	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	5	1	0	0	1	0.~~11~~55	9
Regosols	0	0	0	0	0	7	1	0	7	1	8	1	0	0	22	0	0	5	0.42	52
Solonchaks	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0.60	5
Solonetzs	0	0	0	0	1	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	6	0	0.46	13
Vertisols	3	1	3	5	5	92	32	2	61	3	81	31	5	5	25	2	6	641	0.64	1,003
Producer Accuracy	0.07	0.58	0.60	0.26	0.62	0.44	0.58	0.17	0.51	0.06	0.49	0.58	0.13	0.38	0.17	0.20	0.25	0.81	0.56	-
Total	15	69	47	42	34	443	247	12	342	18	445	229	16	13	132	15	24	787	-	2,930

3.2.3 Modelling and Mapping: EthioSoilGrids Version 1.0

The study identified eighteen reference soil groups in Ethiopia, mapped at 250 m resolution (Figure ~~7~~6). The model prediction showed that seven soil reference groups including Cambisols, Leptosols, Vertisols, Fluvisols, Nitisols, Luvisols, and Calcisols covered nearly 98% of the total land area of the country (Figure 7~~8~~). Five soil reference groups (Solonchaks, Arenosols, Regosols, Andosols, and Alisols) were estimated to cover about 2% of the land area, while trace coverages of Solonetz,~~s (,~~ Planosols, Acrisols, Lixisols, Phaeozems, and Gleysols were also found in some pocket areas.

In terms of spatial distribution, Nitisols and Luvisols dominated the northwestern and south~~-~~western highlands while the south~~-~~eastern lowlands were dominantly covered by Cambisols, Calcisols, and Fluvisols with some Solonchaks. The Vertisols extensively cover~~ed~~ the north and south-western lowlands along with the Ethio-Sudan border areas and central highland plateaus. ~~Overall, each RSG position, with other RSGs, along the landscapes/catena/topo-sequence, is in good agreement with the established schematic soil sequence, previous spatial soil information of Ethiopia and with experts' opinions validated across 126 geographic windows of the country.~~

The probability of occurrence of each RSG was mapped (Appendix C) in each modelling spatial window (i.e., the cell size of 250-meter X 250 m). The dominant RSGs were aggregated based on the most probable RSGs in each spatial modelling window. There was high correspondence between the top seven ranked prediction probabilities and observed soil types as confirmed visually by overlaying observed classes and prediction probabilities.

The overall occurrence and the relative position of each of the RSG along the topo-sequence and its association with other RSGs agree with previous works (Abayneh, 2006; Ali et al., 2010; Abdenna et al., 2018; Asmamaw and Mohammed, 2012; Belay, 2000, 1998, 1997, 1996; Driessen et al., 2001; Elias, 2016; FAO 1984a; Fikre, 2003; Mitku, 1987; Mohammed and Belay, 2008; Mohammed and Solomon, 2012; Mulugeta et al., 2021; Nyssen et al., 2019; Sheleme, 2017; Shimeles et al., 2007; Tolossa, 2015; Zewdie, 2013). However, in some ~~there were~~ cases, ~~where~~ the RSGs' position along the topo-sequence and association with other RSGs require further investigation. ~~, which was not adequately captured and explained in this study.~~ The observed disparities~~This~~ might be attributed to the positional accuracy of legacy point observations, modelling approach, and most importantly the level of detail~~details~~ and scale/resolution of the environmental variables used in this study. We used the currently available coarse resolution national geological map and hence soil parent material might be inadequately represented in the model, which probably resulted in~~to~~ irregular RSGs sequences. For instance, the main driving factors to establish and explain soil-landscape variability in May-Leiba catchment of northern Ethiopia~~,~~ were geology (soil parent material) and different mass movements

(Van de Wauw et al., 2008). These factors led to Cambisols– Vertisols catenas on basalt and Regosols–Cambisols–Vertisols catenas on limestone formations. Similar studies identified parent material strongly determines the soil type (e.g. Vertisol, Luvisol, Cambisol) (Nyssen et al., 2019). In general, in areas where there is complex soil diversity and distribution of soils, one of the most important parameters is to identify parent material including effective techniques to capture and delineate mass movement bodies-, and human-induced soil erosion and deposition areas (Leenars et al., 2020a; Nyssen et al., 2019; Van de Wauw et al., 2008).

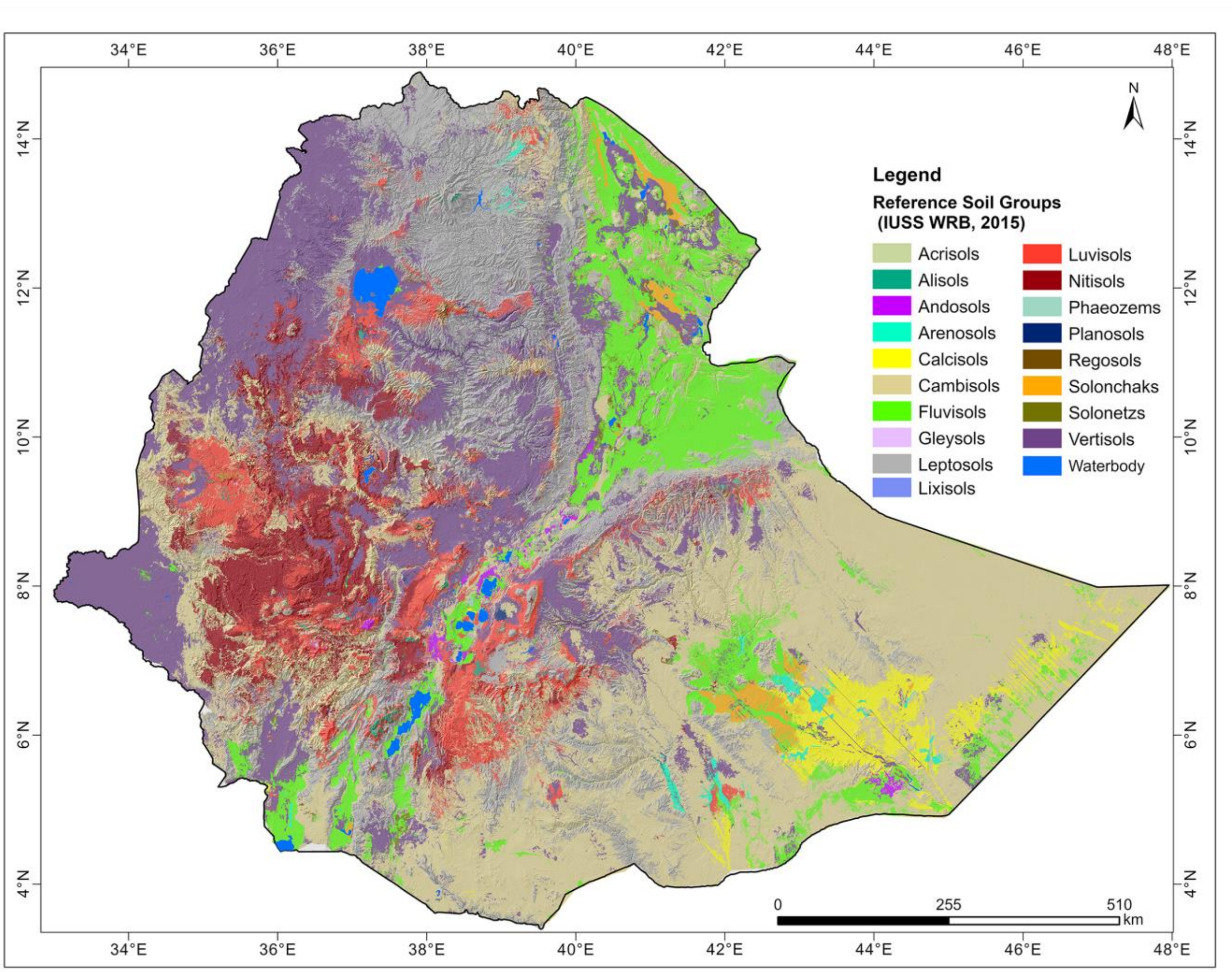

Figure ~~7~~6. Major reference soil groups of Ethiopia (EthioSoilGrid V1.0).

Considering the third position of Cambisols in the order of frequency occurrence of RSGs per point observations (following Vertisols and Luvisols), these soils seem to be over-represented on the map (ranked 1st) apparently at the expense of Vertisols and Luvisols, and to some extent in places of

Leptosols and other RSGs. This might be attributed to the fact that Cambisols create a geographical continuation with Vertisols and/or Luvisols at the lower slopes and Leptosols/ Regosols at the higher slopes, suggesting the presence of some bordering soil qualities in respective transitional zones (Ali et al., 2010; Asmamaw and Mohammed, 2012; Sheleme, 2017; Zewdie, 2013).

The proportion of area mapped as Cambisols (34 %) revealed new insights compared with the information from the most cited spatial soil maps: Cambisols ranked 2nd (21 %), 2nd (16 %), 4th (9 %), and 4th (8 %) as reported by Berhanu (1980), FAO (1984b), FAO (1998), and Soil Grids- Hengl et al (2017), respectively. This might be due to: (i) the number and distribution of profile observations, which is more extensive than the previous ones, (ii) the type and level of details of covariates considered; (iii) variations and rearrangements in the keys for c~~C~~lassification of the RSGs among soil classification versions used in previous studies and misclassification/confusion of Vertisols with Vertic Cambisols, as legacy soil profile data coming from diverse sources.

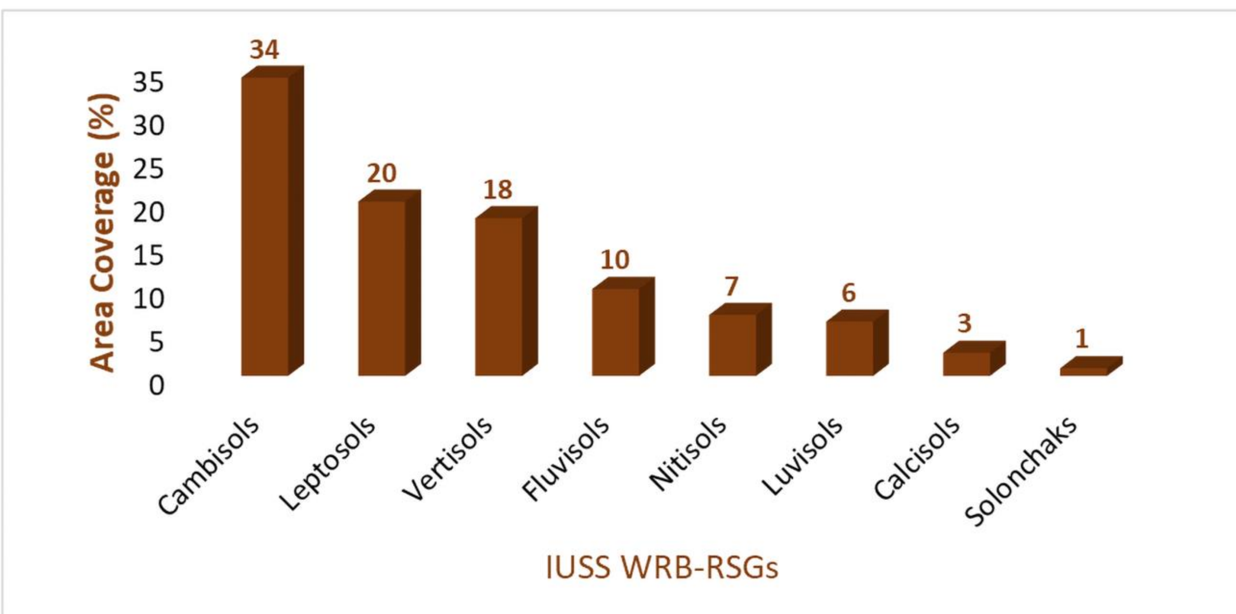

Figure ~~8~~7. The area coverage (in %) for the major WRB RSGs (Note: the remaining 10 RSGs- Arenosols (0.44 %), Regosols (0.35 %), Andosols (0.31 %), Alisols (0.16 %), Solonetzs (0.04 %), Planosols (0.04 %), Acrisols (0.02 %), Lixisols (0.02 %), Phaeozems (0.02 %), and Gleysols (0.01 ~~-~~%) were not plotted because of their relatively small area coverage).

~~Balanced datasets are ideal to allow decision trees algorithms to produce better classification but for datasets with uneven class size, the generated classification model might be biased towards the~~

~~majority class (Hounkpatin et al., 2018; Wadoux et al., 2020). This likely scenario requires further investigation for future similar studies and prediction accuracy enhancement.~~

~~Considering the number and distribution of legacy soil profiles used, the quality monitoring process method was followed to filter dubious soil profiles, and soil classification harmonization protocols were implemented. The study followed a robust modelling framework and generated new insights into the relative area coverage of WRB RSGs in Ethiopia. Further, it provided coherent and up-to-date digital quantitative gridded spatial soil resource information to support the successful implementation of various digital agricultural solutions. The approach used demonstrates the power of data and analytics, and the output is an exemplary use case for similar digital content development efforts in Ethiopia. However, the EthioSoilGrids v1.0 product from this first country-wide RSGs modelling effort requires complementary activities. These include modelling and mapping that should go beyond RSGs and need to include 2^nd level classifications. This will be achieved through modelling and mapping a set of principal and supplementary qualifiers along with RSGs which will enable the integration of taxonomy details and requirements with spatial scale protocols, as outlined in IUSS WRB 2015 classification system.~~

3.3 Expert validation of the soil map

~~Expert knowledge of soil-landscape relations and soil distribution is important in evaluating the predictive soil mapping results and assessing if predicted spatial patterns make sense from a pedological viewpoint (Hengl et al., 2017). The expert validation workshop participants have commended the initiative and the approach that led to the development of the national soil resource map, including the commitment of the technical experts involved and resources invested in it by partner organizations. Overall, they expressed that the map passed meticulous quality-enhancing processes and that its content and accuracy exceeded their expectations.~~

~~All three groups have rated the accuracy of the map at 60 +%; of the 126 polygons, they have expressed no concern for 63 %, minor concern for 23 % and a major concern for 14 % of the polygons. While the minor concerns are mostly related to the accuracy of the relative coverage of the predicted dominant soil types, the major concerns may indicate a possible mismatch between the predicted soil type and the experience of some of the group members of the target area such as an important soil type~~

~~missed out (expected by the experts based on their knowledge of soil coverages and prevailing soil-forming factors in specific areas).~~

~~After the plenary discussions that followed group presentations, participants have suggested that the final version of the map be released for use after additional desk validation and improvements, especially for the polygons with major concerns. It was recommended to re-run the model after revising the data for the polygons where concerns are reported and use additional data obtained during the event. A small team of senior pedologists was formed to support the core group in revising the data from polygons with reported major concerns. Newly acquired data were cleaned and validated before re-running the model to generate the final version of the map.~~

Expert knowledge of soil-landscape relations and soil distribution remains important to evaluate the predictive soil mapping results and assess if predicted spatial patterns make sense from a pedological viewpoint (Hengl et al., 2017; Poggio et al., 2020; Rossiter et al., 2022). An important step in qualitative model evaluation is, therefore, expert assessment whereby professionals with broad experience in soil survey and mapping can evaluate and improve the quality of the soil resource map. This can highlight areas of agreement or concern across the landscape (Rossiter et al., 2022). ~~Accordingly, an expert validation workshop was conducted using the first version of the reference soil groups (RSGs) map. About 45 multi-disciplinary scientists including soil surveyors, pedologists, geologists, and geomorphologists were drawn from national and international research, development, and higher learning institutions to review the draft RSG map in plenary. This was followed by breakout sessions where groups of experts evaluated the map based on their experience and knowledge of soil-landscape relations of the country and examined geographic windows.~~

The expert validation workshop provided useful insights and tangible improvements to the development of the map. While the plenary discussion provided an overview of the approaches followed in developing the map, the ~~facilitated~~ group discussions helped to have an in-depth review of the selected polygons of the map assigned to them. Participants were split into five groups (with 8-10 members each) and have chosen up to 60 polygons representing areas with which at least one of the group members has sufficient information, including data sources. Overall, the groups have checked a total of 126 polygons (Figure 8) which were fairly distributed across the country.

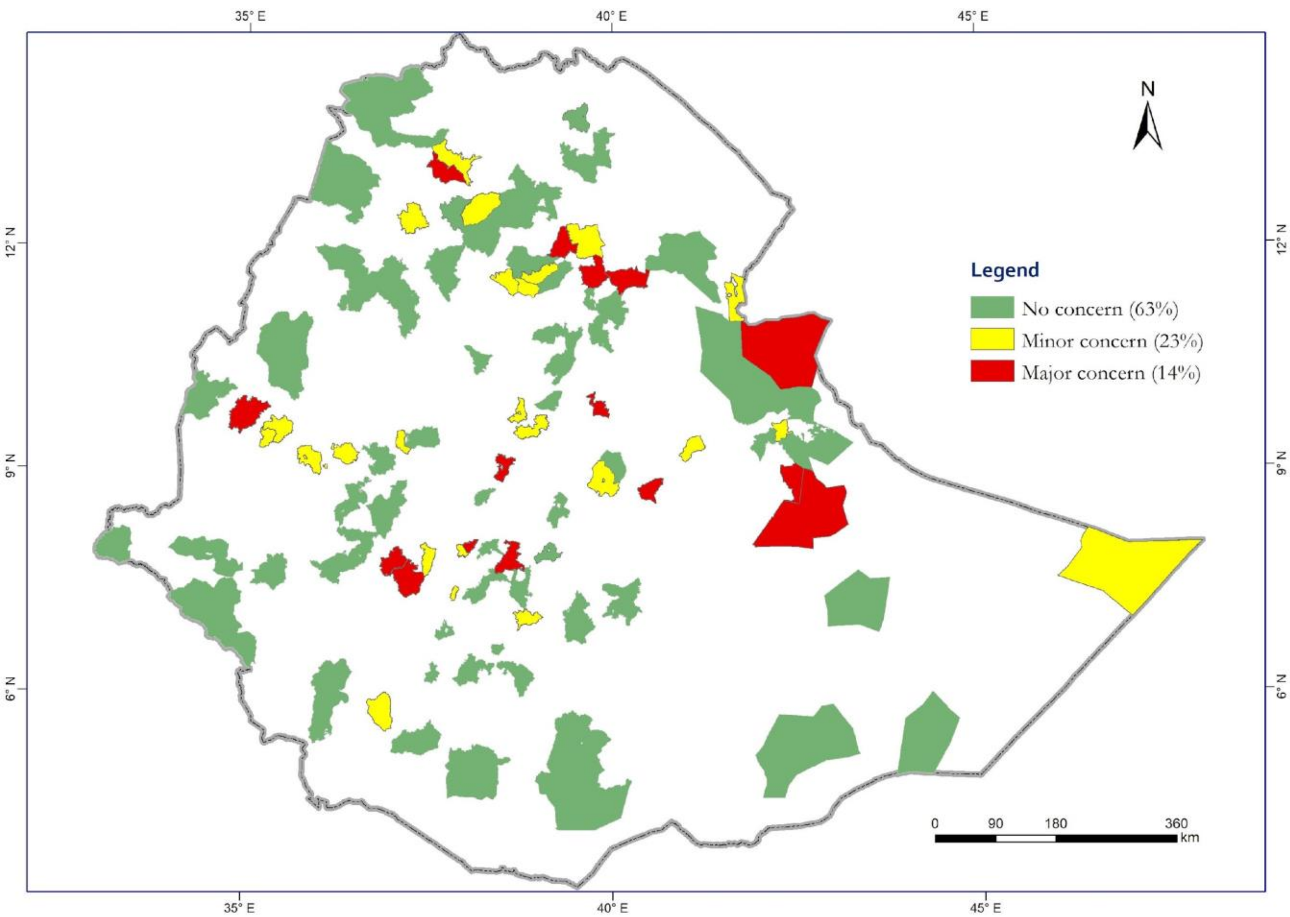

Figure 8. The spatial distribution of districts validated by stakeholders and feedback categories according to the level of concerns raised.

The group members displayed the polygons one by one in a GIS environment and discussed the predicted dominant and associated soil reference soil groups and labelled them in one of three confirmation categories: 1. confirmed with '*no concern'*, 2. confirmed with "*minor concern"*, and 3. confirmed with '*major concern'*. Confirmation with '*no concern'* was made when all members of a group agreed on both the types, relative coverage and patterns of the predicted soils within the polygon. Confirmation with '*minor concern*' was made when all or some of the team members agreed on the predicted soil types within the polygons but did not agree on the order of abundance or the probability occurrence of one or two soils including observed spatial patterns, while confirmation with '*major concern*' was made when all members of the team did not agree on the predicted soil type, or when the presence of another soil type, other than the predicted ones is noted.

All three groups have rated the accuracy of the map at 60 +%; of the 126 polygons, they have expressed no concern for 63 %, minor concern for 23 % and a major concern for 14 % of the polygons. Furthermore, differences in the prevalence of RSGs and patterns of the modeling outputs across different soil forming factor sequences, as well as inferences about which areas of the DSM framework still need work, were identified and elaborated by the expert input-, and presented in the subsequent sections.

3.4 Evaluation of results, limitations and future direction

Up-to-date ~~Up-to-date~~ soil resource spatial information is critically missing at a required scale and extent in Ethiopia. As a result, resource management strategies miss their targets. Furthermore, the absence of such data at a required resolution and extent~~-~~, forced decision support tool developers to pick and use the data they can access and afford. As a result, model outputs appear more site-specific ~~site specific~~ or representation becomes homogenous over the very heterogeneous landscapes that exist in reality. On the other hand, in large areas and complex landscapes~~,~~ such as Ethiopia, it is very difficult to address the demand for reasonably ~~reasonablye~~ accurate and detailed soil-type ~~soil type~~ maps using a conventional approach due to the costs involved, and resources ~~resource~~ and time it requires. For instance, ~~G~~given the vastness of the country and heterogeneous ~~heterogeoneous~~ landscapes~~-~~, a new conventional soil survey mission requires at least ~~about~~ 170,000 profile point observations to map the entire terrestrial land mass of Ethiopia at a scale of 1: 250,000 with at least 1 observations per square centimetre. Moreover, the soil profile data requirement definitely could have been much higher ~~more~~ as we increase the scale of mapping and density of observations. In ~~However, in~~ the present study, machine-learning techniques ~~technique~~ combined with expert input were~~as~~ implemented to produce a country-wide soil resource map of Ethiopia at reasonably~~e~~ higher accuracy, less time and cost than that of conventional methods. In addition, rescue, compilations and standardization of about 14,~~-~~681 geo-referenced legacy soil profiles that can be included in the National Soil Information System (NSIS) of Ethiopia and the World Soil Information Centre ~~world soil information centre~~ will support future national, regional and global DSM efforts. The approach used demonstrates the power of data and analytics to map the soil resources of Ethiopia and the output is an exemplary use case for similar digital content development efforts in Ethiopia and beyond.

Moreover, ~~considering the number and distribution of legacy soil profiles used,~~ in this study thee quality monitoring processes ~~process~~ and methods ~~methodes~~ were ~~as~~ followed to filter dubious soil profiles, and soil classification and harmonization protocols. Then after, ~~were implemented,~~ the study followed a robust modelling framework and generated new insights into the relative area coverage of WRB RSGs of ~~in~~ Ethiopia. In addition, the study provided coherent and up-to-date digital quantitative gridded spatial soil resource information to support the successful implementation of various digital agricultural solutions and decision support tools (DSTs).

The spatially ~~Spatially~~ explicit limitation of the present study is revealed by expert-based ~~expert based~~ qualitative evaluation of spatial patterns across objectively selected geographic windows and prominent contrasting landscapes of Ethiopia. This qualitative assessment indicated areas of concern in terms of how well EthioSoilGrids version 1.0 represents ~~represent~~ soil geography across a mosaic of the country's landscapes. For instance, in the north-eastern lowlands of Ethiopia, mainly along the "Denakil" depression, Fluvisols, Cambisols and Vertisols were found on the map in areas where normally other soil types were expected to occur. In this area, the expected prediction and area coverage of Leptosols has ~~h ave s~~ been probably overshadowed by Fluvisols and Cambisols. Similarly ~~Further~~, in some parts of western Ethiopia landscapes, the prediction of Vertisols overshadows other RSGs which resulted in area coverage underestimation of Fluvisols (along the "Akobo", "Gilo", and "Baro" rivers and their tributaries) and Alisols. Likewise, in the central ~~middle~~ parts of northwestern Ethiopia, the prediction of Nitisols has been overshadowed by Vertisols and Luvisols resulting in probable underestimation of the Nitisols area coverage.

The relatively low ~~poor~~ model performance and some classification errors in some of the ~~, across~~ examined geographic windows (e.g. the Denakil depression ~~depresson~~, along Akobo, Baro, and Gilo rivers and the Somali region) is -, probably due ~~attributed~~ to the paucity of samples from those areas (Figure 4), the inadequacy of the dataset by RSGs, and over-representation of the dataset by some RSGs such as Vertisols, Luvisols, and Cambisols. Balanced datasets are ideal to allow a decision tree~~s~~ algorithms to produce better classification but for datasets with uneven class size, the generated classification model might be biased ~~biassed~~ towards the majority class (Hounkpatin et al., 2018; Wadoux et al., 2020). In addition, uncertainty around ~~/~~quality of included covariates, not considered covariates in the modelling process including management, use of validation methods that do not sufficiently control the effect of clustered samples, and small sample size for some RSGs could have possibly biased modelling results in some ~~across assessed~~ geographic areas.

To~~In summary, to~~ improve the modelling performance,- future studies could explore (1) adding data for under-represented geographic areas, land uses and covariate spaces, (2) opportunities to include other covariates (~~including~~ parent material and management) that could capture the variability of the country heterogeneous landscapes, (3) dimension reduction of covariates (4) use of remedial measures for imbalances in sample sizes, (5) comparing~~e~~ different cross-validation methods, (6) use of an ensemble modelling approach and/or robust modelling technique that accommodates neighbourhood size and connectivity analyses, (7) use of better resolution/quality mask layer to segregate non-soil areas (~~lava/~~rock outcrops, salt flats, sand dunes and water bodies) from mapping areas, and (8) implementation of quantitative and qualitative comparison of national, regional, and global legacy soil maps/soil grids ~~girds~~ with new DSM products in terms of how well DSM products represent soil geography. In addition ~~Moreover~~, future digital soil ~~type~~ mapping strategies~~,~~ in Ethiopia~~,~~ may require ~~needs~~ to consider new soil sampling missions in under-represented areas, adopt standard ~~correct and complete implementation of~~ soil sampling, description guidelines and soil classification systems including ~~complete~~ soil physico-chemical and mineralogical analysis, and combine local soil nomenclature/classification systems with RSGs and develop a map of RSGs with qualifiers. At the moment the under-sampled and under-represented areas are the Somali region, the Denakil and the western and northwestern border areas of Ethiopia (Figure 4). Regardless of these limitations and to the best of our knowledge the EthioSoilGrids v1.0 product ~~we presented here~~ provides the most complete soil information available for Ethiopia.

4 Conclusions

Coherent and up-to-date country-wide digital soil information is essential to support digital agricultural transformation efforts. This study involved collation, cleaning, harmonization, and validation of the legacy soil profile data sets, involving soil scientists with different backgrounds individually and in groups. To develop the 250 m digital soil resource map, a machine learning modelling approach and expert validation were applied to the harmonised soil database and environmental covariates affecting soil-forming processes. Accordingly, about 20,000 soil profile data have been collated, out of which, about 14,681 were used for the modelling and mapping of eighteen RSGs out of the identified twenty-three RSGs. Although unevenly distributed, the legacy soil profile data used in the modelling covered most of the agro-ecologies of the country.

Among the mapped 18 RSGs, the highest number of observed (3,935) profiles represent Vertisols, followed by Luvisols, Cambisols and Leptosols, while Gleysols were represented with the lowest number (63) of profiles. The modelling revealed that MODIS long-term ~~long term~~ reflectance, multiresolution index of valley bottom flatness, land surface temperature, soil moisture, long-term mean annual rainfall, and wetness index of the landscape are ~~is~~ the most important covariates for predicting reference soil groups in Ethiopia.

Our ten-fold spatial cross-validation result showed an overall accuracy of about 56 % with varying accuracy levels among RSGs. The modelling result revealed that seven major soil reference groups including Cambisols (34 %), Leptosols (20 %), Vertisols (18 %), Fluvisols (10 %) Nitisols (7 %), Luvisols (6 %) and Calcisols (3 %) covered nearly 98 % of the total land area of the country, while minor coverage of other reference soil groups (Solonchaks, Arenosols, Regosols, Andosols, Alisols, Solonetzs, Planosols, Acrisols, Lixisols, Phaeozems, and Gleysols) were also detected in some areas. Compared to the existing soil resource map, the coverage of the first three major soil groups has substantially increased which is related to the increased availability of soil profile data covering larger areas of the country, implying that these soils were previously underestimated. Cambisols and Vertisols which together represent nearly half of the total land area are relatively young with inherent fertility, implying the high agricultural potential for the country. However, given their limitations, these and the other soil types require the implementation of suitable land, water, and crop management techniques to sustainably exploit their potential.

The EthioSoilGrids version 1.0 product from this first countrywide RSGs modelling effort requires complementary activities. These include modelling and mapping that should go beyond RSGs and need to include 2nd level classifications including principal and supplementary qualifiers. Furthermore, soil atlas of Ethiopia with ~~providing~~ details of the soil physicochemical properties needs to be prepared together with the map, for which the authors and/or others responsible need to prioritize in their future research endeavours.

~~Given its resolution and quantitative digital representation, the map will have tremendous significance in both agricultural and other land-based development planning while safeguarding the environment. For instance, the accessibility of good quality digital soil data is crucial for developing and using~~

~~decision support tools (DSTs) such as land use and management decisions. However, effective use of the map requires that the associated WRB second-level classification including principal and supplementary qualifiers and soil atlas providing details of the soil physicochemical properties be accessed together with the map, which the authors and others responsible need to prioritize in their future endeavours.~~

Appendix A: Legacy soil profile data distribution

Table A1. Distribution of legacy soil profile data by agroecology zones.

Major agroecological zones~~AJOR_AGRO~~	**AEZ area coverage (%)***	**Profiles o~~O~~bservation (%)****
Warm arid lowland plains	19.76	3.40
Warm moist lowlands	15.12	10.74
Hot arid lowland plains	10.79	2.44
Warm sub-moist lowlands	9.63	6.94
Tepid moist mid highlands	8.05	20.21
Warm sub-humid lowlands	7.11	5.69
Tepid sub-humid mid highlands	6.63	15.26
Tepid sub-moist mid highlands	5.17	12.39
Warm semi-arid lowlands	2.75	3.23
Tepid humid mid highlands	2.65	2.48
Warm humid lowlands	2.29	0.45
Cool moist mid highlands	1.74	4.15
Hot sub-humid lowlands	1.67	0.07
Cool sub-moist mid highlands	1.16	3.00
Cool humid mid highlands	0.82	1.01
Warm per-humid lowlands	0.68	0.01

Major agroecological zones~~AJOR_AGRO~~	**AEZ area coverage (%)***	**Profiles o~~O~~bservation (%)****
Hot moist lowlands	0.59	3.56
Hot sub-moist lowlands	0.56	0.03
Cool sub-humid mid highlands	0.52	1.38
Tepid arid mid highlands	0.43	0.39
Hot semi-arid lowlands	0.40	2.05
Tepid semi-arid mid highlands	0.19	0.67
Cold moist sub-afro-alpine to afro-alpine	0.07	0.16
Cold sub-moist mid highlands	0.07	0.04
Cold sub-humid sub-afro-alpine to afro-alpine	0.06	0.03
Cold humid sub-afro-alpine to afro-alpine	0.06	0.01
Very cold humid sub-afro-alpine	0.04	0.02
Very cold sub-moist mid highlands	0.02	0.02
Very cold moist sub-afro-alpine to afro-alpine	0.01V	0.03
Hot per-humid lowlands	0.01	0.15
Tepid perhumid mid highland	0.13	0
Very cold sub-humid sub-afro alpine to afro-alpine	0.03	0

Note: *= total area of Ethiopia 1.14mln km^2 ; **=total number of profiles 14,681

Appendix B: Environmental covariates

Table B1. List, description, spatial and temporal extent, and source of covariates used in modelling the reference soil groups.

Categories	Covariates	Descriptions	Spatial resolution	Temporal resolution	Source
Climate	prep	Precipitation	4 km	1981 - 2016	ENACTS (Dinku et al.,2014)
	prep_sd	The standard deviation of precipitation	4 km	1981 - 2016	Derived from ENACTS (Dinku et al.,2014)
	tmax	Maximum Temperature	4 km	1983 - 2016	ENACTS (Dinku et al.,2014)
	tmin	Minimum Temperature	4 km	1983 - 2016	ENACTS (Dinku et al.,2014)
	trange	Temperature range	4 km	1983 - 2016	ENACTS (Dinku et al.,2014)
	tav_sd	Standard deviation of average temperature	4 km	1983 - 2016	Derived from ENACTS (Dinku et al.,2014)
	pet	Potential evapotranspiration	4 km	1981 - 2016	Derived from ENACTS (Dinku et al.,2014) using Modified Penman method
	lstd	Land surface temperature- Day (Aqua MODIS- MYD11A2 , time series monthly average)	1000 m	2002-2018	AfSIS [a]
	lstn	Land surface temperature-Night (Aqua MODIS- MYD11A2 , time series monthly average)	1000 m	2002-2018	AfSIS
	soil_moist	Soil Moisture (Derived from one-dimensional soil water balance)	4 km	1981 - 2016	Ethiopian Digital AgroClimate Advisory Platform (EDACaP)
	soil_temp	Soil temperature	30 km	1979 - 2019	ERA 5-Reanalysis ECMWF data [b]
Topography	DEM	Digital elevation model (Elevation)	90 m	-	SRTM- DEM (Vågen, 2010)

Categories	Covariates	Descriptions	Spatial resolution	Temporal resolution	Source
	twi	Topographic wetness Index	90 m	-	SAGA GIS-based SRTM-DEM derivative
	aspect	Topographic Aspect	90 m	-	SAGA GIS-based SRTM-DEM derivative
	curv	Topographic Curvature	90 m	-	SAGA GIS-based SRTM-DEM derivative
	conv	Topographic convergence index	90 m	-	SAGA GIS-based SRTM-DEM derivative
	ls	Slope Length and Steepness factor (ls_factor)	90 m	-	SAGA GIS-based SRTM-DEM derivative
	morph	Terrain Morphometry	90 m	-	SAGA GIS-based SRTM-DEM derivative
	mrvbf	Multiresolution index of valley bottom flatness	90 m	-	SAGA GIS-based SRTM-DEM derivative
	slope	Slope class (%)	90 m	-	SAGA GIS-based SRTM-DEM derivative
Vegetation	ndvi	Normalised Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) (MODIS- MODIS MOD13Q1, time series monthly average)	250 m	2000-2021	AfSIS [a]
	evi	Enhanced Vegetation Index (EVI) (MODIS- MODIS MOD13Q1, time series monthly average)	250 m	2000-2021	AfSIS
	lulc	Land use/ landcover	30 m	2010	Water and Land Resource Centre-Addis Ababa University (WLRC-AAU, 2010)
parent material	lithology	Geology/parent material	1:2,000,000	1996	The Ethiopian Geological Survey (Tefera et al.,1996)
MODIS spectral refelectance	ref1	Red band (MODIS- MODIS MOD13Q1, time series monthly average)	250 m	2000 – 2018	AfSIS [a]
	ref2	Near-Infrared (MODIS- MODIS MOD13Q1, time series monthly average)	250 m	2000 – 2018	AfSIS

Categories	Covariates	Descriptions	Spatial resolution	Temporal resolution	Source
	ref7	Mid-Infrared (MODIS- MODIS MOD13Q1, time series monthly average)	250 m	2000 – 2018	AfSIS

Appendix C: Probability of occurrence of reference soil groups

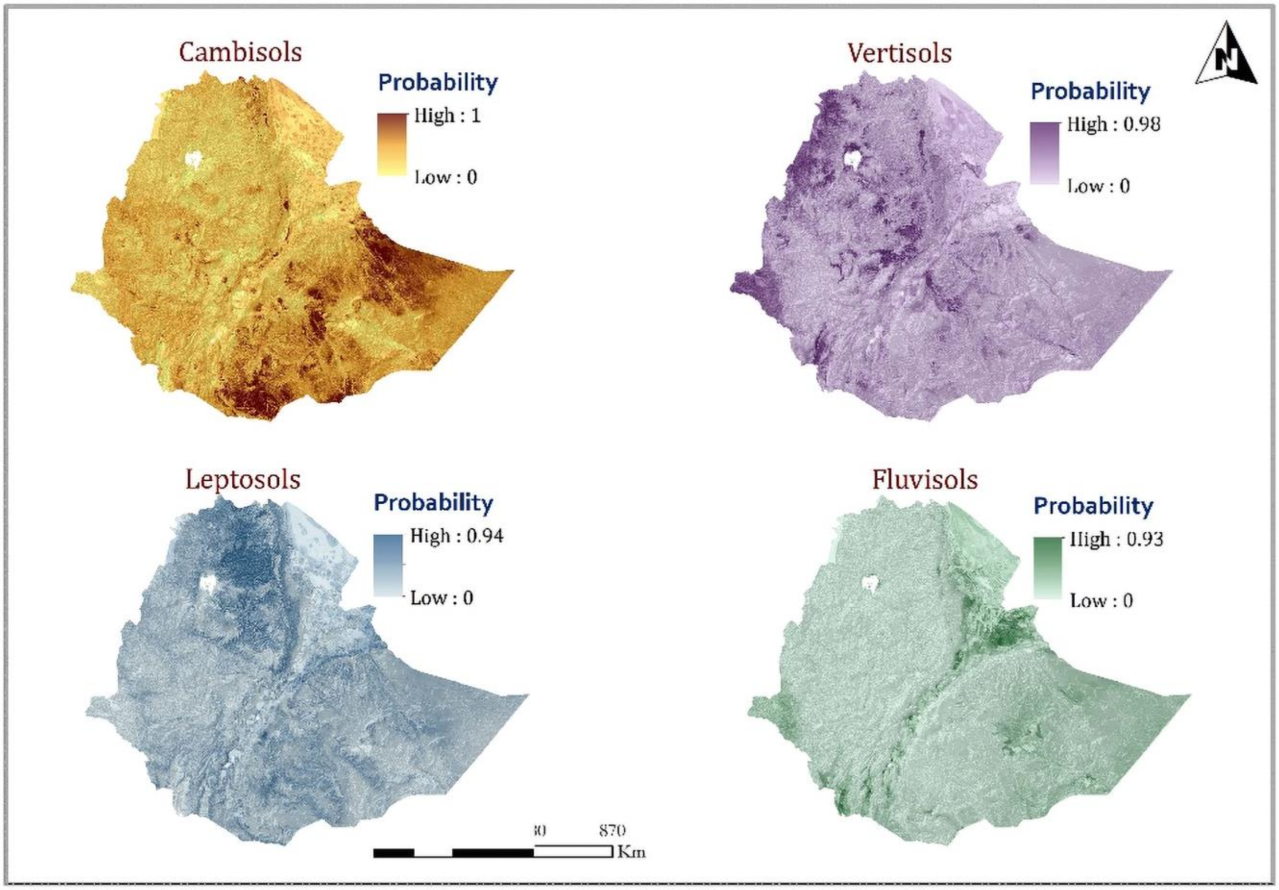

Figure C1. Occurrence probability maps of Cambisols, Leptosols, Vertisols, and Fluvisols.

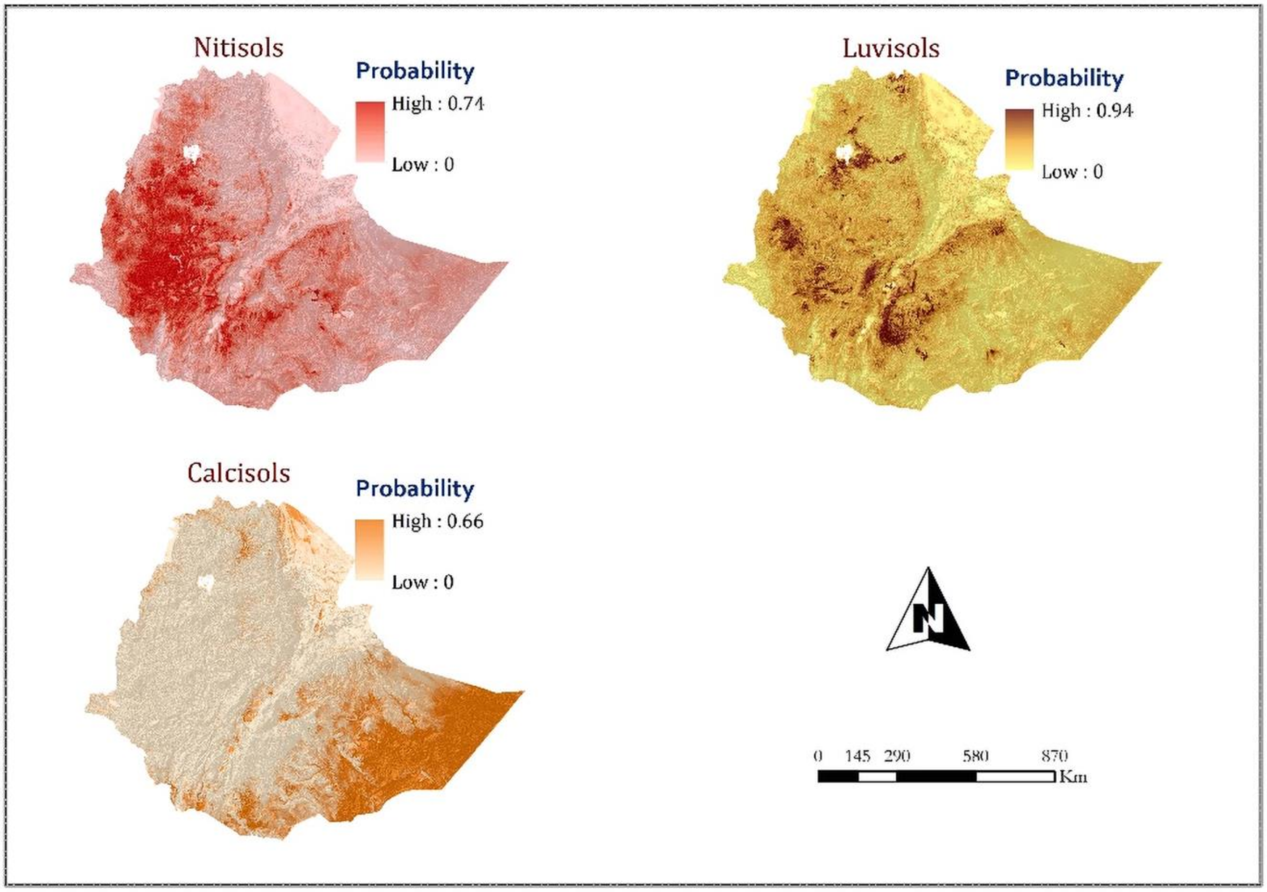

Figure C2. Occurrence probability maps of Nitisols, Luvisols, and Calcisols.

Data availability.

Full data will be available upon request based on the CoW guideline (CoW, 2020; https://ethioagridata.com) and the MoA "Soil and Agronomy Data Management, Use and Sharing" directive No. 974/2023 Ethiopia (https://nsis.moa.gov.et/).

~~Data will be available upon request based on the CoW guideline.~~

Author contributions. AA, TE, KG, WA, and LT conceived and designed the study, perform the analysis, and wrote the first draft, with substantial input and feedback from all authors. EM, TM, NH, AY, AM, TA, FW, AL, NT, AA, SG, YA, and BA, contributed to input data preparation, data encoding, and harmonization. Legacy data validation and review of subsequent versions of the paper were performed by MH, WH, AA, DT, GB, MG, SB, MA, AR, YGS, ST, DA, YW, DB, EZ, SC, and EE.

Competing interests. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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The leadership of the Natural Resource Development Sector and Soil Resource Information and Mapping Directorate of the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) have played a crucial role. These includes assigning experts from the Ministry and other organizations who worked on collating, encoding, harmonizing, processing the soil survey legacy data, and modelling and prediction of Reference Soil Groups using robust machine learning algorithms and high performance computing servers are the foundation for the soil resource map. Various institutions, as well as the late and present soil surveyors and pedologists, deserve special recognition for their contributions to the generation and sharing of soil profile data. We owe a debt of gratitude to ISRIC and the bilateral Ethio-The Netherlands projects (cascape and BENEFIT-REALISE) funded by the Directorate-General for International Cooperation (DGIS) of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Netherlands Embassy in Ethiopia, which have been crucial in providing capacity building to the MoA, and national soil and geospatial experts. Much thanks are due to Professor Eyasu Elias, Arie van Kekem, Dr Tewodros Tefera, Dr Mulugeta Diro, Johan Leenaars, Bas Kempen, Stephan Mantel, and Maria Ruiperez Gonzalez who have been organizing and providing training on soil classifications and digital soil mapping to the MoA, and national soil and geospatial experts, over the Ethio-The Netherlands bilateral projects' period

~~The leadership of the Natural Resource Development Sector and Soil Resource Information and Mapping Directorate of the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) have played a crucial role including assigning experts from the Ministry and other organizations who worked on collating, encoding, harmonizing, and processing the soil survey legacy data are the foundation for the soil resource map. Various institutions, as well as the late and present soil surveyors and pedologists, deserve special recognition for their contributions to the generation and sharing of soil profile data.~~ The senior pedologists and soil surveyors who provided invaluable support to check and harmonize thousands of soil profiles and laboratory results are sincerely appreciated.They worked very hard with positive energy for which we are very grateful. In addition, the same group of experts and additional ones who supported the validation of the preliminary soil resource map deserve credit for their commitment to contributing their experiences. We thank Dr Degefe Tebebe , Dr Sileshi Gudeta, and Neil Munro for supporting in the extraction of climate covariates , providing critical technical support , and comments that helped improve the paper. Our sincere appreciation also goes to the continued and persistent support of GIZ-Ethiopia mainly through the project- Supporting Soil Health Interventions in Ethiopia (SSHI), which supported and facilitated the activities of the CoW. The Alliance of Bioversity and CIAT is highly acknowledged for coordinating CoW and its efforts and supporting the implementation of activities that are of high national importance. We would also like to sincerely thank the Excellence in Agronomy (EiA) CGIAR Initiative, which has brought huge contributions to this project in terms of funding and building skill of the various teams. The Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) and Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS) programs of the CGIAR also provided support in various forms. Recently, our work is benefiting from the Accelerating Impacts of CGIAR Climate Research in Africa (AICCRA) project supported by the World Bank in terms of data, analytics, and resources to support data linkage and integration.

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