

Terms of Reference Associated Partnership Scheme European Marine Observation and Data Network

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1 Introduction

In 2016 the EMODnet Steering Committee agreed to establish a new membership category - Associated Partners – in response to the increasing number of requests from organisations outside of the funded partnerships, particularly from the private sector, for closer interaction and mutually beneficial partnership with EMODnet in a flexible and transparent way. EMODnet Associated Partners (AP) are organisations, institutes or other legal entities that can demonstrate concrete examples of cooperation with EMODnet and/or motivation for a closer dialogue with EMODnet, including for data sharing and provision, data and data product use, exchange of ocean data best practices, etc.

This document aims presents the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the EMODnet Associated Partnership Scheme. It aims to inform interested organisations about the general structure and operation of EMODnet as well as the benefits, conditions and application procedure for the EMODnet AP Scheme. It has been updated in April 2024 to reflect the evolving landscape of marine and maritime stakeholders and to further highlight the mutual benefits of the EMODnet AP Scheme for wider stakeholders and for EMODnet.

2 Background

The **European Marine Observation and Data Network (EMODnet)** is a long-term initiative from the European Commission Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE). It consists of a network of organisations working together to assemble marine data, data products and metadata from diverse sources within Europe in a uniform way, and make these available via the internet.

EMODnet was initiated in response to the EU Green Paper in preparation of the EU Integrated Maritime Policy launched in June 2006. The **main purpose** of EMODnet is to unlock fragmented and hidden marine data resources and to make these available to individuals and organisations without restriction, except in special cases. The **primary motivation** for EMODnet is to stimulate investment in sustainable coastal and offshore activities through improved access to quality-assured, standardised and harmonised marine data. More broadly, the ultimate aim has always been to increase productivity in all tasks involving marine data gathering and management, to promote innovation and to reduce uncertainty about the behaviour of the sea. EMODnet has since been promoted as an official EC Marine data service for integrated, harmonised and standardised *in situ* marine data that are key to marine knowledge for all stakeholders. This includes reducing the risks and uncertainty associated with private and public marine and maritime operations at sea, investments in the blue economy, validating other ocean observation data e.g. from satellites, and providing high quality, integrated and high-resolution data that can be used for a knowledge-driven assessment, management and sustainable use of the marine environment, and for driving forward new knowledge through research and innovation.

The development of EMODnet is a dynamic process so new data, data products, services and functionality are continuously improved to make the service more fit for purpose and user friendly with the help of users and stakeholders. EMODnet development has been organised in three major phases:

- Phase I (2009-2013) developed a prototype (so called ur-EMODnet) with coverage of a limited selection of sea-basins, parameters and data products at low resolution;
- Phase II (2013-2016) works towards an operational service with full coverage of all European sea-basins, a wider selection of parameters and medium resolution data products;
- Phase III (2015-2020) delivered a seamless multi-resolution digital map of the entire seabed of European waters providing highest resolution possible in areas that have been surveyed, including topography, geology, habitats and ecosystems; accompanied by timely information on physical, chemical and biological state of the overlying water column as well as oceanographic forecasts.

In 2024, EMODnet is an operational marine data service of EC DG MARE with a unified Portal (emodnet.ec.europa.eu), providing a gateway to data and data products spanning seven thematic areas, namely: bathymetry, geology, physics, chemistry, biology, seabed habitats and human activities which ensure EMODnet offers high quality, open and FAIR data and data products for the marine environment and human activities provided by data and web services to search, visualise and retrieve EMODnet's pan-European data layers already used by thousands of users across Europe and beyond.

This builds on the substantial work achieved by the EMODnet network to centralise its thematic services, to further enhance the user-friendliness and interoperability towards making all data and data products available through a centralised map viewer. Following the centralisation work that was completed in January 2023, the latest Phase (2023-2025) which focuses on maintaining and improving the EMODnet webservices EMODnet continues to develop its data infrastructure to accommodate for the publication of new types of data and to better engage EMODnet stakeholders as well as create products that can best address user needs, supporting EU policy, the Blue Economy, research and innovation and more.

To make this happen, since its onset, EMODnet has been developed based on a set of core principles:

- Collect data once and use them many times;
- Develop data standards across disciplines as well as within them;
- Process and validate data at different scales: regional, basin and pan-European;
- Build on existing efforts where data communities have already organised themselves;
- Put the user first when developing priorities and taking decisions;
- Provide statements on data ownership, accuracy and precision;
- Sustainable funding at a European level to maximise benefit from the efforts of individual Member States;
- Free and unrestricted access to data and data products.

Since its inception EMODnet has been developed by different consortia of contractual partner organisations through a series of projects. The EMODnet partnership has expanded drastically over the last few years as it has evolved from a set of proof of concept projects to a fully operational service. In the first development phase (2009-2013), EMODnet consisted of 59 partners organisations building on data resources from many more. During the second and third EMODnet development Phases (2013-2016 and 2017-2021), the partners have grown to more than 120.

The EMODnet partnership is made possible through collaborations with many key marine organisations, research infrastructures, marine data infrastructures, aggregators and networks at national, regional and European levels (e.g. national data centres, SeaDataNet, EurOBIS, EuroGOOS, Rooses, etc.). In addition, EMODnet has a strong and evolving collaboration with the Copernicus Marine Service (CMEMS), which focuses predominantly on satellite-derived ocean observations, with ICES¹ and international initiatives including IODE², GEO³ (including GEO Blue Planet⁴).

Individuals and organisations are encouraged to contribute data on a voluntary basis to ensure that the system remains current and expands continuously. Data providers are acknowledged and clearly associated with the datasets, e.g. via metadata, but are not necessarily EMODnet partners. Data or portal users have also contributed significantly in the development process, often on a voluntary basis, providing feedback and testing the tools and systems allowing these to be improved over time.

¹ <https://www.ices.dk/>

² <https://www.iode.org/>

³ <https://earthobservations.org/>

⁴ <https://geoblueplanet.org/>

3 EMODnet structure and governance

3.1 General structure and main functions

The EMOD-network is composed of the following main groups (see Figure 1):

- European Commission Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE);
- EMODnet Secretariat;
- The European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA);
- EMODnet Contractual Partners (project coordinators, project partners, project subcontractors);
- EMODnet Associated Partners.

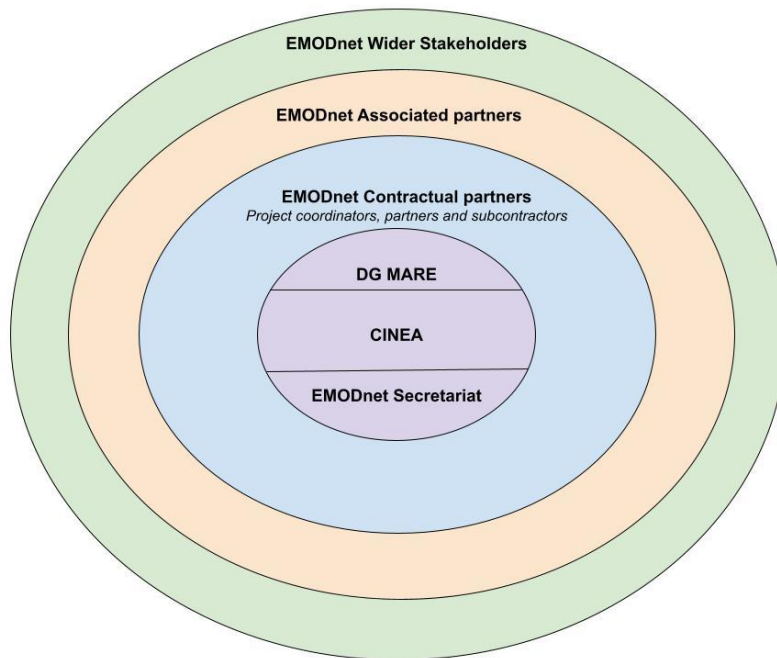


Figure 1. Composition of the EMODnet partnership

The European Commission's Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE) is the initiator, funder and overall manager of the EMODnet initiative. The EMODnet Secretariat implements the coordination and communication of EMODnet activities, on behalf of DG MARE. The Secretariat is responsible for the day to day management of the network, coordinating joint activities, monitoring progress, production of communication resources, dissemination of results to wider community of interested stakeholders, and development of strategic partnerships, at national, regional, European and International levels. Since 2015, CINEA is the administrative and contractual manager of all new EMODnet contracts on behalf of DG MARE. Contractual partners perform tasks to develop and maintain EMODnet according to a service contract with DGMARE/CINEA.

An EMODnet Steering Committee consisting of EMODnet thematic Coordinators, the EMODnet Secretariat, and EC representatives (e.g from DG MARE, DG Defis and DG RTD) meets at least twice a year to discuss progress, identify issues of common concern and guide the development of the EMODnet Portal. A European Commission Marine Knowledge Expert Group⁵ (MKEG) serves as an external advisory and user Group that evaluates progress, provide feedback and guide the overall developments. It is composed of external users from representative organisations belonging to the main EMODnet user communities (private sector, public authorities, scientific community, civil society).

⁵ <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/maritimeforum/en/node/4129>

3.2 Contractual partners

EMODnet is developed through a series of projects granted following calls for tender, launched by the EC, DG MARE, primarily for contracts for seven thematic data assembly activities, and a data ingestion activity. A contractual partner is a member of a consortium responding to such an EMODnet call for tender and granted a contract (or subcontract) to execute the work. Contractual partners sign a contract with the EC, perform tasks according to a proposal and receive financial compensation in return; they attend annual meetings, deliver on specific tasks, provide regular reports, etc.

3.3 EMODnet Associated Partners

Aims and objectives of the Associated Partnership

The aim of the EMODnet Associated Partnership is to reduce potential barriers for new members to join the network so that EMODnet becomes more open, inclusive and representative of the full spectrum of marine data users, providers and other stakeholders. It allows any organisation with a clear interest and willingness to contribute to EMODnet to become more closely associated with the network as a recognised partner of the network, without heavy contractual arrangements and obligations. The ultimate aim is to strengthen the network and allow interested organisations to benefit fully from the network and its activities.

What does Associated Partnership entail?

- An associated partner is formally recognised as a partner of the EMOD-network without receiving funding, without the need to be a contractual partner in one of the projects and without the need to adhere to associated contractual obligations;
- Light and flexible status without complicated application or exit procedure;
- Engagement to promote EMODnet, including some level of support of, and full identification with, the EMODnet goals, objectives and principles; some indication that the organisation is contributing to EMODnet (or is willing to do so) is necessary;
- Inclusion in first line communication in order to be more closely informed about EMODnet, with opportunities to collaborate and participate in EMODnet activities and events from an early stage.

Benefits of Associated Partner membership

There are a number of benefits of becoming an EMODnet Associated Partner (see below and Figure 2):

- Gain access to a unique forum for collaboration, networking and exploring new opportunities with regular invitations to interact with other partner during EMODnet activities (workshops, conferences, etc.);
- For SME's and larger private companies, it may contribute to establishing corporate responsibility and improve the image of the company, as it indicates subscription to the core principles of EMODnet, including adherence to good data management practices and open sharing of data following the FAIR principles;
- Being part of a growing network of key public and private organisations, learning from others and enjoying the huge benefits of working together to address some of the common marine data and sharing challenges which are linked to the management of the growing number and intensity of activities (and data collection) taking place at sea;
- Have a say in the development of future EMODnet products and services and the refinement of existing ones towards actual user needs e.g., blue economy needs and requirements;
- Strengthened visibility of the AP organisation to EMODnet's extensive user community e.g., the organisation's logo and AP membership promoted via the EMODnet Portal, promotional materials, social media etc.);
- Access to marine data experts across the EMOD-network to explore options to share infrastructures or processes to save costs and share benefits, and for dialogue on ocean best practices;

- Be kept informed with first-hand information about global and pan-European marine data landscape, policy developments and funding opportunities;



Figure 2. EMODnet Associated Partnership benefits

Associated Partnership Criteria

EMODnet Associated Partnership is open and inclusive to all stakeholders from the marine, maritime and related sectors, including both public and private organizations, and including traditional and emerging blue economy sectors.

On application, EMODnet APs should demonstrate willingness to:

- strengthen cooperation with EMODnet, e.g., in terms of data sharing and provision, using EMODnet data, data products, or expert advice e.g. in best practices and related services/research.
- actively support and implement the core principles of EMODnet and to act as an ambassador for EMODnet, promoting it on their organisation website and to their stakeholder networks;
- actively contribute to EMODnet requests for community feedback on EMODnet user needs and requirements e.g. online surveys, targeted assessments;
- actively take part, where possible and relevant, in EMODnet events e.g. Open Conference, Open Sea Lab, with willingness to explore opportunities for joint activities e.g. demonstrations, training etc.

Associated Partners do not have to be based in Europe, but must be able to demonstrate some link with Europe (e.g. activities in Europe, collaborations with European organisations, collecting/holding data from European seas, etc). Both individual organizations, associations and/or networks can apply.

As of April 2024, it is mandated that any organization elevated to the status of a full partner within EMODnet must forfeit its Associated Partnership designation.

Application procedure

Any organization wishing to become an EMODnet AP can do so by sending a letter of intent, addressed to the Head of the EMODnet Secretariat and sent by email to secretariat@emodnet.eu. This should describe the organization, explain why the organization wishes to become a member and indicating how it has/will contribute(d). An application can also be made by an existing partner for another organisation, with their agreement. The EMODnet Secretariat will acknowledge receipt of the expression of interest, and if the organization is deemed eligible it will make a recommendation to EC DG MARE and the EMODnet Steering Committee, for consideration and approval. This can be done at 6-monthly SC meetings, or remotely by email. The organisation will be informed about the outcome as soon as possible and within 6 weeks following the receipt of the application. If the application is accepted, new Associated Partners will be added to the list of partners with logo on the EMODnet Portal. The organisation will also be expected to display the EMODnet logo on their website indicating that they are a partner. Associated partnership is always granted for a period of one year and automatically renewed until one of the parties (the Secretariat/DG MARE and/or the partner organisation) decides to end the membership.

There is no partnership fee, although voluntary in-kind contributions are always very welcome.

The EMODnet Portal is regularly updated with the latest information on Associated Partnership Scheme⁶ and the current membership⁷.

⁶ <https://emodnet.ec.europa.eu/en/emodnet-associated-partners>

⁷ <https://emodnet.ec.europa.eu/en/associated-partner-organisations>