13. Land

Europe is the third most densely populated area of the world’s major regions and arguably its land is the most intensely used. In recent decades the rise of the service economy and the need for food security, together with vastly improved standards of living, changes in societal norms and values, increased personal mobility and increasing demands for housing, have led to widespread conflicts over the use of land. Major ongoing pressures include urban sprawl and the expansion of transport infrastructure to accommodate rising levels of traffic. These have resulted in the sealing of soil surfaces, the fragmentation of habitats and the loss or disturbance of natural areas.

There is a wide range of competing and diverse uses for land in Europe and these are subject to different types and levels of pressure. While the northern, southern, mountainous and some coastal parts of Europe are dominated by natural and semi-natural habitats, in western and central Europe land is largely dominated by urban development and large-scale intensive agriculture and there are no longer any pristine natural areas. Most of the natural habitats are degraded or disturbed as a result of the proximity of human activity.

Several EU-wide policies aim to exert an influence on the pattern of land use in Europe. These include the common agricultural policy, the structural funds and the policies behind the trans-European networks (TENs) and involve substantial budget expenditure. Since responsibility for land-use planning rests with individual Member States, it has proved difficult to ensure a coherent and sustainable approach to the application of these policies across Europe. Moreover, data relating to land use remain inconsistent. Global Monitoring for Environment and Security (GMES), a joint initiative between the European Space Agency and the European Commission, was launched in 2001 and aims to improve the availability of the territorial dimension of environmental data. The European Commission has also started to develop an Infrastructure for Spatial Information in Europe (INSPIRE).

The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), an EU inter-government initiative in 1997, was a major breakthrough for integrated land-use planning in Europe. However, the EU, while respecting the subsidiarity principle, only recently recognised the need for improved policy coherence and a more sustainable approach to land issues. The sixth environmental action programme (6EAP) and the EU sustainable development strategy, for example, recognise the need for improved policy coherence and a more sustainable approach to land-use planning. The 6EAP includes a commitment to ‘promoting best practice with respect to sustainable land use planning’ while improved policy coherence is a central theme of the sustainable development strategy. A major challenge for the EU will be to achieve coherence across existing policies with a land-use dimension and also to take into account new initiatives such as the European urban strategy (under development) and the draft Communication on Soil Protection (CEC, 2001).
13.1. Land take due to urban development

Urban sprawl is increasing, but there are insufficient data available to enable an assessment of the extent to which the re-use of previously developed land is reducing pressures for development on virgin land.

Quality of information

☆☆☆

http://www.morland.sai.jrc.it
http://www.sustainable-cities.org/
The population of Europe has increased steadily over the past 40 years or so from 315 million in 1960 to 375 million in 1999. Urban populations have increased at twice the overall rate of growth (40 % rather than 20 %). Although population growth in some urban areas has now stabilised, urban development around the periphery of principal urban centres continues, demonstrating a de-centralisation of urban land uses. The increased importance of road transport has stimulated the development of new transport infrastructure and, in particular, increased land take for road development (an average 10 ha of land take per day for new highways during the 1990s).

Rising standards of living and increased distances between residential areas and places of employment have contributed to an increase in traffic and the infrastructure needed to accommodate it. At the same time, liberalisation of the EU internal market and globalisation of the economy, and the more complex production and trading networks that they give rise to, have driven the growth in freight transport movements, mainly by road.

In addition, recent decades have witnessed the abandonment of developed land within many cities as a result of industrial decline. This trend, coupled with migration from rural to urban areas over the same period, has led to increased urban expansion, often at the expense of virgin land and green areas.

In Germany, for example, total land take for built-up areas, including transport infrastructure, increased from 350 m² per person in 1950 to 508 m² per person in 1999 and the average area for living increased from 15 m² per person in the 1950 to 38 m² per person in 1995 (Dosch and Beckmann, 2000). These increases may be attributed to changes in values and behaviour as well as population growth. The pattern of low-density expansion of large urban areas into surrounding agricultural and natural areas is defined as urban sprawl, and is illustrated below by the three examples in rural, coastal and mountain environments.

A predominant feature of planning policies for major conurbations in many countries is the concentric evolution of development. Examples of this phenomenon can be seen in London and Paris, where many key services and employment opportunities attract millions of long-distance commuters every day, adding to already high pressures in these areas. A proposal under the European Spatial Development Perspective is to encourage a polycentric evolution of development, whereby dispersed urban areas in a country would be connected to each other to help dissipate pressures across a wider area and revive neglected regions, in particular rural areas.

Sustainable land use in urban areas can be encouraged through targeting development at previously developed sites (‘brownfield’ land) and maintaining and enhancing areas of green space (i.e. the efficient use of land in cities). The Sustainable Cities projects supported by the EU aim at pooling experience and providing guidance to local authorities on achieving sustainable urban development. This initiative, together with Local Agenda 21 initiatives and the new European Urban Strategy (under development), have considerable potential for overlap and the challenge lies in ensuring that a coherent and streamlined approach is developed in order that common objectives are realised and budgets efficiently allocated.