

Sustainable Land Use – A Central Challenge for Society

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Sustainable Land Use – A Central Challenge for Society

With the global population predicted to grow to 9 billion by 2050¹, it is more crucial than ever that the world's remaining resources are managed in a sustainable way. Human societies must provide food for this rapidly growing world population, whilst changing dietary demands combined with increasing pressures on agricultural land aggravate this challenge. Societies must also deal with the consequences of climate change and diminishing water supplies, and manage and conserve biodiversity. Universal access to food and shelter is a basic human right, but soil depletion and urban sprawl needs to be controlled in order to safeguard the ecosystems services which underpin agricultural productivity and social welfare. Last but not least, the risks of global conflicts, confrontations and uncontrolled migration must be reduced, meaning that poverty, environmental injustice and inequality must be all addressed.

In the context of these global challenges, there are also significant issues at the European level. First of all, the EU needs to find a balanced approach in meeting the global challenges of food, energy, decent work and environmental security while maintaining a diverse and resilient pattern of extensive and intensive land-use systems. Internal food-security as well as creating socially and economically viable rural areas (with respect to all relevant international standards among which those of the ILO) have to be addressed. The EU has also set a target to "*halt the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services in the EU by 2020, restore them in so far as feasible, while stepping up the EU contribution to averting global biodiversity loss*".²

Agriculture, forestry and the management of semi-natural habitats such as wetlands and forests will all play important roles in mitigating climate change, but farming, forestry and wildlife will also need to adapt to a changing climate. Meeting the EU 2020 target for renewables may lead to further competition for land. The proportion of urbanized land continues to rise, but, at the same time, the move to a low-carbon economy will create both challenges and opportunities for more sustainable land use.

Ensuring sustainable land use is also a challenge for all EU Member-states, and within these, for each region, municipality and for the individual owners and users of land. In the wealthier and more urbanized areas, the allocation of land either to built infrastructure or to maintain ecosystem functioning represents a fundamental trade-off, the long term implications of which need to be addressed in order to avoid the kinds of damage (such as increased flood risk) that will cost us far more to put right in the longer term.³ In the most competitive rural areas, traditional land use systems have largely been replaced by more intensified and simplified land use patterns and mono-cultural cropping patterns which tend to produce significantly fewer public goods. In more marginal areas, the challenge is how to best to support and

retain less intensive land use uses (and their synergies with functioning ecosystems and landscapes) against a background of land abandonment mixed with progressive intensification, both of which can result in undesirable social change.

In these circumstances, the term “sustainable land use” only has real meaning when considered across all relevant scales – from that of individual land owners, users and workers, through to the level of landscapes and watersheds and then on through municipalities, regions and states to the global context. Specific land uses should not be examined in isolation, but as part of combinations of land uses (or “mosaics”) related to human needs, together with man-made infrastructures and the green infrastructure necessary to secure functioning ecosystems. Sustainable land use can then be seen as a dynamic state of individual land mosaics serving to meet current local and global needs while retaining the potential to meet future requirements.⁴

Sustainable land use is firstly an economic challenge: certain needs can only be fulfilled with a limited amount of means – this implies a prioritization and division of tasks, which, in most societies are generally delivered by markets.

However, as markets exhibit systematic failure in relation to the supply of public goods such as ecosystem services, the standard free market approach is not appropriate. These market failures, combined with equity issues and the food, energy and ecological security risks arising from non-sustainable land use, shape, as a second aspect of the challenge, the policy agenda and frame our efforts to promote a more sustainable approach.

It is rarely an easy task to clearly allocate such tasks over the relevant scales; to achieve the necessary synergies and co-ordination; to ensure that the relevant policy choices are democratically made; and to implement these choices effectively and efficiently. Sustainable land use therefore raises, thirdly, major issues of governance as well as technical challenges.

EEAC notes:

1. That sustainable land use depends on well-functioning governance frameworks and adequate policies at all levels. These enable land owners and land users, including local communities, to manage their land sustainably and to contribute to the delivery of public goods and services at local level;
2. That many EU environmental action programs, directives and regulations are in accord with the concept of sustainable land use, but that there is still room for major improvements in order to contribute to a spatial structure which helps to promote the delivery of public goods and services;
3. That, in addition to environmental policy, many other EU policies have implications for sustainable land use, for example through the use of both regulation and subsidies. Considerable scope exists for improving the integration of sustainability and public goods aspects into these policies, and for increasing the amount of coherence between them. The EEAC considers the European Spatial Development Perspective and the European Landscape Convention to be important achievements in this respect;
4. That the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is a crucial policy field in relation to sustainable land use. Considerable changes are expected in the near future, not least because of the ongoing debate over the EU Budget. Many other different elements must also be taken into account during this debate including key issues such as the world food situation and European food security; the viability of rural communities in the economic, social and ecological sense, as well as the provision of those environmental goods and services underpinning the social and economic needs of wider society. All of these issues can, to some extent, be considered as public goods – therefore, they should be addressed in a balanced way;
5. That sustainable land use is not yet sufficiently incentivised in such a way that farmers, foresters and other land managers and workers are adequately rewarded for the protection and enhancement of biodiversity, climate change adaptation and mitigation and the provision of water management services.

This is especially true in relation to globally consumed but locally produced public goods e.g. the carbon sink function of certain forms of land use, where local people bear the cost of delivering services but are unable to capture any of the corresponding benefits to wider society;

6. That the underlying scientific methodology and datasets required to implement these incentive structures and to measure whether improvements in sustainable land use are being achieved are under development, but that further improvements are needed;

7. That the European Commission plans to develop an EU Strategy on Green Infrastructure after 2010, as a key tool to address the ecosystem services dimension of biodiversity and this provides the opportunity of promoting the concept's integration in sustainable land use and territorial policies;

8. That sustainable land use cannot be achieved unless the concept is embedded into hearts and minds, through a profound shift in the cultural values, customs and informal institutions of all those involved in land management at the local, regional, national and global levels.

In view of the above, the EEAC wishes to:

1. Encourage both the EU and Member States to address existing market failures in the supply and management of public goods; to improve both the institutional settings and land use governance structures thereby enabling a more integrated policy framework; to create and improve incentive systems and structures governing the supply of public goods and to shape the necessary conditions enabling both land owners land users and land workers to manage land more equitably and sustainably;

2. Propose that EU legislation should be more focused on the promotion of sustainable land use as an overarching goal, setting standards for the quality or sustainable use of the different relevant natural resources that are derived from (or associated with) the land; using the appropriate instruments to ensure respect for these standards; encouraging Member States to use the opportunities for promoting sustainable land use that arise from existing EU-legislation and to enhance the implementation of these opportunities;

3. Promote a more active impact assessment to fully considering the unintended spatial consequences of EU policy developments, with more harmonization and coherence at the European level of the land use aspects of these policies, as part of achieving more sustainable land use, also at a global scale. At the same time, Member States should develop the necessary mechanisms to assess the implementation of these EU policies from a sustainability point of view, and to deal with unwelcome consequences such as urban sprawl, poverty and loss of employment, or land abandonment. Drawing up a new ESDP – as part of the update of the Territorial Agenda in 2011 – would provide guidance to the EU and the Member States alike as regards the spatial coherence of their policies;

4. Stress that a fundamental part of achieving sustainable land use involves making a further reduction in the European carbon, water and biodiversity footprint outside Europe;

5. Argue for the reform of the CAP from a perspective of promoting more sustainable land use; ensuring that public goods continue to be provided in a world characterized by increased market instability, and by concerns over future supplies of both food and energy. Guaranteeing that the supply of ecosystem goods and services within Europe can adequately be safeguarded is a huge challenge, requiring a strong, but reformed CAP. Such a policy should use public funds to reward the managers of farming and forestry systems notably according to the level of public goods delivered], whilst ensuring that administration is kept as simple as possible, so reducing transaction costs related to delivery and raising policy effectiveness;

6. Encourage the promotion of the concept of public goods outside of Europe and especially within the WTO context, as current trade and pricing policies leave room for improvement. In particular, the EU should redouble its efforts to ensure that sustainable land use is accepted as a valid non-trade concern,

so working towards a level playing field that can offer a higher level of protection to the ecosystems services that underpin long term global well-being and security;

7. Promote further research on the potential for incorporating new incentives in the existing structures for encouraging more sustainable land management;

8. Foster improvements in the monitoring and data collection underpinning the statistical analysis of land use, land use change and tracking of improvements in the sustainability of land use across Europe and globally;

9. Encourage a greater focus on working at the landscape level where production and consumption functions are the most immediately experienced by owners and non-owners as well as by direct users and non-direct users at the same time; thus embedding the knowledge and valuation that is necessary to come to decisions at the local level, where these can be understood and discussed properly;

10. Request the European Commission to consider supporting a set of EU wide pilot schemes as part of a coherent network for connecting and strengthening landscapes of high cultural and/or natural value (see also EEAC Statement 2009 on green infrastructure), constituting a first step towards a sustainable landscape management policy framework.⁵

In conclusion, the EEAC believes that the concept of “sustainable land use” is a crucial component for sustainable development, as it involves integrating the different uses that are being made of natural resources and their interaction within relevant scales. It also provides new insights on how the governance of natural resources can be improved – at the landscape or other appropriate territorial levels (such as watersheds) – as part of balancing the involvement of multiple interests. We therefore recommend that the concept of “sustainable land use” should form one of the main topics to be taken forward within the context of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy.

¹ See UN Population Division/DESA, 11 March 2009.

² European Council, 15 March 2010.

³ See TEEB – The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity for National and International Policy Makers – Summary: Responding to the Value of Nature 2009; IPBES – Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services UNEP 2010.

⁴ Additionally, EEAC points to its principles and objectives, in which it is stated (Art. 1) that “present trends in production, consumption, trade, and economic development as a whole are rooted in unsustainable uses of natural resources. The global challenge confronting humankind is to move to a new and more sustainable concept of development. This new concept of development will acknowledge economic needs and social aspirations, but also will respect the constraints imposed by the requirement to protect the critical and unique values of the natural environment”.

⁵ This recommendation has not been endorsed by the CWEDD (BE) and the Minaraad (BE)