

European Approaches to Achieving Sustainable Land Management

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1. Introduction

When the first laws for the Danish nation were written in the 12th Century the intention was to write one single law. However, this was given up because of great regional differences in the oral laws which in turn were related to differences in the bio-physical conditions. Instead four so-called 'landscape laws' were written down, laws which to a large extent dealt with the owner and user rights to natural resources (Hoff 1997). Also, specific regulations were ordered in the early Middle Ages concerning land management, for example the so-called 'sheep letter' written by the Norwegian King for the Faroe Island – a group of small islands located in the North Atlantic between Iceland and Norway. This letter basically said that the number of sheep that could be grazed on individual fields must not be increased unless an agreement could be reached among all on the island in question. The logic behind this letter was simply that the community was given rights over the individual farmer to prevent overgrazing and consequently erosion on the highly vulnerable islands (Brandt 1987). Policy approaches to sustainable land management is nothing new and European history is filled with examples of environmental deteriorations and regulations (Jones 2003).

Agriculture and agricultural change has remained a significant driver for land management changes over time as the current debate over bio-fuel and food prices illustrate. Agricultural production is currently located among the top issues on the international policy agenda. Another significant driver is urbanisation which affects rural land management in a number of different ways and forms.

A major recent step towards sustainable land management in Europe was the introduction of Article 6 in the European Community treaty, it states that environmental concerns should be integrated into all types of policy making. Indeed this principle of policy integration, which is also a corner stone in the Brundtland Report (World Commission 1987), is central to sustainable land management. However, it is difficult to implement the principle in practice because of the policy decisions concerning the major drivers for land management. Market policy decisions are made at high levels – far away from the specific land management contexts in which the farmers, the forest owners and developers make their decisions. The principle of policy integration implies that policy decisions are integrated decisions but this is most often not the case. In fact there appears to be two major policy agendas of concern in respect to land management, namely a market policy agenda dealing with rules for increasingly open markets and a sustainability agenda dealing with regulations introduced to ensure a sustainable environment. The two agendas operate in parallel and are somewhat poorly integrated. Whereas the market policy agenda is a high level one – in Europe with the EU as the key agent – the sustainable agenda operates on all political levels. Eventually the two agendas meet in the local landscape where the owners and users are dealing with day to day land management (Figure 1).

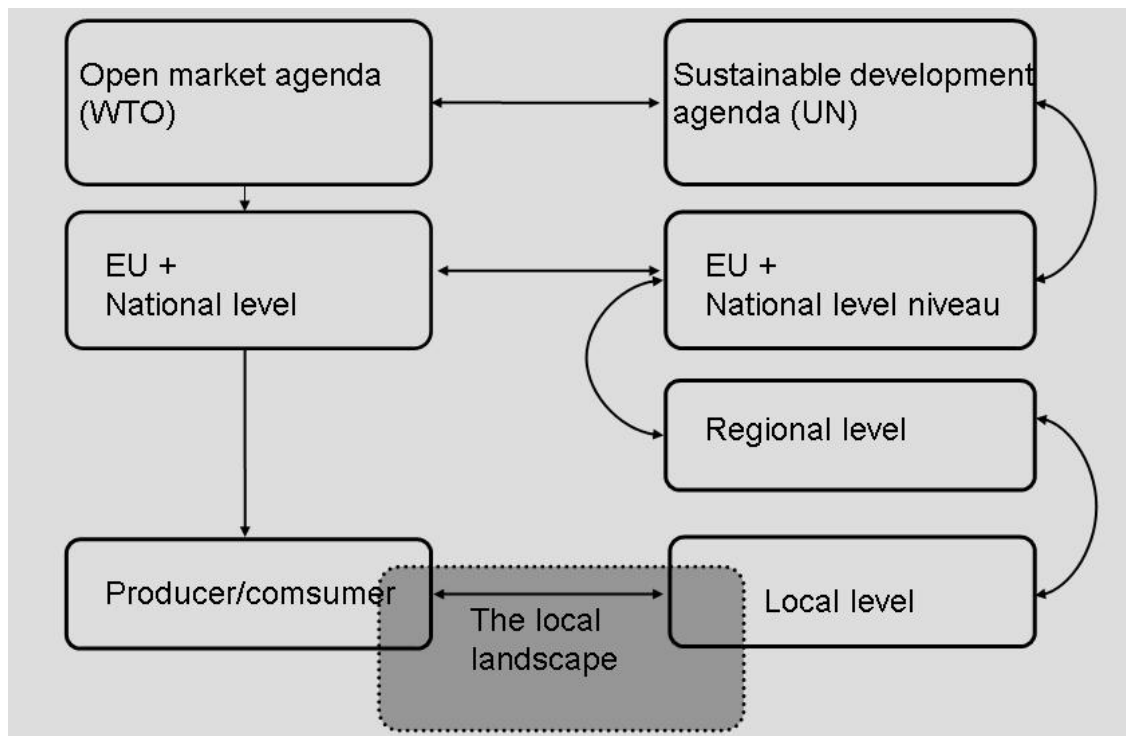


Figure 1. Two international policy agendas affecting local land management

In this paper, different European approaches to sustainable land management taken at different levels and in different policy domains are presented and discussed. The point of departure is the main driver for changes in rural Europe, namely the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) which for more than three decades has played a major role in maintaining and changing agricultural landscapes in all member states. The CAP and its relationship to EU environmental policy is outlined in the next section. In addition to CAP, physical planning and other land use policies operating mainly at member state and local levels are playing a significant role, as discussed in section three. Finally, new approaches to the local landscapes are discussed.

2. The Rural Landscape and EU Policies

The rich diversity of European rural landscapes reflects the huge geographical and socio-economic differences on the continent. The vast majority of the rural landscapes are agricultural landscapes and wilderness areas exist only in few parts of Europe. Since agriculture has been the dominant land use for thousands of years biodiversity and historical values in most of the continent are associated with farming (Stanner and Bourdeau 1995). Intensification of agriculture as well as abandonment of farming since WWII have affected European landscapes to its detriment with basically the same agricultural policy, the CAP, as the main driver of these processes. This means that all the European farmers – despite immense differences in size and production systems - act within the same market policy, which includes an open European market for food, labour and land. In fact these differences have been one of the main reasons for the introduction of an agricultural policy in the first place when the first six countries formed the European community in the late 1950s (Fearne 1997). In my view it is still difficult to imagine that the 27 member states that now constitute the EU would accept a future without policy interventions to cope with the huge income differences between the urban and rural populations and to ensure sustainable land management in the intensively farmed as well as in the marginal regions. However, this does not mean that the current CAP is just an updated

version of the one developed during the 1960s. The CAP has undergone several changes over the last 25 years in a process which has gradually decoupled subsidies from production and introduced a number of environmental regulations.

The introductions of environmental issues into the CAP started in the 1980s with the introduction of so-called agri-environmental policies as the most significant initiative. These policies are basically incentive schemes through which the farmers are offered payments to promote environmentally friendly farming practices beyond regulatory requirements. Within a common EU framework a large number of schemes dealing with issues such as water resource protection, biodiversity conservation and landscape management have been introduced by the member states and regions. Usually the farmer signs a five year contract specifying specific farming practices. Typical obligations include reduced nitrate inputs, reduced or no spraying of pesticides, reduced livestock density, and grassland management requirements. By 2002 about 25% percent of the agricultural area in Europe was covered by contracts under agri-environmental schemes including contracts signed by a growing number of organic farmers (EEA 2004). As shown in Figure 2 there are great variations between the member states in terms of coverage with the 'new' member states from 1995, Austria, Finland and Sweden having the highest uptake. Studies across European member states have shown that the schemes do affect farming practices but there is a general lack of knowledge concerning specific environmental outcomes (Primdahl et al. 2003, Klein and Sutherland 2003). One general outcome of the agri-environmental schemes implemented over time is that a significant proportion of the farmers have had positive relationships with public authorities through contracts which have contributed to alternative incomes and have given the farmer new experiences with sustainable land management.

Since 2000 the agri-environmental schemes have been part of the so-called 'rural development programme' which has been introduced as the 'second pillar of the CAP'. Whereas the traditional subsidies under the first pillar is 100 percent financed by the EU, the rural development programme is partly financed by EU and partly by the member states which in turn are also responsible for designing the different schemes under the programme, again within a common EU frame. New innovations in agricultural production and the rural economy are other issues dealt with in the rural development programme.

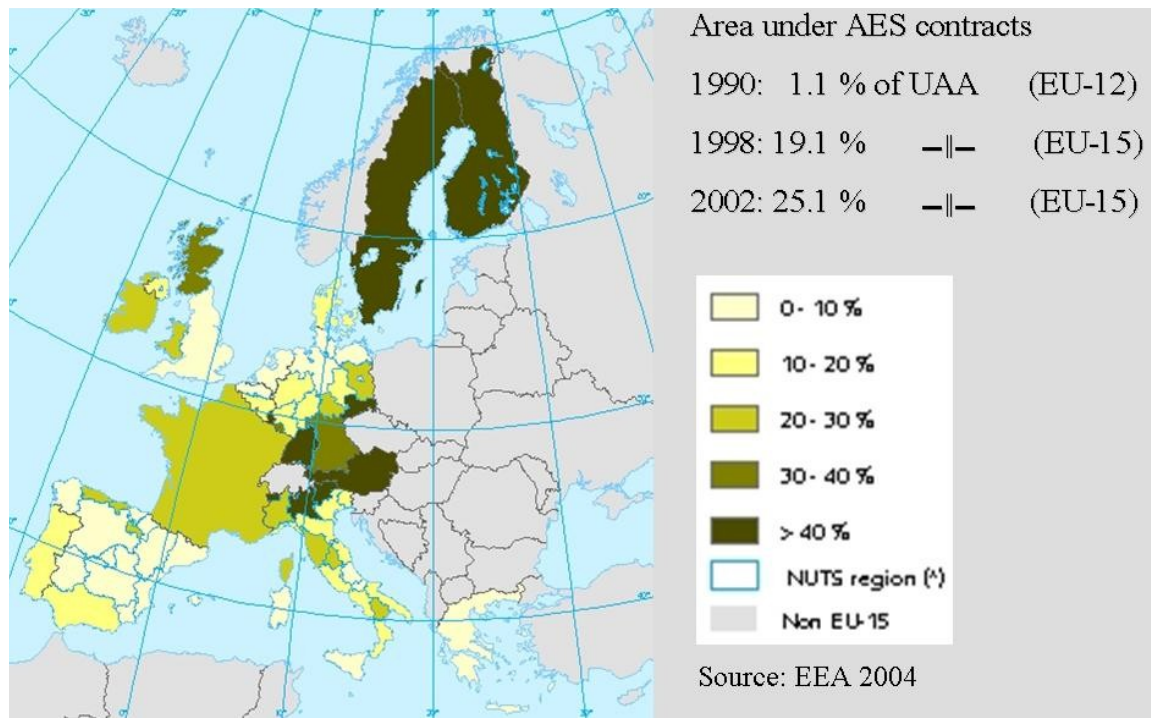


Figure 2. The uptake of contracts under agri-environmental schemes in the 15 member states 2002 measured as percentage of the total utilised agricultural area (UAA). Source: EEA 2004, p.9.

The most recent changes of the CAP were introduced in 2005. Since then most of the pillar one subsidies, including most of the price support schemes, hectare and livestock premiums, were replaced by so-called 'direct payments' which are basically subsidies paid to farmers based on the size of their farm. These changes essentially meant that most of the payments are now de-coupled from production. As an additional part of the reform so-called cross compliance measures were introduced. According to these each farmer must comply with two types of requirements. One concerns so-called 'good agricultural and environmental conditions' which include management regulations of grasslands and areas sensitive to erosion. The other type of cross compliance measures require the farmer to comply with the rules set out in a number of EU environmental directives including the Nitrate Directive, The Bird Protection Directive and the Habitat Directive. If the farmer does not respect these rules he loses the EU direct payments.

Environmental directives functioning as regulatory frames for the member states are the most important components of the EU environmental policy. Directives have been implemented for drinking water, nitrate application, habitat protection and the creation of European network of habitats, and more process oriented policy issues such as environmental impact assessment (Jordan 2005). The environmental directives are powerful instruments functioning as law (member state and regional decisions can be appealed by anyone to the EU) and the linkage of the CAP to the directives has reinforced the significance of these directives.

As a response to water pollution caused by cities and agriculture a new directive, the 'Water Framework Directive' is currently under implementation. According to this directive integrated planning of river basin management in Europe shall ensure that all rivers, lakes and coastal waters should be in good ecological condition by 2015 with the exception of a few specific locations where exceptions from this can be

accepted (<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-framework>). Implementing this directive is a major challenge to many European member states, especially countries characterised by intensive agricultural production such as Denmark.

In summary, a number of initiatives have been taken to promote sustainable land management throughout the European Union – partly through environmental policies, partly through the CAP. Whereas formerly EU policies in general have been a major factor causing environmental problems – first of all through a CAP aiming at agricultural intensification and spatial expansion in the 1960s and 1970s – the EU is now a major player in introducing new environmental policies throughout the continent.

3. Urban Sprawl and Physical Planning

As a continent Europe is densely populated with about 75 percent of the population living in cities and this proportion is expected to increase. Urban sprawl and reduced accessibility from urban areas to the countryside is causing problems in great parts of the continent (EEA 1996). Although a 'European Spatial Policy' has been dealt with by the EU commission (Committee on Spatial Development), urbanisation and physical planning has never had a priority at the EU level. Urbanisation has mainly been a concern for the national states and there is in most European states a long and diverse tradition for physical planning with various zoning systems and designation of priority areas as common approaches (Newman and Thornley 1999).

In Denmark, physical planning is based on a zoning framework through which the whole country is divided into three zones – 'urban zone', 'summer house areas' and 'rural zone'. In the rural zone no development is supposed to take place and any new buildings or constructions except for buildings related to agriculture and forestry require a so-called 'rural zone consent'. Conversion of the rural zone can only take place through plans and no major developments are taking place without local plans and without explicit references to the municipal plan which in turn is approved by the Ministry of Environment. On the one hand the system may appear rigid and formalised, on the other it is in practice a highly decentralised system - the municipalities are powerful and planning decisions cannot be appealed except when protected areas will be affected by the decisions. This also means that planning decisions are highly politicised decisions and over time municipal councillors have become increasingly careful not to take widely unpopular decisions.

A regional planning system has recently been abandoned as part of a restructuring reform which resulted in the abolition of the counties. This means that 'regional concerns' for example in respect to nature conservation values must either be taken over by the state or given up. Currently it is unclear how the government will define valuable landscapes when the next generation of municipal plans will be approved in 2009. Seen in the context of a growing demand for 'attractive lots' by high income families the ongoing planning process is likely to result in major conflicts between 'landscape interests' on the one side and municipal demands for high income taxpayers on the other.

In the Copenhagen region this problem has been dealt with through the recent approval of an updated 'state version' of the Fingerplan first introduced in 1947 (Veire et al. 2007). The overall vision in the plan that urban development of Greater Copenhagen should be located along five fingers with green and highly accessible

open space in between has been maintained and complemented with a new 'green belt' in which forest, golf courses and other large recreational areas should be located, Figure 3. However, the former designations of protected landscapes have not been included in this new plan.

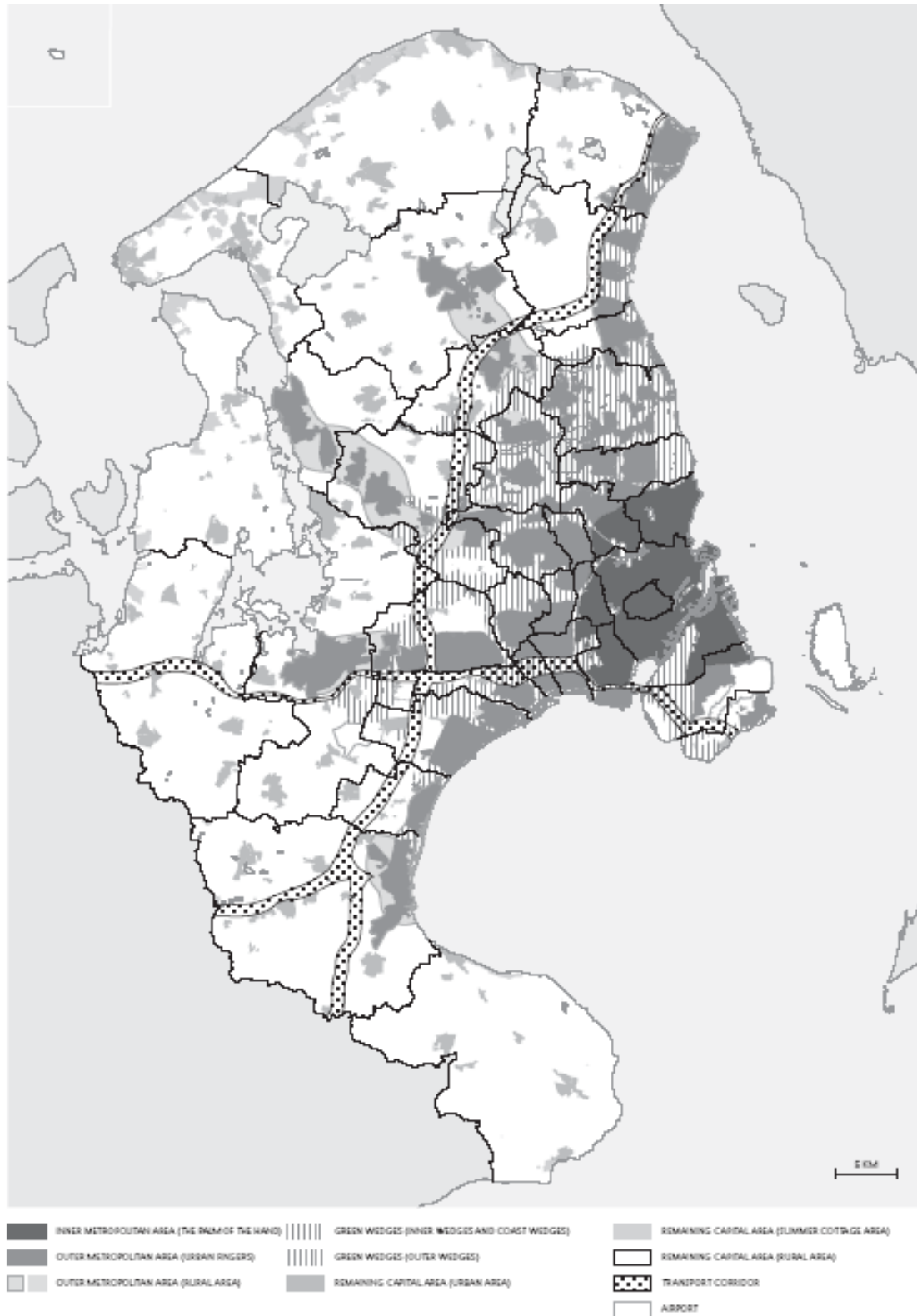


Figure 3. The new 'Fingerplan' for the Copenhagen region. Source: English version of the overall plan prepared by the Danish Ministry of the Environment 2007.

Another problem associated with urbanisation concerns the rural zone. Although this zone – constituting approximately 90 percent of the country – is reserved for agriculture, forestry and natural habitats it is in some regions being gradually taken over by life style farmers and non-rural enterprises. In the Copenhagen region full time farmers are today a small minority and a growing number of farm holdings are hosting an agricultural enterprise such as a building company, a car repair shop, an advertising agency or other businesses which prefer to buy a relative cheap place in the urban fringe rather than investing in an more expensive property within the urban zone. More building activity, more traffic and intensified agricultural land use is the result of such urbanisation processes, which may gradually undermine the very legitimacy of the zoning system (Busck et al. 2007, Primdahl et al. undated).

On a regional scale great parts of Europe's rural areas are affected by such urbanisation processes (Antrop 2004).

4. The Local Rural Landscape – Between Agricultural Dynamics and Urbanisation

The local rural landscape, as a living place, is under pressure as described above, partly by agricultural changes driven by an increasingly global food market and partly by urbanisation processes. The two processes seem to be affecting the local agricultural landscape in two almost opposite directions.

The increasingly open food market – operating under a decoupled agricultural policy puts the individual farmer in a competitive situation in which scale of production and efficient production are important parameters. Intensification, specialisation and concentration have been well known consequences of this process and may also be so in future, especially if the current price levels on grain, milk and other products remain high. At the same time it may be more difficult (more expensive that is) to reduce the negative impacts through incentives such as agri-environmental schemes (Hodge 2007). As a result the local agricultural landscape may become (or remain) a relatively unattractive place to live for non-farmers and this may be harmful to the local economy.

The urbanisation processes includes the so called counter-urbanisation migration where urban families move from city to the countryside. They keep their urban jobs and cultural values but they change their residential environment for a number of reasons and often they will own some agricultural land and become lifestyle farmers (Marsden et al. 2003, Busck et. 2006). Especially diverse and attractive rural landscapes close to urban centres are dominated by lifestyle farmers which are contributing both to the local economy and to a countryside rich in recreational and aesthetical values. This movement may become a problem if farming is given up and the open landscape is turned into 'closed woodland'.

There is, of course, no simple solution to such diverging trends, especially not at a regional level. A reformed CAP or a zoning based planning system appears to provide sufficient solutions to these challenges. Well developed integrated landscape polices still remain to be seen but a number of initiatives taken at different levels may provide some direction for future policies.

At a general, more theoretical level the need for new forms of governance of 'social-ecological systems' (Folke et 2005) or 'rural governance' (Hodge 2007) has been analysed and a number of initiatives have been taken which point in this direction.

For Europe as whole a 'European Landscape Convention' under the 'Council of Europe' came into force in 2004 and has by 2007 been signed by 27 states. This convention aims at promoting 'landscape protection, management and planning, and to organise European co-operation on landscape issues' (Art 3) <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Word/176.doc>. So far the convention has resulted in a number of network initiatives to bridge local landscape projects with regional planning and policies. This networking function may show to be the real strength of the convention, which is not a strong legal document with economic or legal power behind it (Jones et al. 2007).

The local landscape as a 'place' to live in and to visit is gaining more interest and this is without doubt linked to globalisation. Within the European Union part of the Rural Development Programme has been designed to link local governance types of initiatives with regional rural development objectives through so-called 'local action groups'. These groups are dominated by non-public actors and are set up all over Europe as partnerships with their own budgets.

At the regional scale landscape character been mapped in several European member states (Wascher 2005) and regional and local 'landscape strategies' are currently been made to follow up on the character maps.

5. Sustainable Land Management or Sustaining Land Management?

The European approaches to sustainable land management are closely linked to the open European market and more generally to a global process of market openings. The Common Agricultural Policy which during the 1980s and 1990s has, to a large extent, stimulated environmentally unsustainable development is currently undergoing reforms with de-coupling of subsidies and introduction of a number of environmental measures as the main components. A new rural development programme, co-financed by the member states, is evolving. The big question is whether the current reforms are contributing to sustainable land management or they are mainly sustaining a management structure which can hardly be termed sustainable from an environmental point of view. In my opinion, the answer to this is to be determined by how well environmental objectives are integrated into market policies at all level. Since urbanisation processes is also a major driver affecting rural land management the land market and physical planning must be part of such policy integration.

At the local level, projects to promote sustainable land management are evolving throughout Europe. More legal and economic 'infrastructure' at the European and international scale is needed. However, the open market policy agenda and the sustainability agenda should be better integrated than it is the case today.

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