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## Four countries, six experiences, for a single issue: limiting urbanisation

Paolo Pileri

The best known national research on land consumption in Italy is *It.Urb '80*, which goes back nearly 30 years. Despite this, some of its conclusions are still applicable today: the consumption is more accentuated where the non-residential functions are greater and where the use of urbanised areas is more scarce (which is fairly frequent). But, that experience of research is also remembered for the many difficulties in collating and comparing the data. After all, it was a research conducted without geographic IT systems and with few means of computing. Unfortunately, after almost 30 years, we are frankly forced to say that what we are mainly left with from that research is the intuition that land consumption is a central issue for planning, but not the progressive transfer of that intuition into the subsequent and successive strategies. And after 30 years, the struggle to find and process data on consumption is almost the same. Could it perhaps be that limiting urbanisation is no longer a problem? Land consumption is no longer relevant? What is the attitude of other European countries to land consumption? The recent report, urban sprawl clarifies that the problem exists, is ignored and requires urgent measures for dealing with it (EEA, 2006a). With the aim of understanding whether, how and for how long other countries have been facing these issues, here are offered seven papers on the policies for limiting urbanisation. The two concepts common

to all the contributions, as in the EEA report of 2006 are: 1) considering land consumption as the transformation of a non-urbanised land cover into an urban one and 2) land is a finite, threatened resource, precious to the environment and to the landscape.

### *Knowledge about land consumption has disintegrated and needs rebuilding*

The availability of data on land consumption is probably the most incontrovertible starting points emerging from the papers. But in Italy there is no national figures on land consumption, because there is no national database on land usage despite the high number of territorial IT systems. The only data available are those from the project Corine Land Cover (CLC), 1990 and 2000, on the ISPRA site ([www.apat.gov.it](http://www.apat.gov.it)). According to the CLC data (see table on p. 82), between 1990 and 2000 in Italy some 83,630 hectares were urbanised (about 23 hectares per day) and 152,612 hectares of agricultural land was transformed (about 42 hectares per day). But it's quite underestimated. From research published recently (Pileri 2008), between 1999 and 2004 in Lombardy, 24,742 hectares of non-urban areas were urbanised (amounting to 13.5 hectares a day). Compared to Germany which consumes 4.7 m<sup>2</sup>/inhabitant per year (from Siedentop data), Lombardy consumes at a faster rate: 5.45 m<sup>2</sup>/inhabitant per year. Even ISTAT confirmed that almost 2 millions of hectares of agriculture surfaces disappeared from 1990 to 2000 (ISTAT 2007). CLC figure has some limitations: the spatial resolution is based on a minimum unit of 25 hectares, surveying changes in 5 hectares over periods of time (EEA

2006b). It is necessary to go beyond Corine, towards a database of higher resolution. In any case, by now Corine is a database that is outdated for supporting today's planning decisions.

The lack of a unified and national geographic database is a serious failing for the county's planning system, a surprising gap that must be filled as early as possible by being equipped to provide municipalities with the tools for their sustainable planning. Guidelines should be provided together with national and inter-regional coordination to avoid confusion and patchy application (Hart and van der Krabber).

Another risk, connected to the lack of databases, is that the intention of putting policies in place for restricting land consumption is hampered. This would be a serious mistake under these circumstances in which municipalities are reworking their plans. Also the Strategic environmental assessment (EC Directive 2001/42, implemented in Italy by Legislative decree no. 152 of 3 april 2006) loses effective capacity in the decision-making and monitoring processes.

*The subject of land consumption is firmly on the agendas of public policies* Restricting urban sprawl has been very firmly on the agendas of public policies in Germany, UK, Switzerland and the Netherlands for a long time, and not just as 'grand ideas' but actually being put into practice. And this practice has now accrued into experience. The intended slowing down of urbanisation has not always been attained, but certainly these days in those countries a period of reviewing of the initial policies has begun, while here in Italy the problem remains little more than stated. In Italy, containing urban

sprawl is, perhaps, perceived more as a fringe matter, for specialists, and not seen as central and of interest to the general population, of interest also for public policies and for citizens. Probably the chain of social and environmental effects following on from land consumption, as demonstrated by the Plurel research, is not grasped. The debate on land consumption in this country is in danger, unfortunately, of merely becoming ideological. Those who broach the subject may even find themselves accused of 'boycotting' economic development and certainly not be seen as someone who is trying apply a new rationale to such land usage, offering other keys for interpretation and new ways of development (Latouche 2007). Some passages in the accounts by Scholl, Schekte and Nillson show, on the other hand, that an alternative way of thinking is possible and that the affirmation "economic development = building development" can be partially denied. This equation should be corrected, and the corrections should be made known. Unchecked urbanisation, even more so if done in a haphazard way, brings with it costs and debts to the municipality, as well as having effects and impacts on the environment and on health, as has been shown by research even in Italy (Camagni 2002).

*The necessary combining of the environment and land consumption issue* In these months of international crisis, Jeremy Rifkin's revolutionary continual proposal is striking. In short, for Rifkin, the solution to the world's crisis cannot just come from economics and finance, but the points of attack on the problem must change: the economic crisis is closely linked to that of the energy crisis and global warming.

Innovative solutions will arrive by broadening the outlook to other disciplines and giving preference to a cooperative approach. The paradigm could also apply to land consumption. As emerges in all the papers, land consumption is included in the environmental issue and is not a subject exclusively relating to planning. Perhaps it is wrong to expect that just from urban planners will arrive the solutions to the problem. Land use and economic interests often short circuit each other. Reaffirming that the question of land use also involves the environment issue, with the respective objectives of strategic interest (biodiversity, capturing CO<sub>2</sub>, etc.), could open the way to new strategies, increase social awareness of the issue and perhaps rebalance the disparity of power between opponents. The quiet voices of biodiversity must be able to stand up to comparison with the clamour of property development gains, both of which have an interest in the land. Other countries are offering us the strategic key to the environmental interest to overcome urban sprawl, closing circuits that had remained open for too long. Consuming land means consuming nature. Germany's position is emblematic: ten years ago it amended its building code to reinforce the role of nature in planning: "Give back to nature what is taken from it". This has led to the introducing of ecological compensation, even though, as Siedentop says, this on its own is not sufficient and has not always worked as well as expected. But also these tools are needed for breaking that urban planning routine which often heralds land consumption. Also in the Netherlands, the law on nature protection acts as a brake on urban sprawl.

Adjustments and innovations are needed in our legal instruments. The lesson coming to us is clear: the regulations for protecting nature should have a priority influence and directly make urban expansions responsible.

#### *The return of the 'central' decision maker?*

In the 4 countries considered, the decision on the use of the land has been progressively left to local governments. Can a local agency acts in relation to challenges and issues that only partly concern it? Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK maintain a balance between responsibility and freedom of local initiative and the need for regulating at a centralised level. At least three questions arise:

- Land consumption is an issue of national interest given the environmental and social consequences it implies;
- Local governments cannot deal alone with the challenge of limiting urbanisation: they are very dependent on the revenues from urbanisation and they cannot be expected to conceive such strong strategies;
- Progressive local autonomy also in tax and budget matters has often produced an 'estate agency' effect and the municipalities have specialised in attracting new businesses and new inhabitants, meaning new revenues. This deal ought to be modified from national policies.

The Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and the UK, in different ways, have partially returned the matter of urban limitation to central government: "The local governments can, at most, be given responsibility for implementing strategies for countering urban sprawl, but not for conceiving them" (E. van der Krabben).

#### *Limits to not overstep?*

Some countries have chosen to set a nationwide quantity limit for land consumption (e.g. the policy of 30 hectares/day in Germany, or minimum densities in England), while realising that this on its own is not enough. Others have tried imposing geographic limits on urban expansion and not quantity limits (the Netherlands), while others again have set strict non-building conditions (Germany, for the agricultural areas), and others have placed limits for the use of derelict areas (England). Without doubt, the question of limits should be reviewed and updated, but should not be excluded out of hand, and learning processes among the various carriers of interest are needed. The direction of imposing limits is difficult, but still feasible and often useful for giving a first form of guidance to local governments.

#### *Greenfield versus brownfield. Caring for open spaces and favouring used areas*

In all the cases proposed here, the re-usage of derelict and underused urban areas is a must. This has not been sufficient for avoiding the transformation of greenfields. The devices for reducing the margin of convenience for property developers is still not efficient, and they prefer to transform free areas rather than previously used areas. Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK show us how it is necessary to act on two fronts of the problem: each policy for redeveloping previously used areas becomes weak if, at the same time, the possibilities to urbanise greenfields remain active and advantageous.