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No net land take trajectories: policies and practices in Europe

**Zemes izmantošanas nākotne
ESPON pieredze Latvijas zemes pārvaldībai**

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Nicolas Rossignol, ESPON

Policy debates about “No Net Land Take” (NNLT) are both topical and sensitive, as they involve allocating an increasingly scarce land resource to various legitimate but competing public policy objectives: building homes, accommodating new economic activities, maintaining agricultural spaces, constructing transport infrastructure, preserving natural areas, etc.

While the objective of fostering land frugality seems achievable at the continental level, notably due to the lesser demographic pressure to come and the potential for improving land use efficiency, European countries and even more regions must deal with highly heterogeneous territorial profiles in terms of space consumption and needs for their own social and economic development.

Key take aways from the different analysed countries and broader policy options at different territorial level are presented in this document to highlight possible pathways towards green transition trajectories at different territorial levels.

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1

EU and national strategies



What is Net Land Take?

Land Take = conversion of land to artificial surfaces (EEA)

Reverse Land Take = when artificial surfaces are converted to (semi-)natural land

Net Land Take = Land Taken – Reversed Land Take

Why do we take land?

Land is “taken” to respond to development needs : housing, transport infrastructure, industry, agriculture, etc.

Land take impacts:

- decreased ecological functions of land => less resilient ecosystems
- decreased potential for carbon storage and biodiversity
- increased surface run-off during floods and increased effects of heatwaves in cities
- reduced quality of life via loss of natural areas as amenities

The EU soil strategy for 2030

Overall vision and framework

By 2050, all EU soil ecosystems are in healthy condition and are thus more resilient.

Sets out a framework and concrete measures to protect and restore soils and ensure that they are used sustainably.

Why do we need healthy soils?

Healthy soils contribute to achieve existing objectives related to climate neutrality, a clean and circular economy, revert biodiversity loss, safeguard human health, halt desertification and revert land degradation.

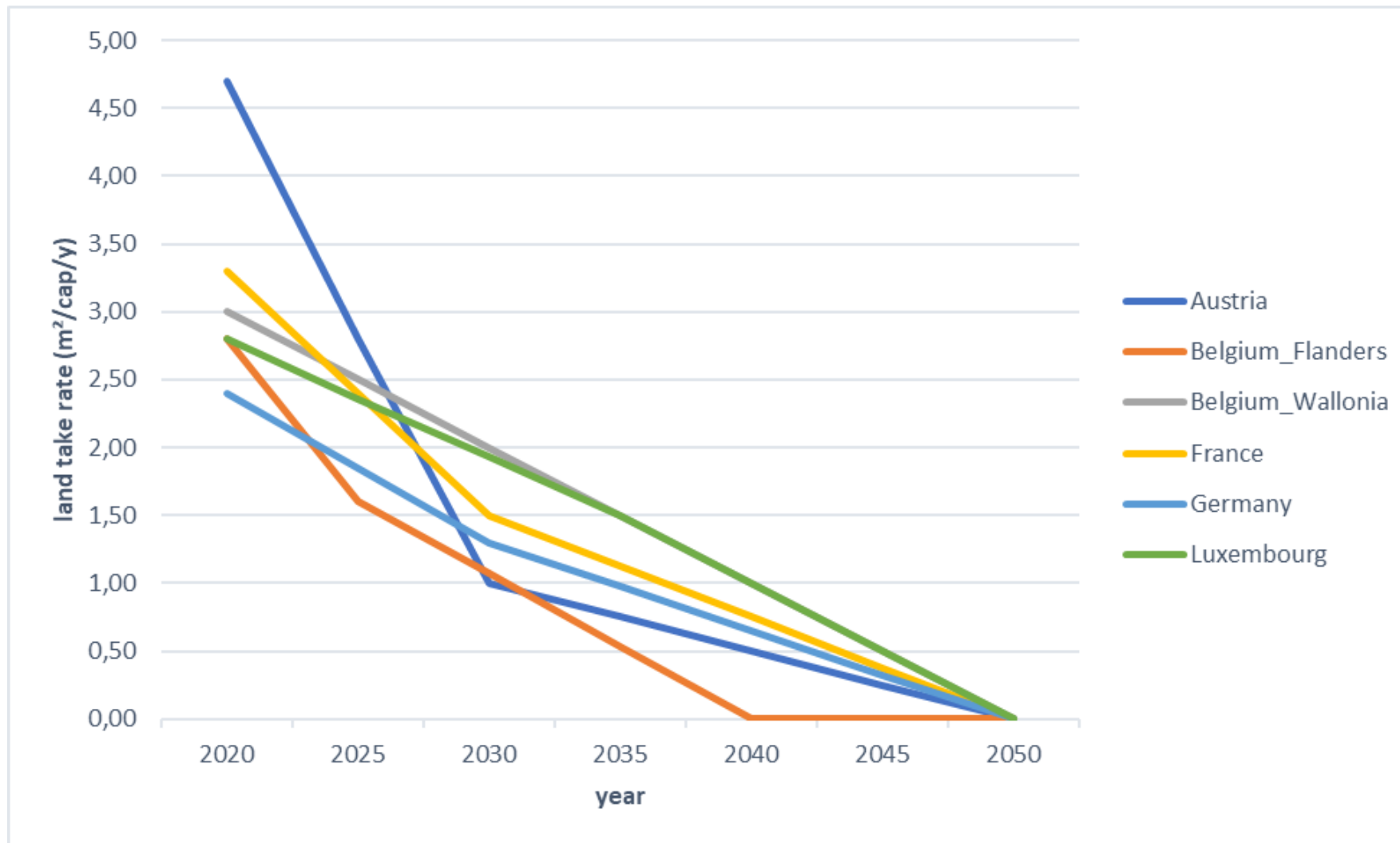
The EU soil strategy for 2030

Member States were called to ...

- set national, regional and local targets to reduce net land take by 2030 in order to make a measurable contribution to the EU target of 2050
- integrate 'land take hierarchy' and give priority to reusing and recycling land and to quality urban soils

One of the objectives of the EU soil strategy is to ensure that, **by 2050, there is No Net Land Take (NNLT)** – sometimes also called zero net land take

Examples of national trajectories



Source: Lacoere, Decoville, Delattre, Melot, Grimski, Schamann & Halleux

Major differences remain between national strategies

In Germany, a non-binding federal goal and differentiated strategies by Länder

- The national sustainable development strategy aims to limit land take to less than 30ha/day by 2030. This non-binding goal is not broken down or allocated among the Länder.
- The level of ambition in reducing land take and the instruments used vary by Länder.
- For example, the city-state of Berlin has developed compensation measures and ecological counters at the Land level. Baden-Württemberg has set a goal of zero net land take by 2035, which it intends to include in the regional planning document, accompanied by an action plan to finance relevant projects or help municipalities recruit "surface managers."

In the Netherlands, the goal of no net land take is considered unachievable

Between 2010 and 2018, land take increased by 10ha/day per day. However, NL has the second-highest rate of land take in the EU, after Malta, with 12.6% of its territory affected.

There is no goal to reduce land take, and the Dutch government considers the European objective of NNLT by 2050 unachievable in a densely populated country like the NL

A new approach to spatial planning in response to climate change adaptation and energy transition, notably incorporated into the National Environmental Vision (NOVI)

Three principles for balanced land use: "combining functions takes priority over individual functions," "the characteristics and identity of an area are essential," and "preventing displacement."

2

Challenges



An ESPON benchmark

Implemented by

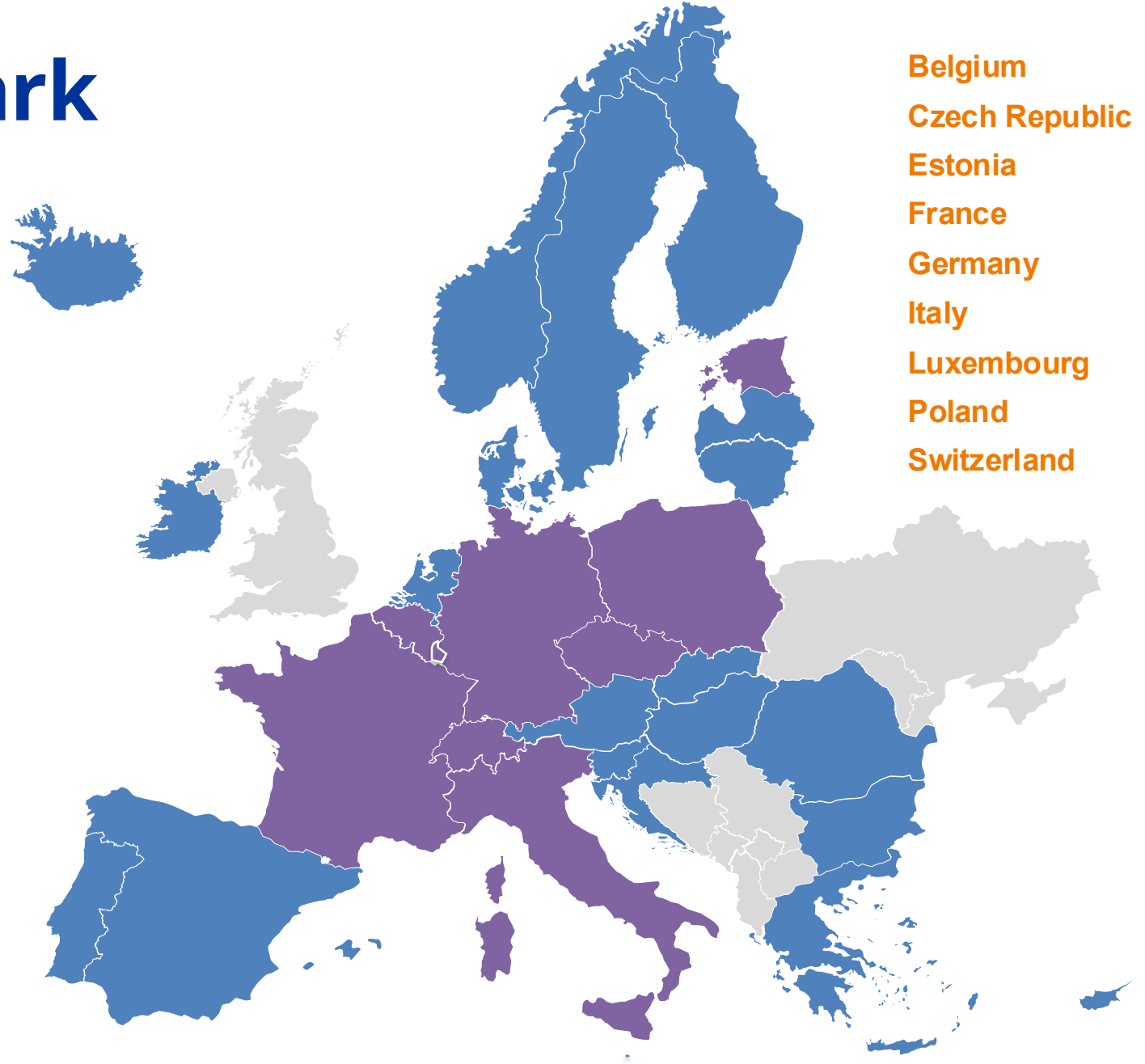


How is NNLT defined? How is LT monitored, with which statistical tools?

What are the policies and governance mechanisms in place to align the various actors in reducing LT?

What are the challenges faced by the various institutions?

What are the main levers and obstacles, as well as discussions and solutions



Legal frameworks

No explicit quantitative aim for limiting land take



A national legally binding aim



States or regions responsible for transposing the NNLT objective



Challenges 1/4

Defining and monitoring land take

Legal transcriptions vary between countries, none of them being completely aligned with the proposed definition by the EC

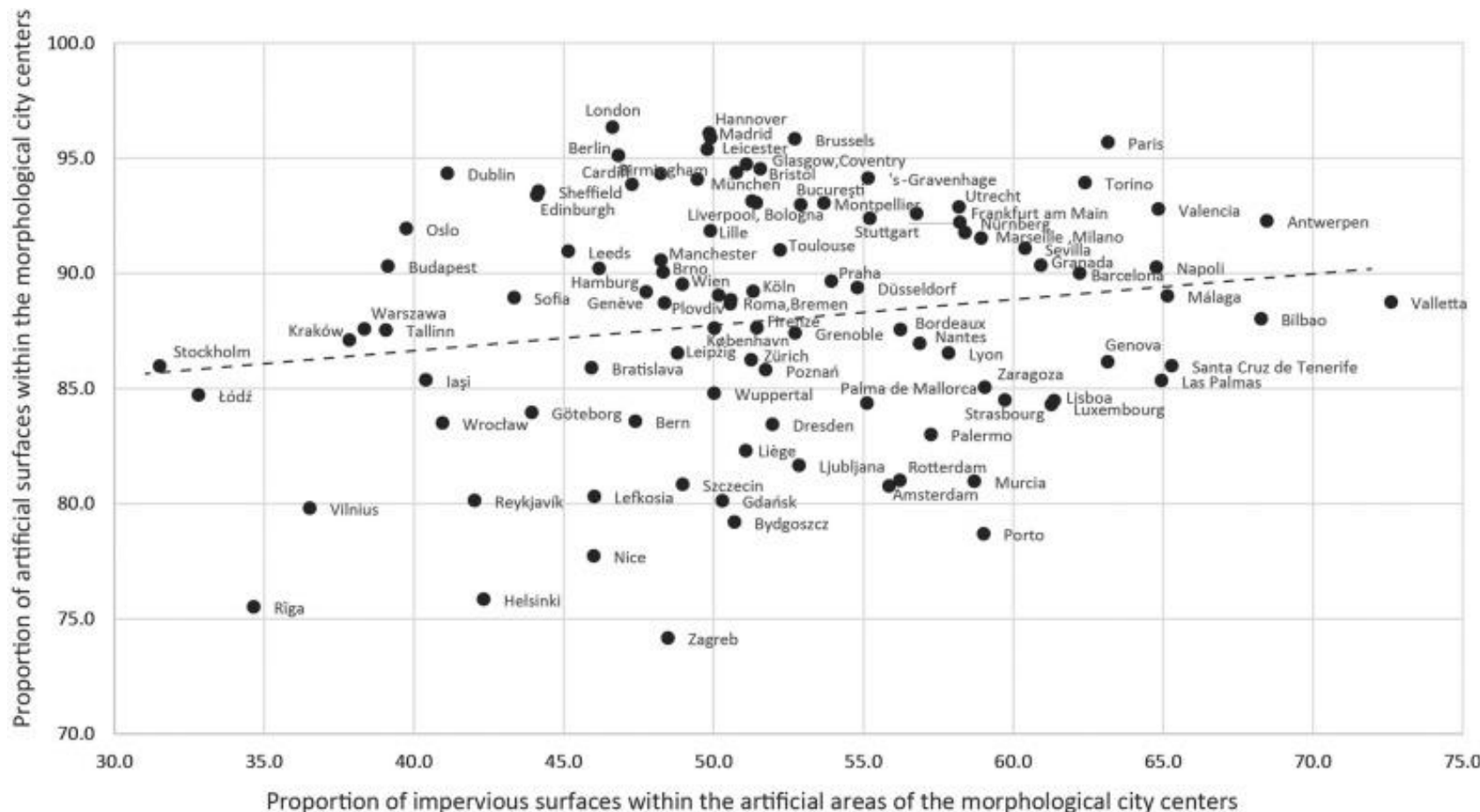
- **Concepts differ** : Soil sealing vs land take / soil health vs soil function
- **Tools as well** : cadaster vs photo interpretation

A national and/or regional measurement system is a pre-requisite to define and monitor no net land take trajectories

But a revised and shared European monitoring system would be necessary as well

Challenges 1/4

Defining and monitoring land take



Soil sealing or land take

Possible conflicts or contradiction between the two objectives?

DECOVILLE Antoine, FELTGEN Valérie, « Clarifying the EU objective of no net land take: A necessity to avoid the cure being worse than the disease », *Land Use Policy*, vol. 131, August 2023, p. 106722.

Challenges 2/4

The legacy of planning policies designed to encourage urbanisation

In most countries, the legal framework, the local tax systems, along with spatial planning policies, were **not initially designed to support trajectories aimed at reducing land consumption.**

Although soil protection laws exist (e.g. to protect natural areas, agriculture...) , the NNLT objective is being added to existing practices and objectives that might seem contradictory.



Challenges 3/4

An elusive socio-economic model

In all countries, programmes and initiatives exist that encourage urban renewal, brownfield regeneration, densification, and even renaturation of artificial spaces.

Public and private investments are activated to this end.

They encounter however key challenges :

- While they may be locally effective, they are often insufficient to structurally transform the socio-economic mechanisms that lead to increased land consumption.
- Producing enough housing at the right cost, with the right quality and at the right place becomes automatically more complex when land become a scarce resource, inducing social cohesion issues.

Challenges 4/4

Searching for new governance models

Throughout Europe, local authorities are required to negotiate 'horizontally' with other local authorities and stakeholders regarding their respective contributions to achieving the objective of no net land take.

This new approach (different from traditional cooperation in planning) requires a long and tenacious learning process.

The role of regions is key to set up an effective framework for defining green transition trajectories.

4

Insights



Lessons learnt 1/3

The need for an open debate and common understanding on the actual ecological value of space

#1 Towards common definitions and shared monitoring tools

A shared definition at the EU level would facilitate meaningful transnational discourse and collaboration.

The debate could help reconciling the aim for preserving soil quality and sustainable urbanisation.

Intergovernmental cooperation could play a valuable role to that end.

Lessons learnt 2/3

“No territory left behind” principle for building NNLT trajectories

#2 Building concerted local trajectories

Aligning stakeholders and conducting horizontal dialogue shall be done on the basis of shared and acceptable criteria,

Territorial allocation of “development rights” could consider historical efficiency regarding land take and take into account specific territorial needs,

Not everyone has the same needs, but all needs must be heard to ensure spatial justice and equity approach,

Understanding stakeholders needs and identifying win/win strategies is a role that regions can play in many countries (not all).

Lessons learnt 3/3

Searching new bases for the economy of land use

#3 The need for new tools and economic models

The economic model for NNLT has yet to be invented, but it is a reachable goal,.

New compensation tools and taxes or economic incentive mechanisms would be valuable instruments for transforming development and planning policies, which is a necessary condition for NNLT to succeed.

Some of these tools are already tested in various countries, among which Planning damage compensation, transferable development rights, larger territorial deals...

Key factors of success in times of backlash

The ESPON study indicates that the pursuit of **no net land take is a worthwhile endeavour**, provided it is not regarded as an end in itself.

The most promising approaches across Europe demonstrate that achieving **this objective must be integrated into a broader transformation of territorial and sectoral policies**, including housing, mobility, environmental protection, economic development and agriculture.

In its various forms of application, NNLT is increasingly becoming **an essential tool** to support territories in designing, through renewed territorial cooperation, their pathways **for green and just transition**.

2

Going further



METROLAND: a new ESPON Targeted Analysis

A new ESPON study that aims at providing an outlook at **Land Take Reduction and Net Zero Development** in Metropolitan areas

A project which encompasses the metropolitan areas of **Prague, Amsterdam, Vienna, Brussels-capital region, Lille, Torino and Riga.**

Their starting point : the **demand for construction** and the aspiration to organise **development in a strictly sustainable manner** with clear and measurable goals

METROLAND: a new ESPON Targeted Analysis

Main objectives of the project: To obtain evidence to drive change on the ground and, more broadly, to inform other cities and EU policymakers about what it takes to achieve NNLT

- ✓ to highlight the added value of **developing a territorial/metropolitan dimension to the European Green Deal** policies in general and biodiversity policies in particular
- ✓ to show evidence for **linking the next round of EU funding (2027-2034) with NNLT objectives**
- ✓ to **show locally the value of metropolitan cooperation** to reach NNLT objectives and compare the cooperation possibilities within the stakeholder countries;
- ✓ in connection with the draft European Directive on Soil Monitoring and Resilience, to share ideas on **how to enhance a real soil policy within NNLT policy** and analyse **how environmental accounting tools can be utilised** to calculate the true value of healthy soil.

METROLAND: a new ESPON Targeted Analysis

Non-use: How can planning help citizens transition to a less resource-heavy lifestyle, share buildings/goods/spaces, encourage them to carefully consider each new project and its real impacts, and require a smaller footprint per capita on land? How can landowners generate income from land without converting it into buildings?

Re-use/long-term use: How can we best utilise and circulate the land (and the buildings) that are already being used to meet our needs?

Optimise land consumption: How can we coordinate on the metropolitan level to ensure that land is being used most efficiently in terms of location and building typology while sustaining the quality of housing and public spaces?

Combined use: If we still need to use new land, how can green goals like biodiversity and rainwater management, among others, be met in new developments so that this land is not considered entirely “taken”?

METROLAND: a new ESPON Targeted Analysis

The questions that the project aims at answering:

- ✓ What are the current land use and the development patterns in the 7 metropolitan regions?
- ✓ What is the anticipated future land use in the metropolitan regions and the expected impacts of NNLT policies
- ✓ How do the various urban planning governance models compare with each other?
- ✓ How can regional / metropolitan governance contribute to minimising urban sprawl and enhancing ecosystem services? How can urban planning policies and urban development processes better anticipate future needs and enable reuse of land and buildings in line with the NNLT principle?

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<https://www.espon.eu/projects/nnlt-no-net-land-take-policies-and-practices-european-regions>

nicolas.rossignol@espon.eu