

Event: NNLT and Compensation, De Markten, Brussels, 9 September 2025

Synthesis

Peter Lacoere in conversation with Dris De Smet (De Standaard)

Visual communication plays a crucial role in raising awareness about land consumption. **Images clearly reveal the extent of urban development**, often shocking the public and generating strong media attention, which helps mobilise broader societal support.

Approaches to land take vary depending on cultural and legal contexts. In Norway, high levels of wealth contribute to significant land consumption. In Switzerland, attempts to introduce No Net Land Take (NNLT) through a referendum failed due to insufficient support, yet existing planning regulations are relatively strict. These rules have enabled effective downzoning, including reclaiming land left unused for over 15 years.

Despite growing awareness, current efforts remain insufficient to address future challenges. While enthusiasm for land protection persists, private-sector pressure is delaying governmental action. Cities are playing a leading role in advancing the agenda, but progress remains too slow in both scale and pace.

Block 1 – The need for urban green infrastructure

Cases :

- ESPON GILL - Rik De Vreese, European Forest Institute
- Spatial Planning Policy in Flanders/Nature Restoration Law/3-30-300 - Peter Vervoort, Department Omgeving
- Michiel Van Mele, Mechelen (EUI WATSUPS)
- Brussels Canal open space plan (BKP) – Sven Vercammen, perspective. Brussels

Diversity of green infrastructures

Green infrastructure relies strongly on the idea of interconnected green networks, **which must be diversified in form, function, and scale**—from large natural areas to greenery integrated into buildings.

The need of data

Although, measuring green infrastructure remains challenging due to data limitations. In spatial planning, indicators like distance or green ratios must be

combined with aspects such as visibility, quality, and actual park use. Visual contact with nature is especially important in dense urban areas.

Quantitative targets (such as the 3-30-300 rule) are useful but insufficient on their own. Beyond indicators, it is crucial that green spaces feel accessible, welcoming, and foster a sense of belonging among citizens. Social use and acceptance matter as much as numerical coverage.

The social impact

Green infrastructure **provides multiple ecosystem services, including significant but often underestimated health benefits**, and has a long-term positive economic impact.

Nevertheless, green gentrification is a major concern, as greener areas often correlate with rising property values and the displacement of low-income residents. Therefore, context-sensitive approaches are preferred over rigid targets.

Developing guidance tools is essential for establishing a clear vision and addressing these aspects in a participatory management.

BLOCK 2 – Achieving NNLT in Europe and Belgium

Cases :

- NNLT for the Lombardia Region - Politecnico di Milano
- City of Tournai - Hubert Deschamps
- Brussels Good Soil - Wouter Francois, Brussels Environment

Mapping, a tool for multi-level governance

Pursuing a goal such as the NNLT requires the ability to assess the current situation and the effects of the measures that will be taken. **Composite mapping is key tools to assess environmental quality, greening potential, and land value.**

The acquisition and use of this data is facilitated by effective coordination between the different levels of government. In addition, this data supports the completion of a shared strategy.

Achieving No Net Land Take (NNLT) requires solid data, and effective multi-level governance to conduct coordinated and monitored actions.

Promoting the collective value of land

Soil is considered a common good, and some legal instruments are intended to protect green spaces from private development. However, **legislation differs from one region to another. Strategies must therefore be adapted accordingly.** For example, Italy can rely on the recognition of soil as a common good, which is a powerful argument in conflict resolution. In Wallonia, urban charges are a mechanism for obtaining financial contributions from private actors.

The financial cost of NNLT

Taking action against soil sealing in urban areas requires significant financial resources for a city. **Acquiring land or desealing requires financial investment which many cities, sometimes in a delicate economic situation, cannot afford.** National/Regional authorities have an important role to play, both in terms of financial support and in adapting legislation.

Roadmaps such as the European Soil Strategy also reinforce cities in their initiatives, even if it does not involve financial support.

BLOCK 3 – Long term strategies for cities

Cases :

- Rewild the City - Linde Vertriest, City of Ghent
- Brussels Open – Griet Kuppens, Brussels Environment
- UMons - Chloé Duffaut & Kristel Mazy

Combination of multiple approaches

Urban greening and land protection can follow different approaches, **whether top-down planning, bottom-up initiatives, or a combination of both.** While some rely on a long-term, structured vision with clear priorities, others adopts a more flexible approach that encourages local initiative and scaling-up.

- ✓ In Ghent’s “Rewild the City” programme, grey infrastructure is actively desealed, supported by strong political commitment. **Downzoning is achieved through planning instruments that protect public green spaces and selected private lands alongside incentives and practical support for residents to green private gardens.** The project integrates a strong social dimension, targeting vulnerable neighbourhoods and offering hands-on assistance through dedicated teams. Rewilding is embedded within a wider set of municipal initiatives and supported by GIS-based data models to prioritise actions and manage soil sealing risks. However, high costs, limited budgets, and compensation rules remain major challenges, particularly for land acquisition.
- ✓ Brussels Open provides **a regional framework to support municipalities** through multi-level cooperation. A green corridor network and interregional collaboration form the backbone of a shared vision, while municipal projects must align with the regional framework to receive support.
- ✓ Research from UMons (SUNLOOP project) highlights the value of spontaneous urban nature, identifying its role in biodiversity conservation, ecological connectivity, and ecosystem services. In cities like Charleroi, mapping spontaneous green spaces has shifted perceptions, with **non-intervention increasingly considered a viable nature-based solution.** These areas are now being assessed strategically, particularly brownfields, to balance economic development and long-term green infrastructure goals.

Planning as a glue

Planning is seen as essential to effectively develop green infrastructure, protect open spaces from densification, and move beyond the sole objective of No Net Land Take (NNLT) toward broader environmental and social gains. Many underused or vacant lands offer significant potential for repurposing. Designing a plan establishes a shared vision and links the various approaches. This allows multiple actions to contribute to a common goal within a well-defined framework.

Key takeaways

- ✓ **“Urban green works for us”**. We need it, it contributes to collective and social well-being and to everyone's health, which in turn generates economic benefits. The added value is not only aesthetic.
- ✓ **Active land policy**. “Sponge city”, “Perforated city” are various concept which call for a better balance between greening and densification. Pursuing such models requires active mobilization of public authorities. In this regard, land ownership is essential. Making space for Nature requires control over the land we wish to preserve.
- ✓ **Political courage** is necessary to confront landowners and give the lands a purpose that serves the common good and the local political vision.
- ✓ **Combine actions**, protection and prevention contribute to the same objective. We can use downzoning in a preventing way, desealing in a restauring way.
- ✓ **Multi-level governance** is essential for the practical implementation of the NNLT. Aligning regional and municipal objectives enables better mapping and tangible actions embedded in a strategic plans.