



COUNCIL OF EUROPE

EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE CONVENTION

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Sustainable Landscapes and Economy

On the inestimable natural and human value of the landscape

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Civil Society and the European Landscape Convention – Our commitment

When people hear the term landscape they mostly think about nice scenery or the beautiful landscape they visited at their last holiday. But the European Landscape Convention is built on a different definition, one dating back 200 years to Alexander von Humboldt and still as relevant and true today: landscape as the living canvass on which human and nature interact, the territory where all relevant human activities take place. When we talk about landscape we talk about the great challenges of our age: climate change, the right to free access to clean water and clean air, a healthy environment just as much as economic development and social well being. The great conflicts of our time are reflected in the landscape, they change and form our landscape and they take place in the landscape. With the new energy policies and the greening of our energy production we have to build wind turbines, solar energy plants, water energy plants, produce bio mass and build a bigger, more intelligent grid system. All these activities cause major conflicts between land owners, politicians, planners, entrepreneurs, local citizens and those who use the same landscape for leisure and recreation. They cause conflicts between food and plate and raise fundamental debates about our living style, social cohesion and economic models. And this is but one of the many challenges of our time.

Landscape is also the source of identity and the mirror of societies. The question of who has the right to decide about the future of our landscapes is a highly political one – and also a highly emotional one.

Are it the politicians, the forces of economy and lobby organizations, the land owners or the people who live in a region – and what voice do all the other people have, who know and love a landscape, who go there for holiday or feel related to it through their own history, that of their family or social group. These are difficult questions and they touch the heart of the key principles of the Council of Europe: human rights, rule of the law and democracy, especially participative democracy. The European Landscape Convention does tackle these questions and tries to give answers, not in a mandatory style, but in setting a framework for good practices in decision making, governance, policy making and participation of all relevant groups. This makes the European Landscape Convention so powerful and so attractive to civil society. This is the reason, why my own organization, CIVILSCAPE, was explicitly founded on the principles of the European Landscape Convention.

It also makes the European Landscape Convention attractive to other international bodies. The European Union just recently has implemented the Convention into the regulations for the Environment Impact Assessment – the most important tool for planning in the EU. It were the NGOs who had advocated for this decision, it was taken up by the European Commission and finally adopted by the European Parliament. The European Landscape Convention is discussed within the Rio 20+ process and serves as a model for the United Nations to draft a global landscape convention. It is a powerful tool, but even within the Council of Europe and the signatory states we still have to advocate it and show its potential and benefits.

For this let me give you just one example out of the daily practice of the many grass root organizations working with the Convention. Just recently I was privileged to give report on the activities of an Italian NGO to the Congress of iNGOs at the Council of Europe. Libera Terra (Free Land) works hand in hand with the Italian state in the fight on the Mafia. They get allocated land by the state, which was taken from Mafia Clans. Nobody wanted to use this land for fear of the mob. But this NGO recreates the land, creates job opportunities in the backwaters of Sicily and Southern Italy, re-invents traditional methods of land use with modern tools, offers education and qualification to young people, fosters sustainable tourism and markets Mafia-free products not just at home but also abroad. It brings together economy, ecology, rule of the law and civil engagement, restores the dignity of the people and fights crime. And the one word which binds all these activities together for Libera Terra is: landscape. It is landscape which is not just the physical place in which the activities take place, landscape is also the cultural construct, the social reality and the future vision. No other term can combine man and nature, society and the individual, all the many activities of economy, ecology, development, politics and human needs and visions, individual as well as for the whole society, so perfectly than landscape.

It is this definition of landscape which lies at the heart of the European Landscape Convention and it is this vision of landscape development which did drive the authors of the convention. We all know that these different aspects never come in close harmony. They are competing with each other, economy against ecology, production of renewable energy against production of food, access to clean water, resources and vital services for everyone against financial interests and economic profit making, to name just a few of the daily conflicts we face. But landscape helps us to understand these conflicts better, because it is here they are acted out physically as well as mentally. And the European Landscape Convention does offer tools to moderate such conflicts and to find solutions in a democratic and participative way, thereby tempering the conflicts and avoiding violent outbreaks and great social and political strains.

In this spirit our working group on landscape inside the Conference of iNGOs is preparing a declaration on territorial democracy to stress the importance of a democratic and participative process in developing our future landscapes and dealing with the many challenges posed to us. The

Conference of iNGOs has developed a set of tools for a practical approach in participative processes and good practice for both sides in this dialogue, which fits hand into glove to the recommendations for the implementation of the European Landscape Convention approved by the Council of Ministers. These tool kits refer to the governments and administrations as well as the civil society organizations on all levels, from local to international. Because we all are aware of the importance of European conventions and national laws to implement them, but most of the daily work with landscape is done on the local and regional level. And of course the NGOs represented in the Conference of iNGOs of the Council of Europe are international umbrella organizations, but they consist of thousands of members, individual and associations, who do the grass root work right down in the field on an every-day basis.

The European Landscape Convention points us to a path of co-operation between all the actors in the field, mainly the public administration and policy on one side and the civil society and NGOs on the other: because we need to work hand in hand in these fundamental matters for our future, not in total harmony and single mindedness, but in a well organized and moderated dialogue and permanent debate, an exchange of ideas and a competition for the best models for our future landscapes – and our future societies. As a practical example I can point to the landscape fora, organized through Civilscape. In the last three years we had 10 landscape fora held from the Baltic to the Eastern Mediterranean – the latest just a few days ago in Ankara. All these conferences were organized as a co-operation between civil society organizations, local and regional governments and sometimes also with national governments e.g. in the Baltic as well as the Balkan. The Council of Europe was represented at most of these events and I would like to thank the Council of Europe, and especially Maguelonne Dejant-Pons, for the fruitful and continuous co-operation in bringing the European Landscape Convention to life.