The Challenge of Sustainable Brownfield Regeneration in Europe

European researchers have recently addressed current Europe- and nationwide approaches to promoting and delivering sustainable brownfield regeneration. The study highlights that sustainable brownfield soil reuse or site regeneration is not being promoted, enabled or facilitated in Europe by the initiatives currently being adopted. Further efforts are still needed to overcome current obstacles to the effective and efficient redevelopment of brownfield sites.

The process of industrial change has resulted in the creation of so-called "brownfields" across Europe, particularly in urban areas. Brownfields are sites that have been affected by the former uses of the site or surrounding land, are derelict or underused, and may have contamination problems. They are often marginally viable or even non-viable as they are not competitive compared to greenfields without public intervention. Therefore, these sites present particular challenges to national and regional policymakers, including the remediation of hazards to human beings, groundwater and ecosystems, and the need to facilitate the reintegration of rehabilitated sites into the property market and to ensure that they can be regenerated for new economic uses. While management of contaminated land aims to manage or eliminate risks, the primary objective of brownfield redevelopment is the reuse of the land and the reintegration of the properties into the economic cycle. The fact that brownfield regeneration avoids the consumption of greenfield sites means it is often regarded as sustainable and thus worthy of public funding.

In a recent study carried out under the EU-funded project RESCUE¹, European researchers have analysed the benefits and deficiencies of current financial, fiscal, legal, regulatory and policy initiatives with direct or indirect relevance to sustainable brownfield regeneration. To this end, the authors first looked at the incentives Europe-wide, and then analysed in more detail the incentives in some Member States, namely Germany, the United Kingdom and France. Finally, the authors proposed solutions to address the defined deficiencies.

The results of the analysis show that current initiatives are only partially effective in facilitating brownfield regeneration through reuse of soil/construction waste, maintenance of heritage buildings, land use/urban design and a citizen participation process.

The authors highlight that little attention is given to the sustainability of the methods used to regenerate brownfield sites. As the majority of the brownfield regeneration projects in Europe are subsidized by the European Commission through the Structural Funding support system, the authors propose to introduce a set of sustainability criteria to guide this funding scheme towards sustainable brownfield projects.

Furthermore, according to the study, integrated land management policies addressing brownfield regeneration should focus on market-led initiatives (indirect incentives, gap-finding, etc.) but also enable public intervention. Consequently, policies should be designed to:

- Eliminate the present legal obstacles to brownfield regeneration (i.e. clarifying ambiguous legal liability).
- Provide legal incentives/regulations and direct and indirect financial incentives to encourage brownfield development and discourage greenfield development.
- Place a high 'tax' on greenfield development in order to discourage it.
- Reduce public opposition to ‘derelict land’ through information campaigns on the benefits of regenerating and reusing this type of site.

This study highlights the importance of taking into consideration sustainability issues when choosing alternative site uses and regeneration methods for brownfields, as well as the relevance of adequate citizen participation. The results of this study may be useful for policy makers when considering changes to current policy and practice to improve the delivery of sustainable brownfield regeneration in Europe.

¹The RESCUE project “Regeneration of European Sites on Cities and the Urban Environment” (http://www.rescue-europe.com), is supported by the EC 5th Framework Programme contributing the implementation of Key Action no 4: “The city of tomorrow and cultural heritage” within the "Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development" programme.


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Theme(s): Land use, sustainable development and policy assessment

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To cite this article/service: "Science for Environment policy": European Commission DG Environment News Alert Service, edited by BIO Intelligence Service.