The Council of Europe is an intergovernmental organisation founded in 1949. Its headquarters are in Strasbourg, France, and it has 46 member states. Its main objectives are to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law and to seek common solutions to the main problems facing European society today. It is active in promoting sustainable spatial development in line with Recommendation Rec. (2002) 1 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the Guiding principles for sustainable spatial development of the European Continent (PD5DCE-CEMAT), adopted at the 12th Session of the European Conference of Ministers responsible for Regional Planning (CEMAT) of Council of Europe member states. These seek to protect Europeans’ quality of life and well-being taking into account landscape, cultural and natural values.

The Action Plan adopted by heads of state and government of Council of Europe member states in Warsaw on 17 May 2005 at the Third Summit has a section on “promoting sustainable development” which reads: “We are committed to improving the quality of life for citizens. The Council of Europe shall therefore, on the basis of the existing instruments, further develop and support integrated policies in the fields of environment, landscape, spatial planning and prevention and management of natural disasters, in a sustainable development perspective”.

I. SPATIAL PLANNING: EUROPEAN CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR REGIONAL PLANNING (CEMAT)

The Council of Europe actively promotes sustainable spatial development in line with the Recommendation Rec (2002) 1 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to Member States on the Guiding Principles for Sustainable Spatial Development of the European Continent (GPSSDEC), previously adopted by the European Conference of Ministers responsible for Regional Planning (CEMAT). The aim is to bring the economic and social requirements to be met by the territory into harmony with its ecological and cultural functions and therefore to contribute to long-term, large-scale and balanced spatial development.

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1 As at 12 April 2006: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

2 See also the Ljubljana Declaration on the territorial dimension of sustainable development, in: 13th European Conference of Ministers responsible for Regional/ Spatial Planning (CEMAT), Ljubljana (Slovenia), 16-17 September 2003, Documents of the Conference, Council of Europe Publishing, Territory and Landscape Series, 2005, No 1.

One section of the Guiding Principles concerns “urban areas” and another “Encouraging development generated by urban functions and improving the relationship between the town and the countryside”.

Extract from the GPSSDEC-CEMAT

“2. Urban areas

51. In order to achieve the objective of polycentric development of the European settlement structure, further measures, in addition to strengthening economic potential, are proposed for achieving sustainable development in towns and cities. These include:

– developing strategies adapted to the local context and aimed at overcoming the effects of economic restructuring;
– controlling the expansion of urban areas (urban sprawl): limiting trends towards suburbanisation by increasing the supply of building land in towns and cities, activation of gap sites and use of space-saving building methods, developing building land near traffic nodes and railway stations, promoting inner urban development, raising the quality of living and housing conditions in urban areas, which includes the conservation of existing ecosystems and the creation of new green areas and biotopes;
– regenerating deprived neighbourhoods and producing a mix of activities and social groups within the urban structure, particularly in cities where areas of social exclusion are developing;
– carefully managing the urban ecosystem, particularly with regard to open and green spaces, water, energy, waste and noise;
– developing effective, but at the same time environmentally-friendly public transport designed to contribute to sustainable mobility;
– establishing planning bodies across local authority boundaries between individual towns and communes to co-ordinate the planning and implementation of measures;
– conserving and enhancing the cultural heritage;
– developing networks of towns.

52. The towns and cities in the new member states face special challenges, such as how to finance the construction of dwellings and how to maintain and improve the housing stock, especially reconstruction and the adjustment to new needs (increased car ownership, demand for architectural quality and increasing energy efficiency). New trends towards suburbanisation and segregation resulting from the backlog demand for home ownership can be countered by increasing the supply of building land in the agglomerations.”

The 13th Session of the European Conference of Ministers responsible for Regional Planning (CEMAT), held in Ljubljana (Slovenia) on 16 and 17 September 2003, was a key political event in the implementation of strategies and visions for sustainable spatial development of the European Continent. The Ljubljana Declaration on the territorial dimension of sustainable development emphasizes territory as the indispensable medium and framework for man’s settlement and activity, and, as a result, a basis for sustainable development. It considers notably that relevant policies must be further improved in order to support the balanced polycentric development of the European continent and the formation of functional urban regions, including networks of small and medium-sized towns and of rural settlements.

An International CEMAT Seminar organised by the Council of Europe in co-operation with the Republic of Slovenia and the European Council of Town Planners within the framework of the Working Programme of the CEMAT on “Urban management in Networking Europe”, was organised in Bled, in Slovenia, on 17-18 November 2005.

The 14th Session of the European Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning (CEMAT) will be held in Portugal in 2006 on the theme: “Networks for Sustainable Spatial Development of the European Continent – Building bridges across Europe”.

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II. LANDSCAPE: THE EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE CONVENTION

Adopted in Florence (Italy) on 20 October 2000 and came into force on 1st March 2004, the European Landscape Convention is aimed at promoting the protection, management and planning of European landscapes and organising European co-operation on landscape issues. It is the first international treaty to be exclusively concerned with all dimensions of European landscape. It applies to the entire territory of the Parties and relates to natural, urban and peri-urban areas, whether on land, water or sea. It therefore concerns not just remarkable landscapes but also ordinary everyday landscapes and blighted areas.

The Convention represents an important contribution to the implementation of the objectives of the Council of Europe: these seek to protect Europeans’ quality of life and well-being taking into account landscape, cultural and natural values. The Member States of the Council of Europe signatory to the European Landscape Convention declared their concern to achieve sustainable development based on a balanced and harmonious relationship between social needs, economic activity and the environment. The cultural dimension is also of fundamental importance.

Organised on a regular basis since 2002, the meetings of the Workshops for the implementation of the European Landscape Convention take a detailed look at the implementation of various aspects of the Convention. Special emphasis is given to the experiences of the state hosting the meeting. A genuine forum for sharing practice and ideas, these meetings are also an opportunity to present new concepts and achievements in connection with the European Landscape Convention.

Three meetings of the Workshops for the implementation of the European Landscape Convention have been held so far, in an effort to promote discussion and provide a showcase for practical experiences and examples: on 23 and 24 May 2002 and on 27 and 28 November 2003 in Strasbourg and on 16 and 17 June 2005 in Cork. The following topics were examined:

– Landscape policies: the contribution to the well-being of European citizens and to sustainable development (social, economic, cultural and ecological aspects);
– Identification and assessment of the landscape and landscape quality objectives, using both cultural and natural resources;
– Awareness-raising, training and education;
– Innovative tools for the protection, management and planning of landscape.
– Integration of landscapes in international policies and programmes and transfrontier landscapes;
– Landscape and individual and social well-being;
– Spatial planning and landscape;
– Landscapes for urban, suburban and peri-urban areas.

Two further meetings of the Workshops for the implementation of the European Landscape Convention are organised in 2006:

– in Ljubljana, Slovenia, on 11 and 12 May 2006 on “Landscape and society”;
– in Girona, Spain, on 28 and 29 September 2006 on “Landscape quality objectives: from theory to practice”.

Contemporary lifestyles are such that people increasingly aspire to rediscover an unspoiled setting and to preserve their natural as well as cultural heritage. As a result of this growing social demand, landscape gains or regains prestige and begins to be perceived as a major component of sustainable development policies.

Website of the European Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning (CEMAT): http://www.coe.int/CEMAT
Website of the European Landscape Convention: http://www.coe.int/EuropeanLandscapeConvention
Website of the Naturopa magazine of the Council of Europe: http://www.coe.int/naturopa (see in particular issue 100/2003 on “Town and sustainable development”)