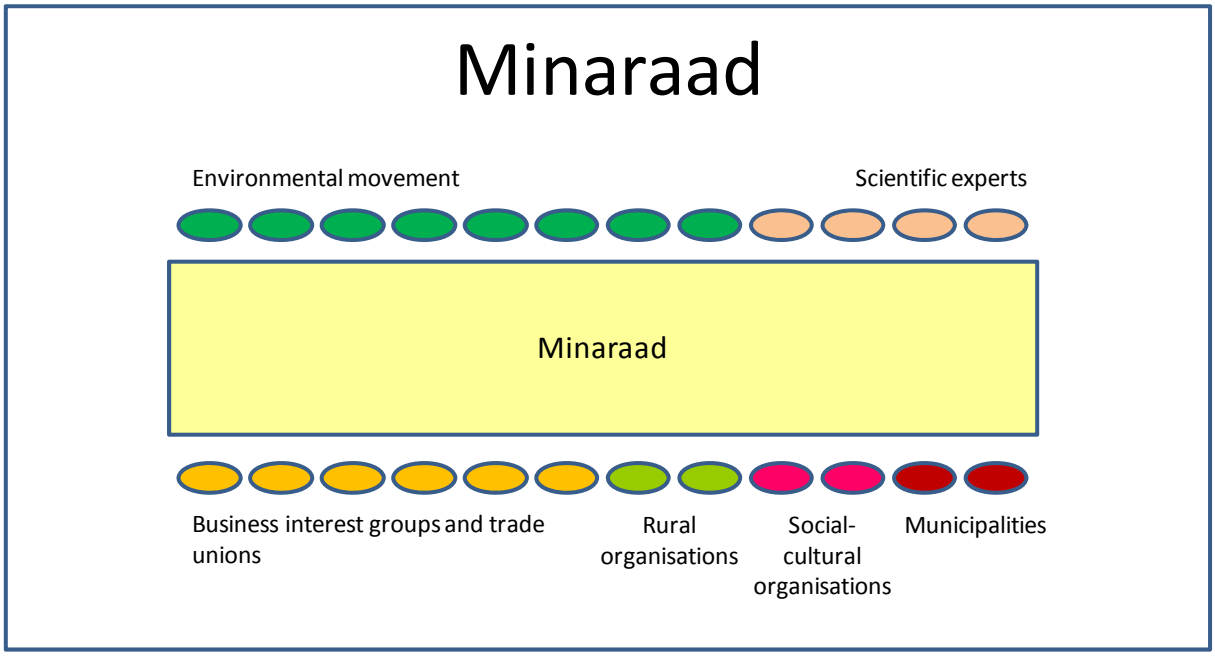
GREENWORK(S)!
Developing open space in peri-urban areas
Jan Verheeke, Bruges, 12th October 2010

Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning! I have not been member or participant in one of the networks or projects that are represented in this conference; nevertheless, I have followed some of them with interest. Therefore, it is a true honor for me to give this introductory speech.

I.

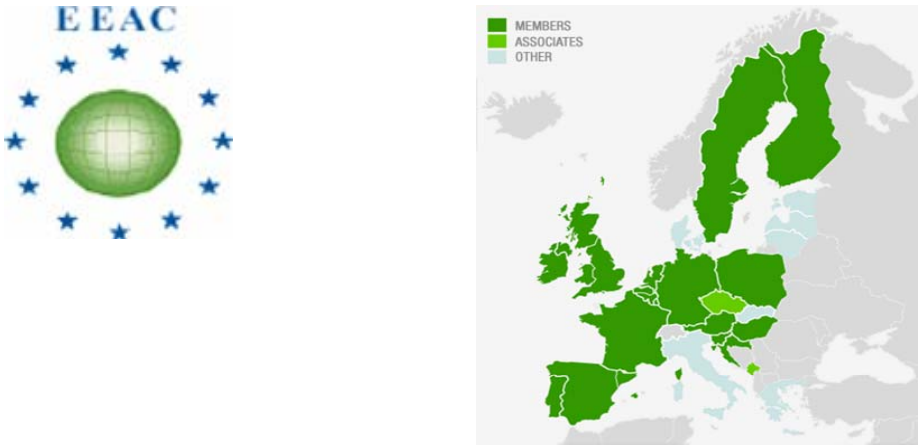
First of all, I'll give a short introduction to the institution I come from, the Minaraad – the advisory council on environmental and nature protection policy of the Flemish government.



This council is composed of 24 members. 8 of them represent environmental NGO's; 6 represent the business interest groups and trade unions; 2 represent rural organizations. Those 16 members are already sufficient to discuss the topic of this conference: land management in peri-urban areas. But besides that, there are 4 scientific or independent experts, 2 members that represent social-cultural organizations and 2 members that represent municipalities and provinces. The council meets every month, in order to give advice upon 5 tot 10 strategic or very concrete policy questions.

The EEAC then is, as has been said, a network of 27 comparable councils within 17 member-states.

EEAC



The **similarity** between those councils is that they give advice on environmental or sustainability policy matters, and this in a rather independent way. But at the same time, there are **large differences**. Some specialize into environmental matters, others do on sustainable development. Some are composed of stakeholders, others have scientists as members. Some give very frequently advices, others produce just some advices in a year, but then very elaborate ones. The yearly conference of the EEAC takes place within a few days, here in Bruges as well. The theme is focused on “sustainable land use”, and elements of this talk are inspired by the “statement” that will result out of that conference.

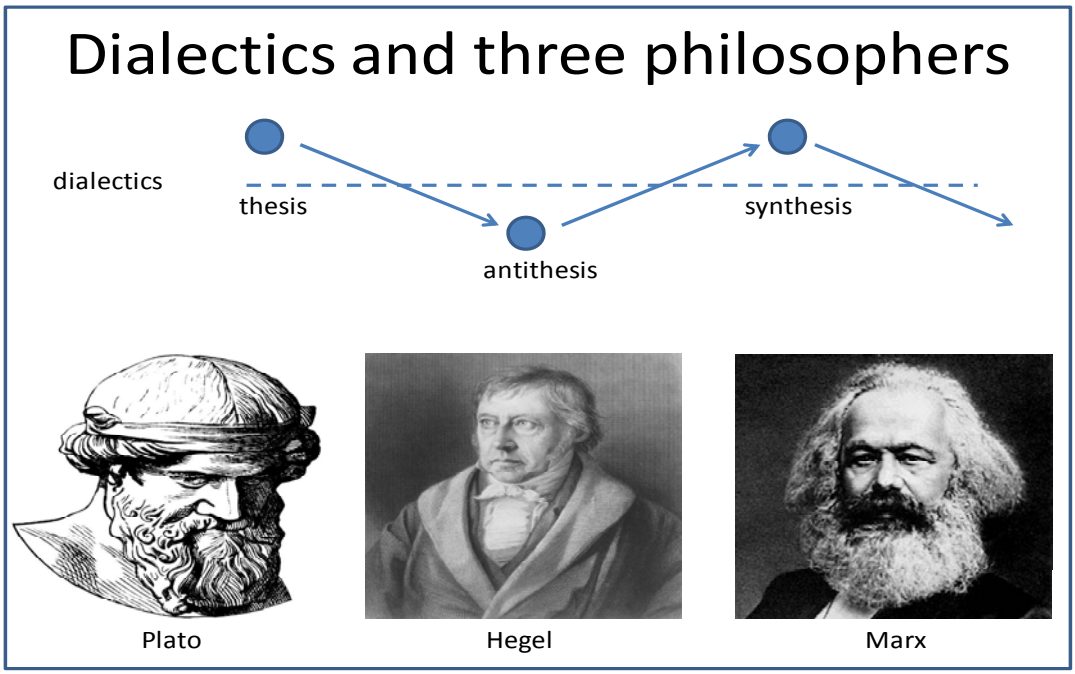
II.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When first I heard about this conference and about the projects that were brought together, I thought: what a wonderful thing is happening here! All those **concrete, specific** actions that are reassembled into projects … And they all try and manage some very **general, even abstract**, problems – problems of spatial quality in urbanizing regions. This contrast – *of the concrete, specific on the one hand and the general, abstract on the other hand* – made me think of **dialectics**. You probably know the scheme: a certain **thesis** (or position) – mostly of more abstract nature – is contradicted by an **antithesis** (or juxtaposition). Both then influence and correct each other and finally, we get a qualitatively richer **synthesis** (or composition).

The scheme originated in ancient Greece. And, implicitly or explicitly, “dialectics” has remained central to the history of Western science and philosophy.

In Western **science**, because the interplay and mutual correction of the abstract and the concrete has continuously been pivotal to Western science.



And in Western philosophy. Three philosophers stand out in the dialectical tradition. **Plato** – who used it as a methodological device. **Hegel** – who saw in it a scheme to explain the history of human thinking and politics – idealistic dialectics. And **Marx**, who also made a historical theory based on that scheme, but the other way round as Hegel did – materialistic dialectics.

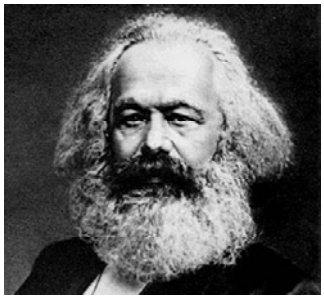
III.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

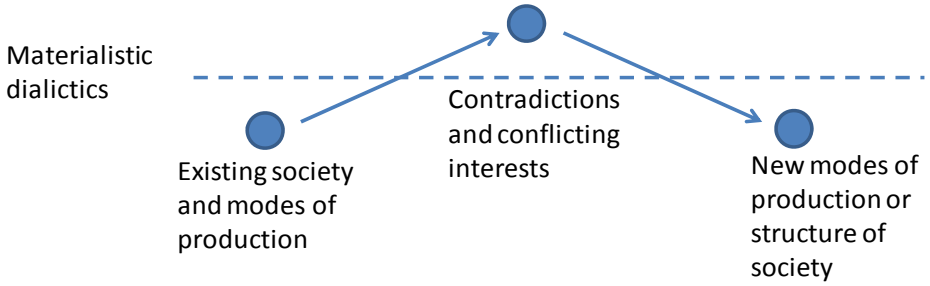
We will now use the images of these three thinkers to structure this talk – but, as good dialectician, we will start the other way round, with Marx. Karl Marx criticized that Hegel was "standing on his head," and was very proud about "putting him back on his feet", conceiving what is now known as **materialist or Marxist dialectics**.

Marx started with the existing society, with its concrete mode of production and consumption and its **vested, material interests**. In this society, he discerned **contradictions**, not only between classes, but also between town versus countryside and between richer and poorer nations or colonies. These contradictions express themselves at the level of ideas: as they become open **conflicts**, they then lead to **new modes** of production and to a renewed structure of society. This is, in a very short and simple way, the Marxian theory of history explained.

Materialistic dialectics



Marx



Now, the interesting thing is that we can describe the problem of land use as one of the existing structure of society, combined with the contradictions and conflicting interests that arise from it. When one takes a world-map and one tries to plot the **cities that have a high concentration** of advanced producer services … and **connectivity** with similar services in other cities – as the British think tank "*Globalization and World Cities*" (GaWC) has done – one gets an overview of the cities that have a high grade of integration into the world city network.

World class cities – 2000

What you see here is **a first map** of this exercise. GaWC distinguishes between alpha, beta and gamma level cities, and here the alpha-cities are plotted **for the year 2000**. The next map shows a similar exercise for the year 2004.

You will have perceived that changes have taken place. Some dots (rather in the West) have disappeared, and others (rather in the East) have appeared or have fattened. In these places, city boundaries have moved, people have immigrated and population densities are increasing. All this shows us – and a dialectician would like to hear it – that we are dealing with **a certain, uncontestable, change** in the world.

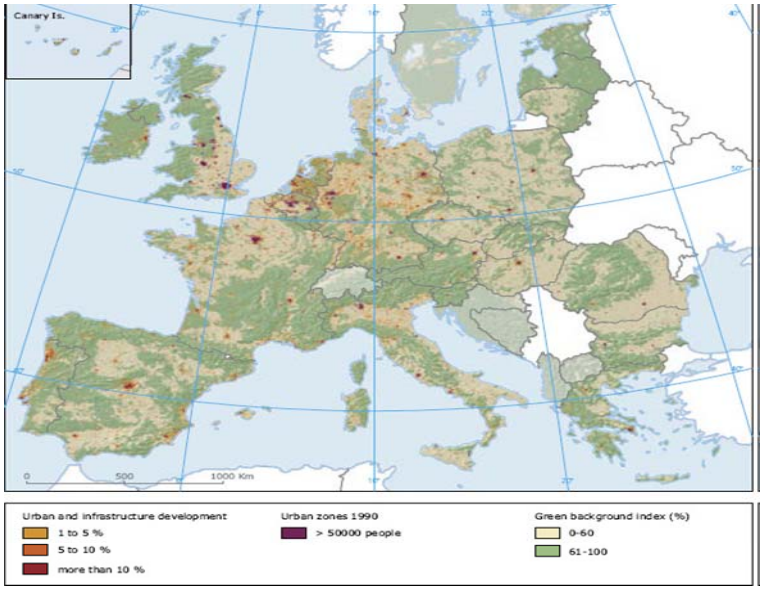
I think the most plausible and interesting model for explaining this change is to be found in **World Systems Theory** – or variants thereof. In a simplified way, a world system can be seen as a structured cloud of spatially unevenly distributed interactions. There are concentrations of monopolized – and therefore high-profit – production-activities in a number of **core-zones or -cities**. These concentrations are complemented by the movement of less profitable activities and/or of extraction activities to **semi-peripheral and peripheral zones**. **Globalization** is then the process by which more and more interactions, in more and more zones, are incorporated in this system.

Another interesting feature – again, a dialectician would like to hear it – is that we can discern a time-line of constant rise and fall, destruction and reconstruction, tension and (sometimes) resolution of the tension ... Here, on the map for 2008, you see this dynamics further at work.

World class cities – 2008

The dots that represent world class cities have moved more Eastward. And in the shadow, not on this map, is the complementary fact that more and more cheap labour and materials are incorporated from outside into the system. I think this systems dynamics is not only unmistakably there, but is **unavoidable** as well. We have to deal with the fact that we operate within this system, and try and steer it into a better direction. Now, when we zoom in into the urbanized and urbanizing Europe, we see that this pattern is **replicated** at the continental scale. But, as Europe is situated in a core zone in the world, more than three-quarters of the population is living in urban areas.

Europe as an urbanized region

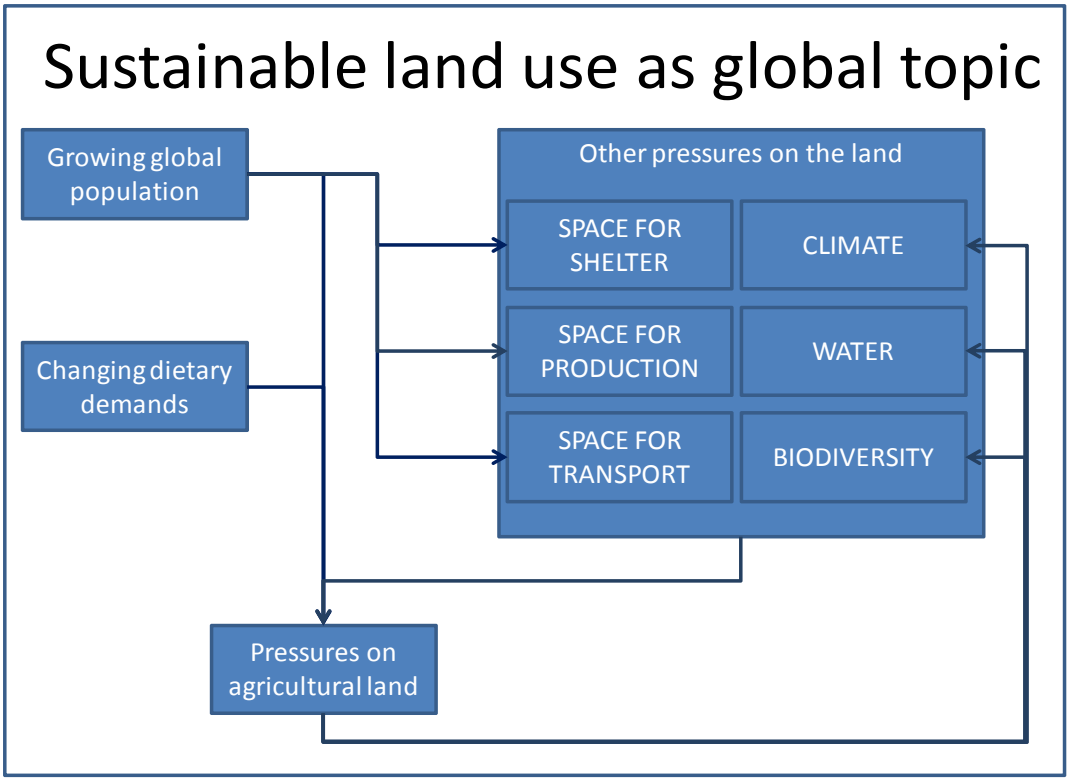


Not only are people immigrating into cities, there is also an opposing trend to "**counter-urbanization**" or outward emigration, leading to **urban sprawl**. As a result, in some areas – such as Flanders – one cannot find much rural area anymore.

Indeed, outside city regions, there are the **rural areas**. These are in connection with the urban regions, and are very much influenced by them. The profitability of agriculture is related not only to climatic and soil conditions, but also to the chances that are offered by nearby cities and infrastructures as well. Where agriculture is less profitable, there is a trend towards **land abandonment**.

And, moreover, within the regions and the cities as well, the structure of core and periphery is **replicated**. There are what could be called "citadels", or zones where business and government are concentrated and which are, by design, often insulated from the rest of the city. There are centrally located industrial sites and there are the waterfronts – which are still in use for trade and productive activities, or which can be re-used for service-oriented activities. There are the gentrified neighborhoods, or the residential locations in which the managers, professionals and technicians are living. And there are the poorer parts of the cities, in which often the people are situated that have not much chance left on the labor market.

Now, when we combine this world system – which is replicated within Europe etc. – with the **global population**, predicted by the UN to grow to 9 billion by 2050, … there is an ever increasing risk that the world's remaining resources are not being managed in a sustainable way. We now come back to land use.

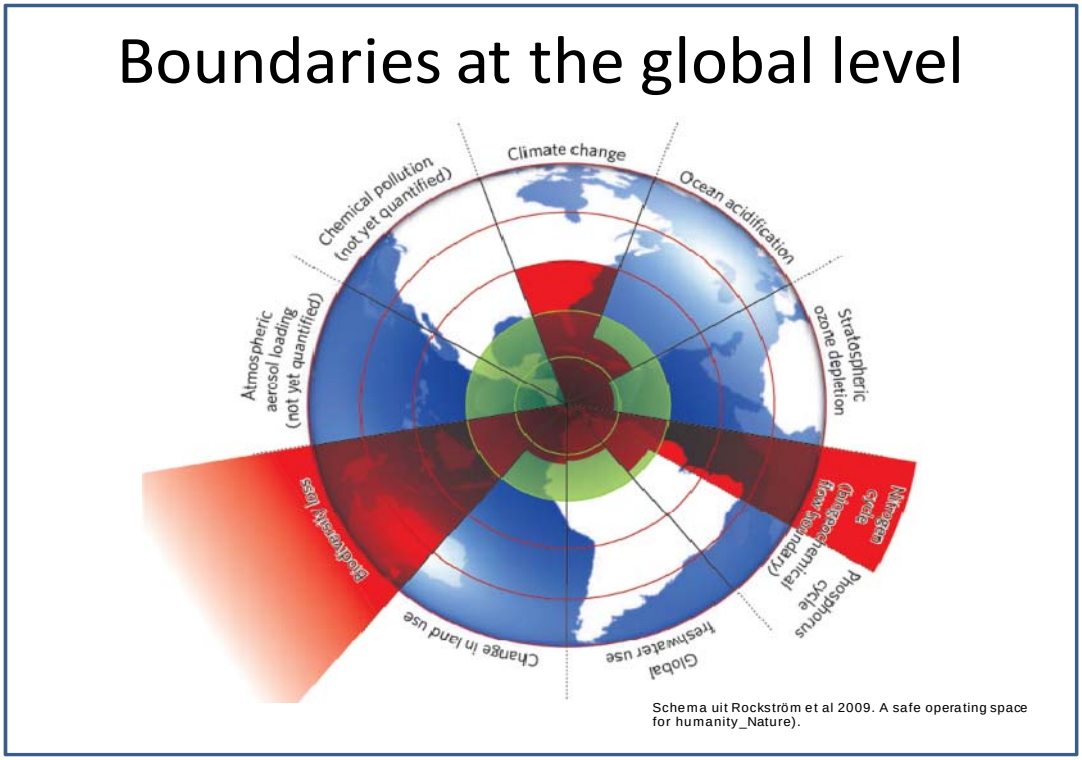


Human societies must provide **food** for this rapidly growing world population, and combined with changing **dietary demands** this increases pressures on agricultural land. Moreover, **other pressures** aggravate this challenge. For example, societies must also deal with the consequences of **climate change** and diminishing **water supplies**, and manage and conserve **biodiversity**.

The growing world population, combined with the needs for **housing**, **production** and **infrastructure** even increase the pressure on the land. These needs cannot be denied, as the world system moves further as described, and as, moreover, access to shelter is a basic human right. Finally, **agriculture** itself contributes to the pressures on the land. For example, soil and water depletion need to be controlled in order to safeguard the ecosystems services which underpin agricultural productivity.

Taken together, these pressures increase the risks of global conflicts, confrontations and uncontrolled migration – something which would nicely fit in the Marxian way of thinking dialectics.

That this evolution is significant, is shown by a graph that was publicized in Nature, a few months ago.



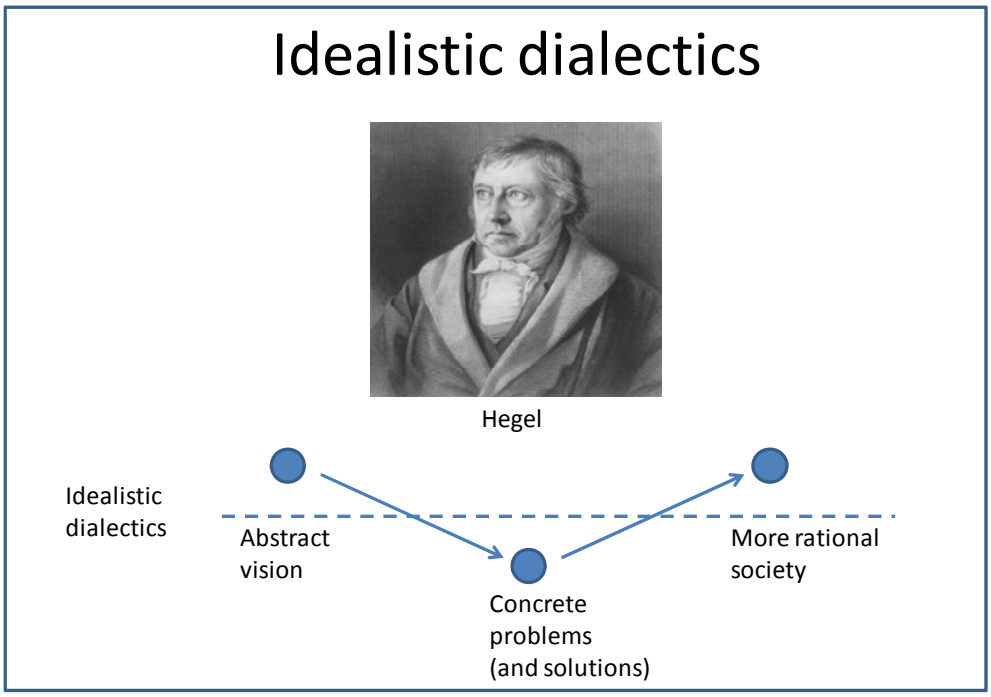
The theme of the paper was to find out for which environmental resources, humanity had crossed, or was crossing borders – I mean, beyond sustainable use. The green circle then represents the zone of sustainable use, and the different sectors represent the diverse environmental resources – and at the same time the environmental problems at hand. The interesting thing for this conference is that, apart from climate change, **two themes seem to stand**

out: the disturbance of the nitrogen cycle, and the loss of biodiversity. Both are in a significant way related to land use.

IV.

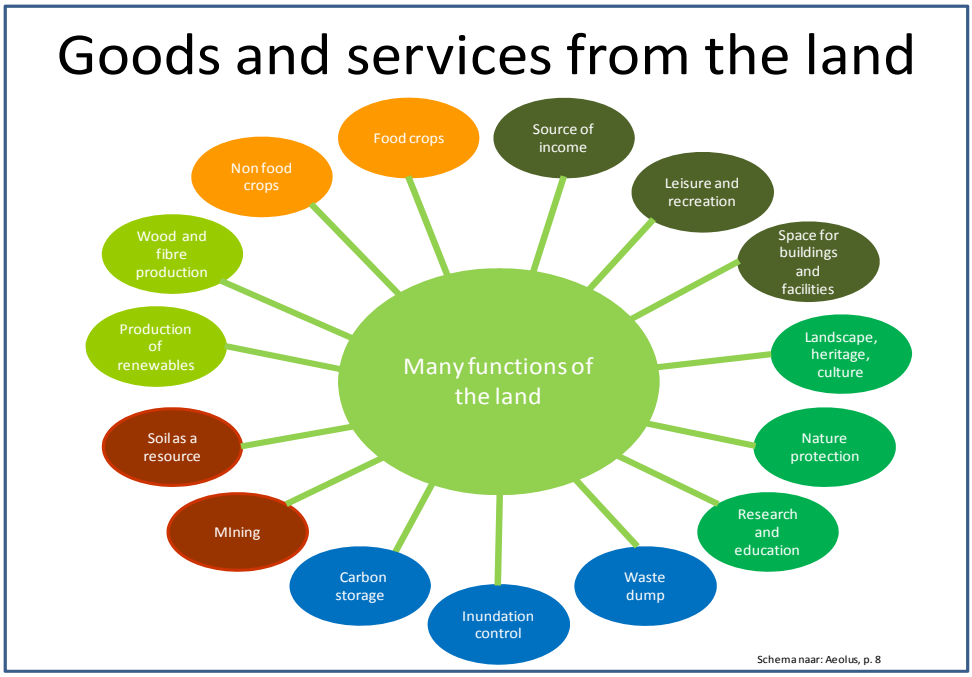
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I think it is time to turn back to Hegel. As you remember, Hegel saw history as a dialectical process, by which **ever more rationality** was reached, and this would be expressed in the **modern state and politics**. As many of us here in this room, in one way or another, work for the state or government institutions, we cannot be anything else but **followers of Hegel**, and try and figure out how to solve or manage the problematic trends as sketched before.



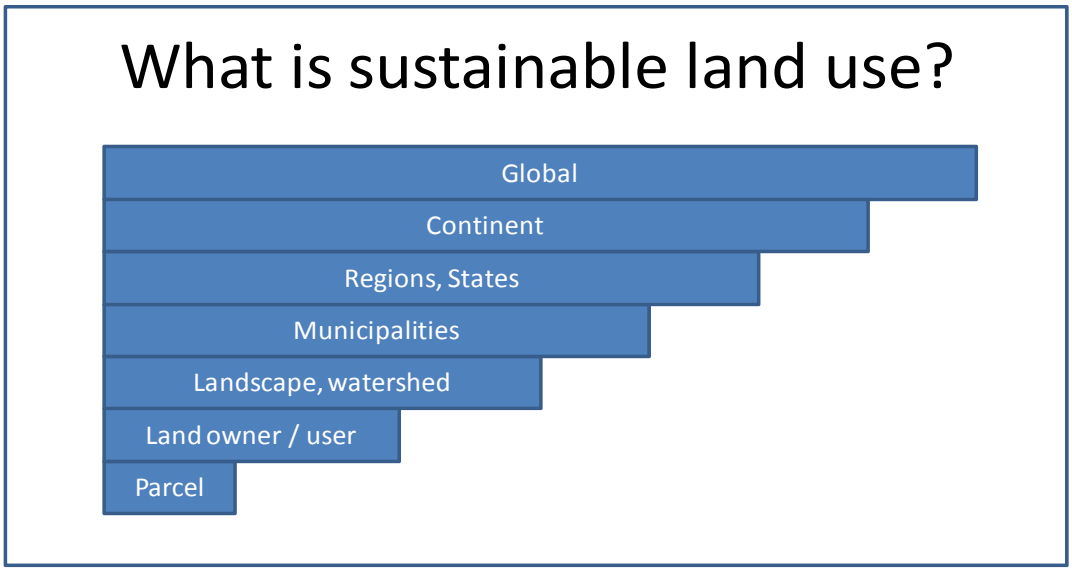
Hegel was **an idealist** – he saw processes start from an abstract ideal. In that way, we will start with an image of sustainable land use, and then confront it with its problematic aspects, in order to suggest solutions.

As we are talking about land management – and the relationship between city and rural area – we first have to look at **the many functions the land ideally can have**. When we want to discuss sustainable land use – and in particular the urban/rural relationship – we must take into account most of these functions at the same time.



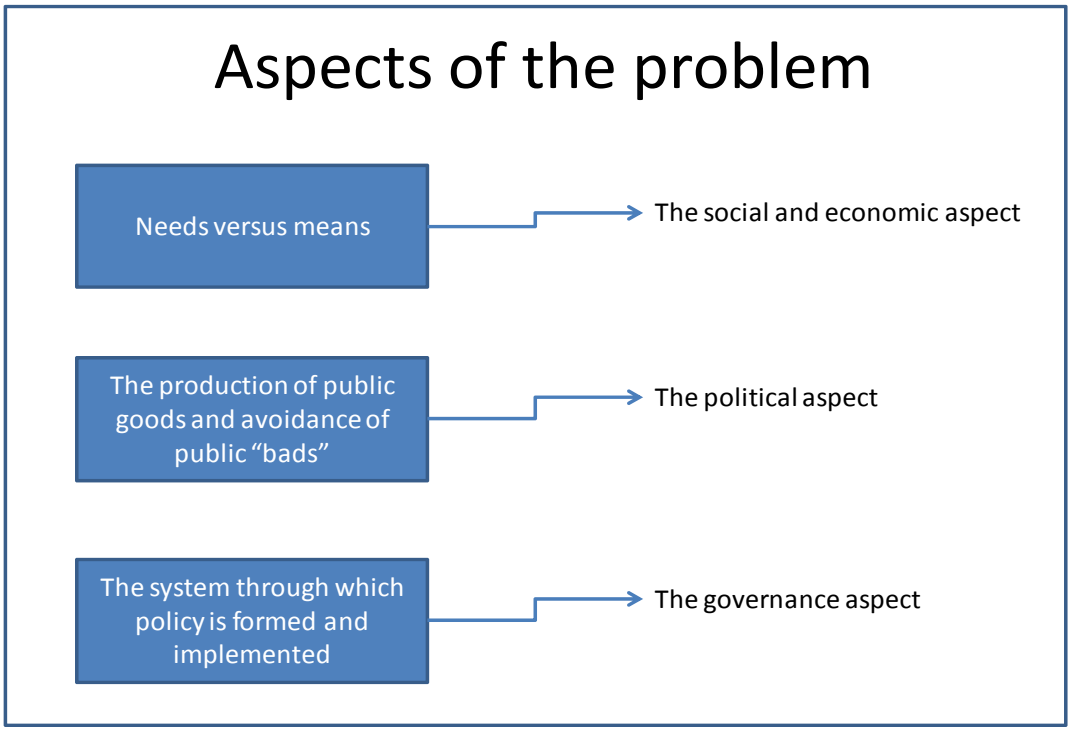
Sustainable land use can then be seen as a dynamic state of individual land mosaics serving to meet current local and global needs while retaining the potential to meet future requirements.

The important thing is, that specific land uses should not be examined in isolation, but as part of **combinations of land uses** (or"mosaics") related to human needs, together with man-made infrastructures and the green infrastructure necessary to secure functioning ecosystems. The urban / rural relationship is typically such a mosaic structure, where many uses meet and are combined in a more or less optimal way.



Now, the term "sustainable land use" only has real meaning when considered across **all relevant scales** – from that of individual parcels and land owners, users and workers, through to the level of landscapes and watersheds and then

on through municipalities, regions and states to the continental or the global context. The problem of sustainable land use has many aspects, which can be regrouped into three.

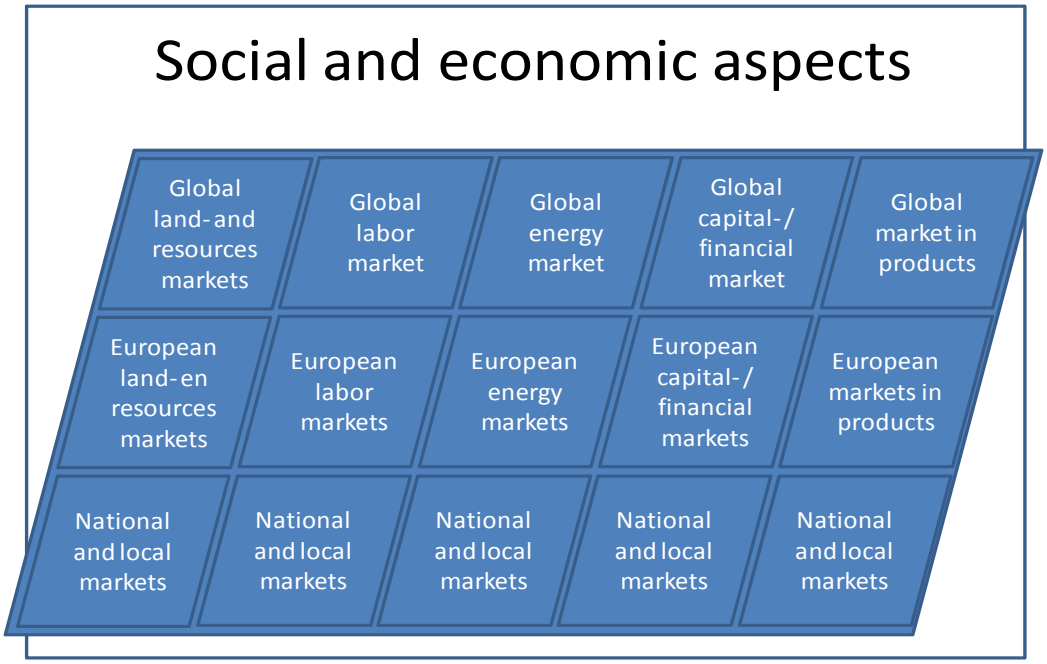


Sustainable land use is firstly **an economic challenge**: certain needs can only be fulfilled with a limited amount of means – this implies a prioritization and division of tasks, which, in most societies are generally delivered by markets.

However, as markets exhibit systematic failure in relation to the supply of public goods such as ecosystem services, the standard free market approach is not appropriate. These market failures, combined with equity issues and the food, energy and ecological security risks arising from non sustainable land use, shape, as a second aspect of the challenge, **the political agenda** and frame our efforts to promote a more sustainable approach.

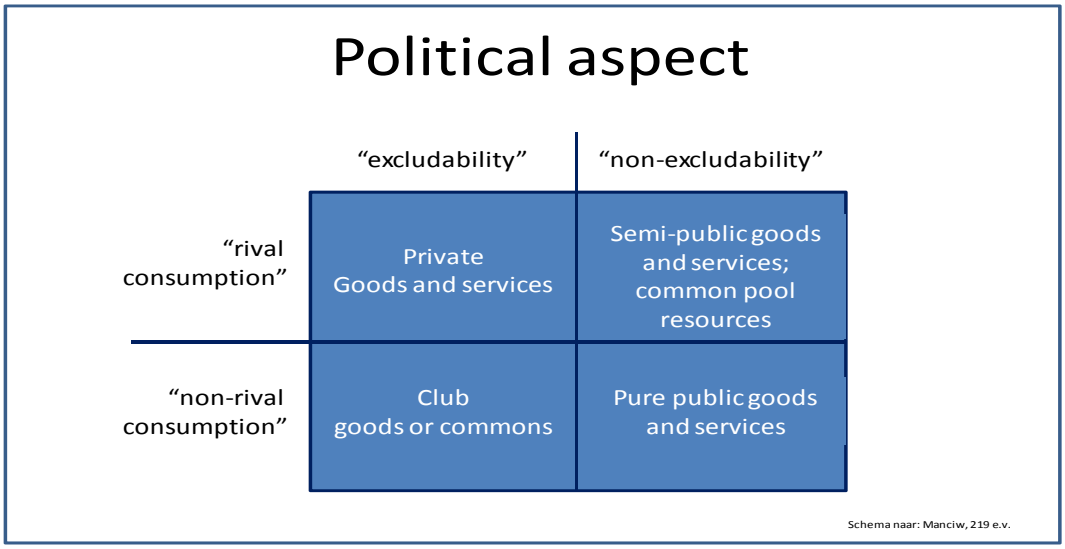
Finally, it is rarely an easy task to clearly allocate such tasks over the relevant scales; to achieve the necessary synergies and co-ordination; to ensure that the relevant policy choices are democratically made – with all stakeholders represented – and to implement these choices effectively and efficiently. Sustainable land use therefore raises, thirdly, major **issues of governance** as well as technical challenges.

The social and economic aspects of sustainable land use are expressed in the functioning of **markets** that relate to land use. Now, it is a misunderstanding that market operations as a simple, monolithic device. Just as land use itself is a multilevel issue, markets that relate to land use as well have a global, an continental and a national / regional / local **scale** as well. At the same time, markets operate in **sectors**.



This all shows us that, when we discuss **the urban / rural relationship** or the peri-urban zones, we have to spend some thought on land and housing markets, on the market position of farmers and foresters, on the marketability of landscapes and leisure, and on the attractiveness of cities for good labor.

Moreover, markets do have markets failures, and market failures often have to do with public goods. This brings us to the political aspect, which is how to define the **property rights** on goods and services in order to get a more optimal and fairer result.



You all know the classical scheme in which this is explained, with a combination of the criteria "rivalry" and "excludability" to define private versus public goods.

Examples of **private goods**: a terrain that can be selled, bushels of wheat, wood. This is the type we seem to be most familiar with: when these goods are used by one party, usage by another one is made impossible, but as the usage of these goods is excludable, this rivalry can be managed.

With **pure public goods**, it is technically not feasible to exclude users, but the usage of this type of good by one party forms no real obstacle to other parties to use it. Examples of pure public goods are: a stable climate, a good air quality, biodiversity, … the examples show that absolute public goods do not really exist: overusage is always possible in the long run.

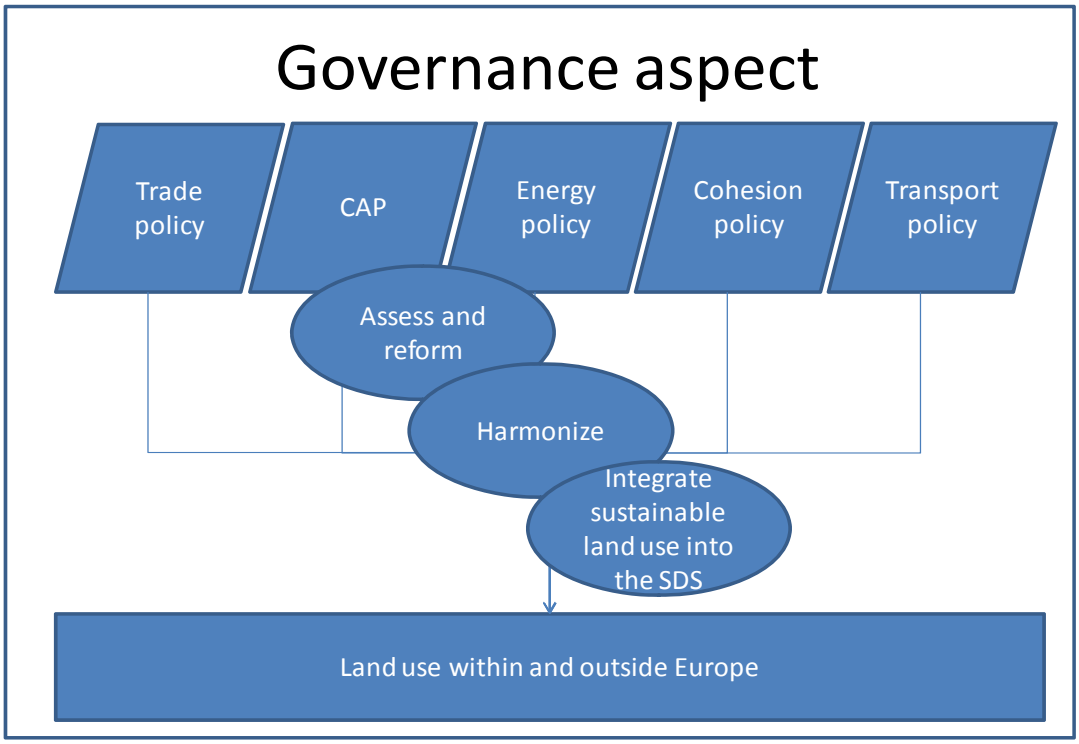
This leads us to **semi-public goods** or **common pool resources**. The usage of one party is in practice disadvantageous for other parties, but exclusion of other parties is not really feasible. This situation leads to overexploitation – the so-called tragedy of the commons. Most environmental goods are like this.

Finally we have the case of the **club goods** or **commons**: excludability is feasible as with private goods, but there is a group of users for which usage is mutually not disadvantageous or rival – as long as the group of users grows not to big and everyone keeps to the rules. Examples of club goods are: private parks, golf courses, natural reserves, or, in medieval times or outside Europe: the traditional common pastures.

Now, sustainable land use is **not yet sufficiently incentivised** in such a way that farmers, foresters and other land managers and workers are adequately rewarded for the protection and enhancement of biodiversity, climate change adaptation and mitigation or the provision of water management services. This is especially true in relation to public goods that are products of rural activities, but that are consumed by city dwellers.

And this brings us to the governance aspect, which I now only discuss at the European level. many EU policies have implications for sustainable land use, for example through the use of both regulation and subsidies.

What is needed in the first place is a more active **impact assessment** to fully considering the unintended spatial consequences of developments within these EU policy. For example, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is a crucial policy field in relation to sustainable land use. Considerable changes are expected in the near future, not least because of the ongoing debate over the EU Budget. Many other different elements must also be taken into account during this debate, including key issues such as the world food situation and European food security; the viability of rural communities in the economic, social and ecological sense, as well as the provision of those environmental goods and services underpinning the social and economic needs of wider society. All of these issues can, to some extent, be considered as public goods – therefore, they should be addressed in a balanced way.



Moreover, there should me more **harmonization and coherence** at the European level of the land use aspects of these policies, as part of achieving more sustainable land use, also at a global scale. TAt the same time, Member States should develop the necessary mechanisms to assess the implementation of these EU policies from a sustainability point of view, and to deal with unwelcome consequences such as urban sprawl or land abandonment. Also within the many EU regulations and directives, incentives should be built in in order to stimulate Member States to integrate the different aspects of sustainable land use.

Finally, “sustainable land use” is a crucial component for sustainable development, as it involves integrating the different uses that are being made of natural resources and their interaction within relevant scales. In that way, has the same potential as “sustainable energy”, “sustainable mobility”, “sustainable cities” or “sustainable consumption’’. Therefore EEAC, in its conference, will recommend that the concept of ”sustainable land use” should form one of the main topics to be taken forward within the context of the **EU Sustainable Development Strategy**.

V.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I now go shortly, together with you, through some of the projects that are the substance of this conference. My choice is based on the very innocent criterion that I could find them easily on the internet.

“Farland”

- “Future Approaches in Land Development. ”
- 11 Partners within seven Member-States: Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain
- Budget € 1 272 480; period 2005 – 2007.

“MP4”

- “Making Places Profitable, Public and Private open places”
- 10 Partners out of Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom.
- Budget: 5.827.543; September 2008 – September 2012

“Value”

- “Valuing Attractive Landscapes in the Urban Economy”
- 9 partners out of Belgium, Germany, United Kingdom.
- budget €7.241.571; Period: June 2008 – June 2012

"Urban Habitats"

- "Creating Urban Habitats, Sharing Knowledge"
- 4 partners within Flanders, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.
- budget: about €5.000.000; period: 2009-2011.

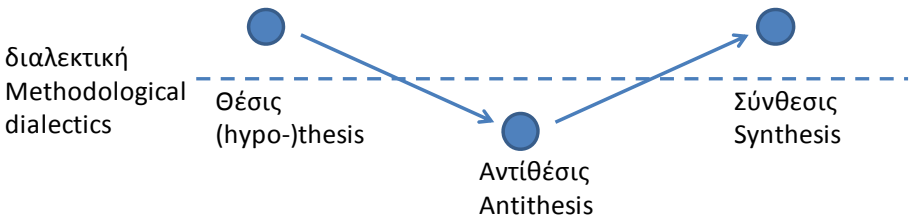
"Solabio"

- "Soorten en Landschappen als dragers voor Biodiversiteit" Or "Species and Landscapes as platforms for Biodiversity"
- 27 Partners within Flanders and the Netherlands.
- Budget € 8 690 708; period 2008 – 2011.

But apart from the internet, these projects will be the topic of the next discussion round, in a few minutes. The interesting thing about all these projects is … that we now can turn **back to dialectics**, but this time **as a method for reasoning**.

Methodological dialectics

Plato



Indeed, Ladies and Gentlemen, in classical philosophy, dialectics was, more than anything else, a methodology. Plato based all his writings on **dialogues** between two or more people – usually Socrates was involved – … People that might hold differing views, yet wish to pursue truth by seeking agreement with one another. This was in contrast to **debate** (where one tries to prove that another participant is wrong) or **rhetoric** (where one tries to persuade someone else) – the action fields of the Sophists.

Now this type of dialectics – a methodology for finding a commonly shared truth – is relevant for our conference "Greenwork(s)!" in three ways.

In the first place, **this very conference** is the bringing together of people in order **to discuss** things and **to produce more truth** about the urban/rural relationship.

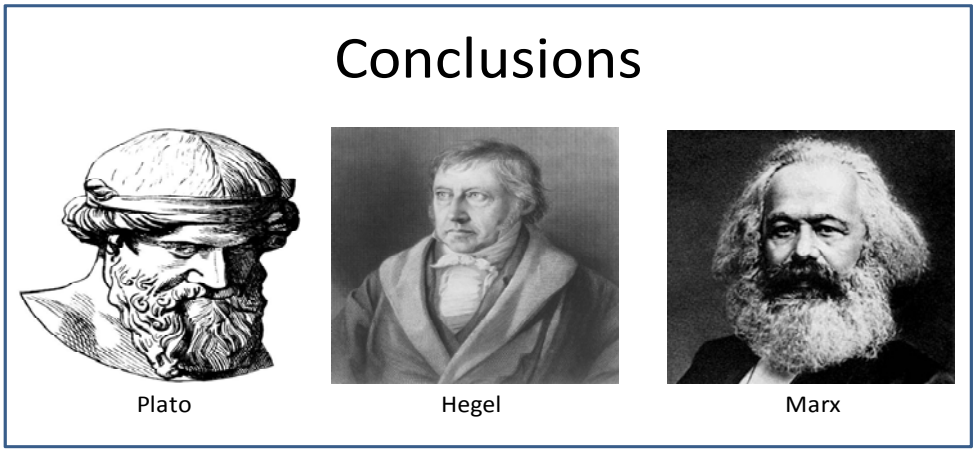
Moreover, **the projects themselves**, that are brought together, and of which I have mentioned some, all typically work with a kind of Socratic/Platonic dialectics. They all start with the trouble of unresolved local or regional problems … they all bring together the parties involved, with their different views … they all structure the discussion in such a way that this exchange is not a contest, but that mutual gains are sought and found.

Not only this conference and these projects, but also **the basic intuition** behind all this has a relationship with the Socratic/Platonic way. The abstract intuition, or hypothesis, of this conference is that urbanization is an ever increasing process, and that it is underestimated. Concrete co-operation and investments at the local and regional level could resolve these problems. The projects can then be seen as concrete, specific tests, to see if the general intuition is a true one. When we bring the abstract and the concrete together, we will learn more about the best way to proceed in the future.

All in all, we can declare that by participating in this conference, we are in truth dialecticians – even if we didn't know it.

VI.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I conclude.



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In this conference we will (1) use dialectical reasoning, – following the example of Plato and Socrates – as a method for our proceedings, in order (2) to improve and rationalize our ways of government and governance, – following Hegel – (3) and this with the aim to better cope with the global, European and national/local trends we have discerned – in a Marxian way.

I wish you lots of succes!