

The Governance of Land Use

Country fact sheet Japan

The planning system

Levels of government and their responsibilities

Japan is a unitary state with three levels of government; the national level, 47 prefectures and 1 741 municipalities. The national government has five distinct functions related to spatial planning. First, it enacts framework laws that structure land-use planning processes. Second, it prepares national level spatial plans. Third, it provides financing for major infrastructure projects that influence land use directly and indirectly. Fourth, it approves spatial plans that prefectures prepare according to national law. Fifth, it issues binding regulations on the content of subnational plans, provides standards for other instruments of lower level governments and gives general guidance and advice to subnational governments.

Prefectures are responsible for the enactment of local laws and regulations on spatial planning, the preparation of prefecture level plans, and the approval of municipal level land-use plans. Furthermore, they provide guidance and advice to municipalities. Actual zoning decisions are made by prefectures and municipalities. They prepare strategic and zoning plans in accordance with national and prefectural laws and regulations and pass auxiliary regulations guiding land use in their jurisdictions.

Spatial and land-use plans

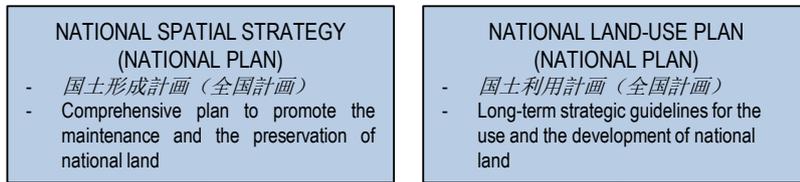
The Japanese spatial planning system is complex and employs a large number of spatial plans. At the national level, two plans provide strategic directions. The *National Spatial Strategy (National Plan)* provides general principles on a national spatial structure, land use, environmental protection, sustainable use of resources and disaster prevention. The *National Land Use Plan (National Plan)* includes a master concept for land use and outlines necessary measures to achieve it.

At the prefectural level, *Basic Land Use Plans* play a comparable role to the *National Land Use Plan*. They are strategic plans that focus on general policy objectives for spatial development. *Master Plans for City Planning Areas* concern only urban areas within prefectures and outline the objectives for land-use planning in those areas, such as targets for development promotion and development control. The actual land-use plans at the prefectural level are the *City Plans of Prefectures*. These plans do not refer to a single city, but generally cover the entire urban area of a prefecture. Among other aspects, they delineate areas where urbanisation is promoted or controlled, which has substantial consequences for the types of permitted developments and for the planning approval process. Furthermore, they contain special zoning regulations for specific developments and show major transport infrastructure. They are typically drawn at scales between 1: 50 000 and 1: 10 000 and are among the plans that are the most strictly enforced.

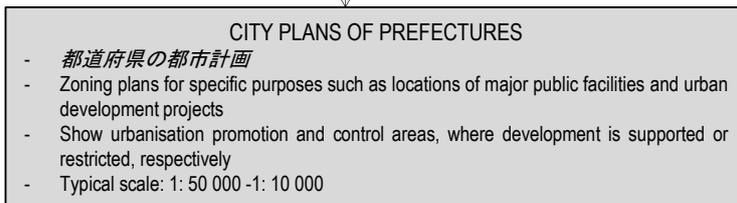
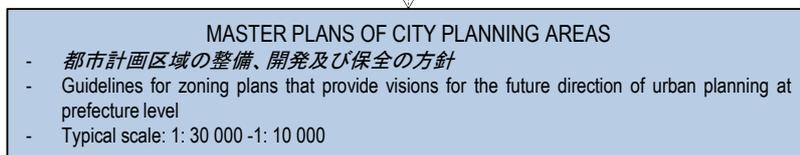
Organisation of spatial and land-use planning in Japan

General framework

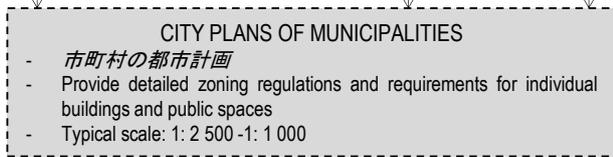
National



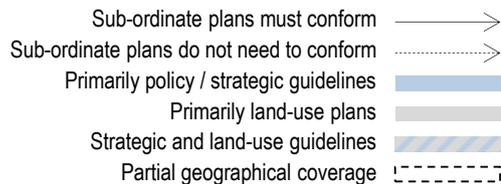
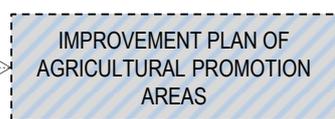
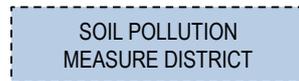
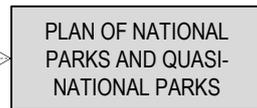
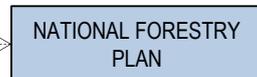
Regional



Municipal



Sectoral Plans



The municipal level mirrors the prefectural level insofar as its main planning instruments are a master plan and an actual zoning plan. *Municipal Master Plans* are strategic plans that contain general objectives for the municipality and guidelines for zoning and adjustments to land uses. *City Plans of Municipalities* are the main local land-use plans. They contain detailed zoning maps and restrictions on building sizes and shapes, designate major urban redevelopment areas and show public infrastructure.

In addition to the plans described above, several sectoral plans exist at all levels of government. These plans concern only specific land uses, but provide legally binding, sometimes detailed zoning regulations. For urban areas, three distinct plans exist. The *Plans for Urban Renaissance Areas* outline urban redevelopment projects and policies to strengthen the competitiveness of cities. *Landscape Plans* target urban design aspects, for example by restricting outdoor advertisement. *Location Optimization Plans* prescribe settlement patterns in urban areas with the objective of promoting compact development and high population densities.

Major laws and regulations

Four acts form the foundation of the Japanese land-use planning system. The *Comprehensive National Land Development Act* and the *National Land-use Plan Act* provide the legal basis for the *National Land Use Plan*. The *City Planning Act* stipulates the details of land-use planning in urban areas at the prefectural and municipal level. It also specifies the procedure in order to obtain planning permission. The *Building Standards Act* contains building code regulation and specifies the procedure to obtain building confirmations.

Furthermore, three environmental acts contain important provisions affecting the land-use planning system. The *Soil Pollution Measure Act* and the *Water Pollution Control Act* outline protective measures that restrict development in sensitive areas. Similarly, the *Sabo Act* defines erosion control areas, in which development is restricted in order to prevent landslides and reduce fatalities in case they occur.

Co-ordination mechanisms

Vertical co-ordination between national and subnational governments occurs through two channels. Each level of government can confer with another level of government on its own initiative. The national government has furthermore the possibility to offer advice to lower levels of governments. Similarly, horizontal co-ordination at the national and subnational level occurs primarily through consultations between ministries and departments. In particular, a department intending to change a policy is obliged to confer with other departments.

Expropriations

Expropriations are possible for clearly defined purposes, which cover primarily transport and energy infrastructure, public facilities and environmental developments. Expropriation of land for private uses is not possible. Compensation to the expropriated land owner must cover the market price of the property, the costs of moving as well as the costs to establish the private life or the business at the new location.

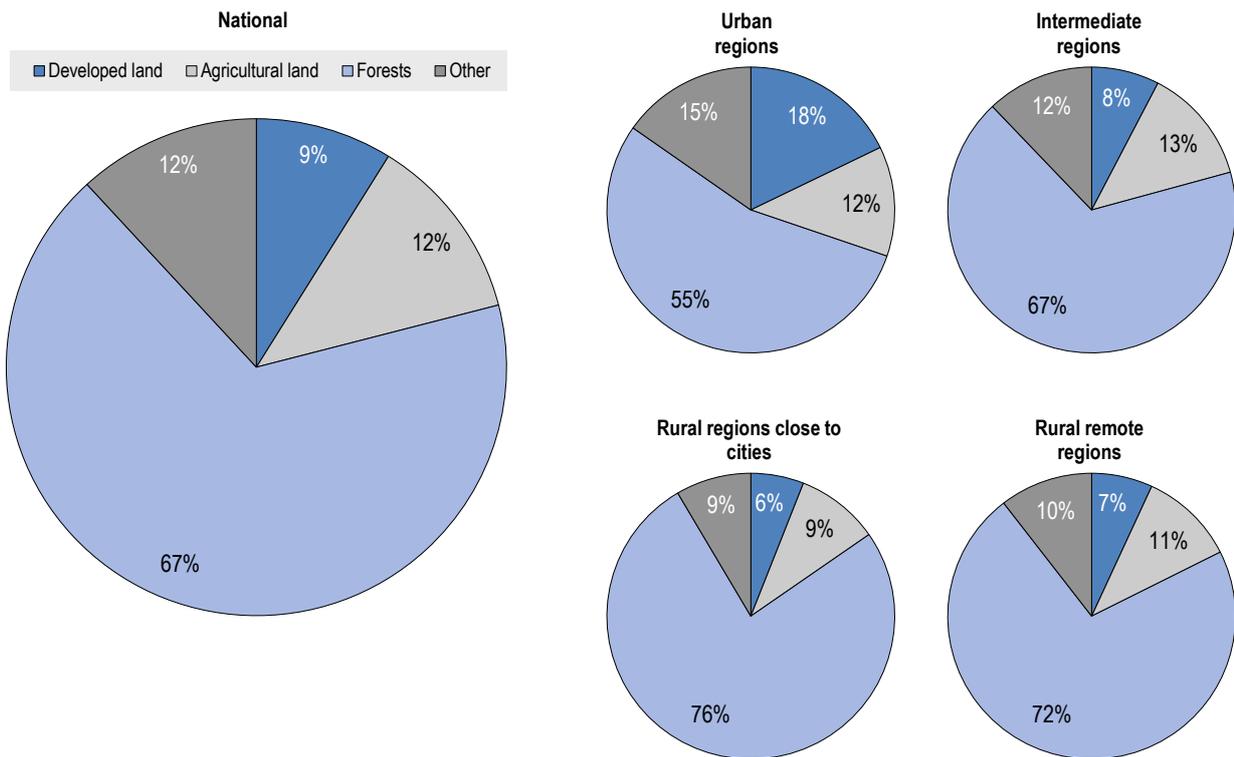
Recent and planned reforms to the system of land-use planning

The broad outlines of the Japanese land-use planning system were established in 1950, when the *Comprehensive National Land Development Act* and the *Building Standard Act* were passed. Two further milestones were the enactment of the *City Planning Act* in 1968 that replaced an older

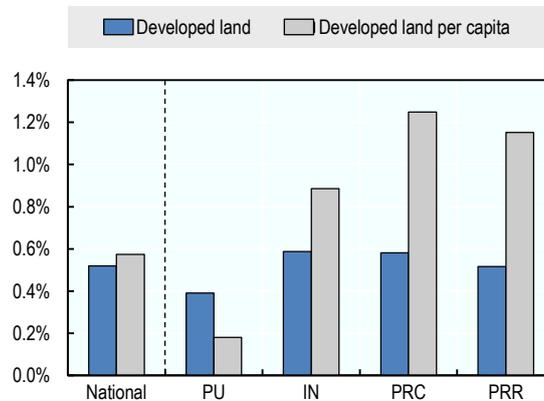
act from 1919 and the *National Land-use Plan Act* in 1974. Since then, reforms have been incremental. Most recently, changes occurred with the approval of the *Soil Pollution Measure Act* and the *Special Act for City Restoration* in 2002, and the *Landscape Act* in 2004. Currently, efforts are made to improve the quality of cadastre data. In the past, cadastre data has been imprecise, which led to conflicts between land owners and difficulties in the planning process.

Land cover in Japan

Land cover at the national level



Annual change in developed land from 2005 to 2015



Note: PU: urban regions, IN: intermediate regions, PRC: rural regions close to cities, PRR: rural remote regions.

Land-use trends in Japan

Japan stands out as the country that has the highest share of forested land among all analysed countries. More than two-thirds of its surface is covered by forests. In contrast, the share of agricultural land is exceptionally low at just 12% and has been declining by almost 0.5% annually. Per capita use of developed land is one of the lowest within the OECD with an average developed surface of just 260 square metres per inhabitant. Since 2005, the area of developed land has been expanding at a rate of approximately 0.5% annually even though the population has slightly declined over the same period.

Source: OECD calculations based on data provided by the Japanese government.

Land cover at the national level in Japan

Land cover (km ²)	National	Urban regions	Intermediate regions	Rural regions close to cities	Rural remote regions
Total area	372 969	58 089	202 896	50 052	61 933
Total developed land	33 042	10 342	15 466	2 984	4 250
Percentage of total	8.9%	17.8%	7.6%	6.0%	6.9%
Annual change in developed land, 2005-15	166.7	39.6	88.0	17.8	21.3
Annual percentage change in developed land, 2005-15	0.52%	0.39%	0.59%	0.58%	0.52%
Agricultural land	45 181	7 222	26 618	4 690	6 651
Percentage of total	12.1%	12.4%	13.1%	9.4%	10.7%
Annual change in agricultural land, 2005-15	-211.5	-57.2	-110.0	-17.1	-27.2
Annual percentage change in agricultural land, 2005-15	-0.46%	-0.76%	-0.40%	-0.37%	-0.40%
Forests	250 588	31 659	136 248	38 134	44 548
Percentage of total	67.2%	54.5%	67.2%	76.2%	71.9%
Annual change in forests, 2005-15	-27.6	-7.1	-26.5	-0.7	6.8
Annual change in forests, 2005-15	-0.01%	-0.02%	-0.02%	-0.002%	0.02%
Land cover per capita (m²)					
Total developed land per capita	260	144	388	474	475
Annual percentage change in developed land per capita, 2005-15	0.57%	0.18%	0.88%	1.25%	1.15%
Agricultural land per capita	356	100	668	745	743
Annual percentage change in agricultural land per capita, 2005-15	-0.40%	-0.97%	-0.11%	0.27%	0.23%
Forests per capita	1 972	440	3 419	6 060	4 979
Annual percentage change in forests per capita, 2005-15	0.04%	-0.23%	0.28%	0.63%	0.65%

Note: Per capita values for land cover in TL3 regions computed using 2014 population figures.

Source: All land cover statistics for Japan based on data provided by the Japanese government.