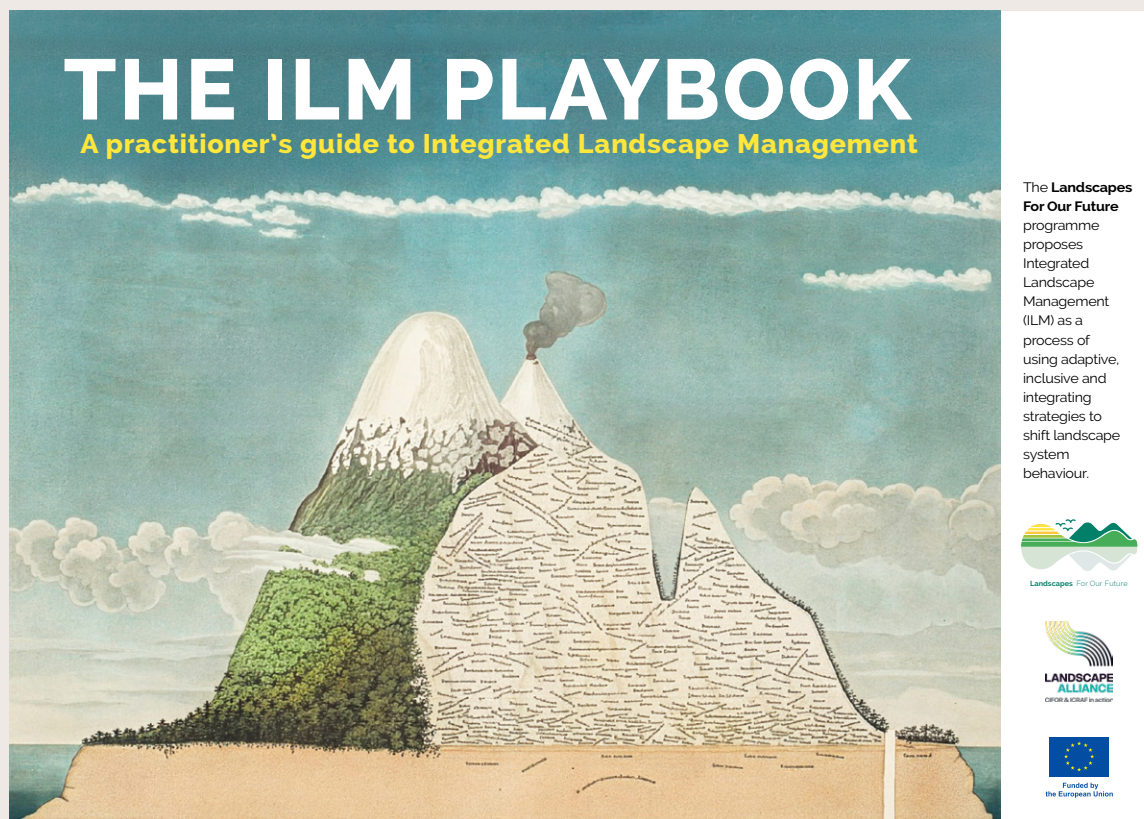


Extract from The ILM Playbook

The ILM Playbook is a practitioner curriculum developed through the EU-funded Landscapes For Our Future programme. Its **interactive web edition** provides a quick, non-linear route through the concepts and tools, while the **full-length PDF** provides the conceptual foundations, evidence and methodological depth behind them.

The concepts, methods and practical guidance were developed through the Central Component's work with project teams, partners and practitioners across the programme, and through the experience and learning generated in participating landscapes.



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Explore the full interactive ILM Playbook or access the complete reading edition at:
landscapesfuture.org/ilm-playbook



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Key take-aways

- Foments are discrete, time-bound micro-interventions released into the system to stimulate a response – they are diagnostic (revealing the system) and provocative (revealing avenues to the alt-heading); they are not experiments.
- A ferment of foments is the operationalization of the deliberative system: each foment performs a different deliberative function – bilateral engagement builds trust, info-bombs shift what is thought possible, convened spaces structure confrontation with trade-offs.
- Foments target primary practices and adjacent ones, because the meanings, materials and competencies that hold a practice in place are reproduced through everything around it – temple attendance, school engagement, market routines.
- Foments must be held lightly: they embody propositions, not commitments; if the response heads nowhere positive, abandon and learn rather than defend the foment as a sunk cost.
- The team itself is the first foment: simply by being present, your positionality has already perturbed the system – design that arrival deliberately rather than discover it after the fact

Introducing foments

The intent of your intervention is to shift system heading. Recollect that we argued (in [Systems and Complexity](#)) that a system's heading is a composite of individual strands. Foments are intended to provoke or stimulate a strand off its current trajectory. With foments, you aim to generate ripples in order to achieve this.

In the Compromise section, we introduced the concept of a deliberative system – deliberation should be understood not as a single forum but as an interconnected constellation of arenas, each performing specific functions, whose collective effect is genuine deliberation even though no single arena achieves it alone. The foment palette described in this section is the Playbook's operationalization of that concept. Each foment type performs a different deliberative function:

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you're interested, check out the 'evidence page' for this section here.



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bilateral engagement builds the trust and competency that allow marginalized actors to participate (democratic function); information-sharing shifts what people think is possible (epistemic function); storytelling creates spaces where different experiences are heard and valued (ethical function); relational brokering creates the connections between arenas. And convened spaces – workshops, fora, assemblies – are where these threads come together in structured confrontation with trade-offs. The ferment is the deliberative system. No single foment carries the whole weight.

But designing a ferment requires a read of the system as a *whole* – and this is where [sensing](#) becomes indispensable. It is only when you have that conceptual vista of the system – its actors, their practices, the power configurations that regulate them, and the feedback loops that maintain current heading – that you can detect the interactions where multiple dynamics converge, design foments appropriate to specific target groups and moments and place them strategically to maximize the opportunities these represent (see Opportunity Points). The ferment is designed against this read. It is always provisional, because the system will change as your intervention proceeds and as unanticipated regulations come into play. But without that initial read, your foments are shots in the dark.

The word ‘foment’ suggests stirring something up, provoking response – and that is exactly the intent. A foment is *a discrete, time-bound micro-intervention introduced into a complex landscape system to stimulate a response*. It serves two key functions: (a) a diagnostic one, revealing new information about the system and how it responds to a stimulus; and (b) to reveal plausible avenues towards the [alt-heading](#). An intervention into a complex landscape system releases a multitude of foments – a ferment¹ – to diagnose and detect the system’s dynamics.

Opportunity points are *where* in the system you intervene; foments are your micro-interventions.

Foments are not the same as experiments, which the systems literature often calls for. ‘Experiment’ carries specific connotations: controlled conditions, hypothesis testing, impartial observers, isolated variables, and repeatability. Intervening in a complex system does not allow for any of these. With foments, you do not (and cannot) control what happens – the system’s response to a foment is what matters, and the response reveals things about the system that were not visible before. A foment is a provocation: it calls forth a response. The emphasis is on what the system does, not on what you predicted.

Foments are neither failure nor success. Whatever response they generate must be treated with equanimity – an evenness of mind. *You release the foment, and then watch what happens*. The response will almost never head entirely in the direction you want. Nor will it head entirely in the wrong direction. If even a quarter of the response is moving towards your alt-heading, that is worth pursuing. In all likelihood, you will be working with partial, imperfect directionality – and that is enough.

¹ We use ‘ferment’ as the collective noun for foments. Fermentation is a slow, biological, transformative process in which many small organisms collectively produce change that none could produce individually. You do not control fermentation; you create conditions for it. And the result is qualitatively different from the inputs – something new has emerged. That is precisely what a collection of foments is designed to do.



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When we release foments into the system, we can plausibly expect three types of response. These responses will relate to the foment's design, and our understanding of the system's dampening or amplification loops:

- No response: such foments should be discarded but, in so doing, analyse why the foment failed – was it designed incorrectly? What dampening loops have we overlooked that caused our foment design to fail?
- Responses misaligned with the alt-heading: can the foment be repurposed? What does the response tell us about the amplification loops that enabled it, and the dampening loops that caused it to head away from the alt-heading?
- Promising responses that suggest movement towards the alt-heading: learn from the experience, retain and design new foments to maintain momentum.

Multiple foments will need to be designed to address different target groups at different depths in the system. Our thinking about foments derives, in part, from two important ideas:

Seeding² – planting something that may grow. Seeding is a medium- to long-term approach which captures the generative quality in foments. A foment carries this potential, but whether it takes root depends on conditions you do not fully control.

Trojan mice³ – interventions deliberately small enough to slip past resistance. Trojan mice capture the strategic quality of foments. They are designed to avoid triggering the dampening loops that larger, more visible change efforts provoke.

Designing effective foments

A well-designed foment meets four criteria:

Small: modest enough to be safe-to-fail, unobtrusive enough not to trigger disproportionate resistance.

Provocative: while being small, foments are not benign. They create productive disturbance in the system, calling forth a response that reveals dynamics and misaligns existing practice configurations – disturbing the relations between meanings, materials, and competencies that hold current practices in place.

Diagnostic: designed to reveal where the system has give, where it resists, and where potentials lie.

Generative: foments will generate ripples and, potentially, cascades if conditions are right – to be picked up by stakeholders and carried further than the intervention directly initiated.

Held lightly: a foment is not a commitment to defend. It is not a binary either/or, a null/hypothesis or a stated objective or goal. If it is not taking you anywhere positive, abandon it.

² Burkett et al, 2023.

³ Taylor, 2020.



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These criteria are not a checklist to satisfy mechanically. They describe a disposition: foments are micro-interventions held lightly, designed to learn from the system's response, whether that response is uptake, resistance, or indifference.

What foments target

Imagine that our intervention targets a land-degrading practice. Let us call this the '**primary practice**'. This is the practice that your sensing work has identified as deleterious to the landscape – of which there may, of course, be many. Most traditional interventions will target the primary practice. This is, *in part*, the correct approach. Where it weakens, however, is that doing so denies the practice's position within a broader system. Nevertheless, interventions should target the primary practice – although not in the absence of targeting adjacent practices.

Target groups implementing the primary practice also have what we can call '**adjacent practices**' – these are not adjacent to the target group, but to us. Besides being busy with the primary practice every day, let us imagine that the target group also attends a temple daily. Their children – for those who have them – all go to the same local school. While these practices may not seem to have much in common with the primary practice, they do. In fact, they are intimately connected, because the target group's members move between these, all the time. The values and world views they bring with them as they degrade the land are the same ones they bring to their households. These are also very proximate practices – intimately tied to our actors, their daily lives, community relations, livelihoods and well-being.

Thus, foments are designed for both the primary and adjacent practices because, for your target groups, there is no separation between them. One set of practices influences others – there is two-way, mutual regulation between them. So, you might design one or two foments that directly target the land-degrading practice itself. Meanwhile, another foment sees you speaking with the local abbot and obtaining agreement that in his sermons, he will refer to these land practices as a cost to their community. Another foment sees your team visiting the local school and speaking several times to several classes about the land degradation and the practices that create it. These messages, and gentle pressures, feed back to your target group's members. This is how we can use foments to provoke a systemic response – by 'nudging' or perturbing the context that surrounds the primary practice.

If you recollect our layered model, you will remember that we had three embedded elements. Practices are embedded in power, while power is embedded in the system. In our [Integration](#) section, we presented a graphic of a 'power vista' showing different domains, or spheres, of influence that different actor groups have that shape the landscape and each other's practices. These intermingle, overlap and influence each other – they regulate each other. Your intervention needs to be clear-eyed about the actors lying beyond the landscape in centres of power whose exercise may profoundly shape the accomplishment of your intervention. Above, and in much of this Playbook, we use rural examples because these are typically the focus of many of the Playbook's users. But influential communities outside of the landscape – of politicians, of corporate actors, of middle-men and women, of warlords and ladies – all of these actors exert different levels and degrees of regulation on what happens in your landscape and require their own foments if they are to be influenced. This means your interaction space – the space where the strands that regulate



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your target groups originate – may extend far beyond the landscape itself (see the Opportunity Points section). Foments can reveal the character of the feedback loops these actors issue. In many cases, these will not only be dampening feedback loops, but destructive ones – and must be addressed.

Why do people adopt new practices?

Here, we revert back to our [Practices](#) section. Shove et al.⁴ argue that people do not adopt ‘new practices’ because of individual attitudes alone; practices *recruit* people when changing configurations of meanings, materials and competences (MMCs) make participation possible, attractive and woven into daily life. Douthwaite⁵ refers to this as ‘meshing in’ an innovation. Here, the most successful technologies (in terms of adoption) are those most modified by local users and manufacturers, gaining ‘fitness’ by interlocking with existing systems.

Recruitment occurs when people become ‘carriers’ of a practice – when they are drawn into performing it, often through existing social networks, communities of practice and shared settings where the new way of doing things is already happening. First encounters with the new practice typically happen because a person’s daily paths intersect with sites where a practice is performed (workplaces, households, fields), and because others can demonstrate and legitimate the practice as normal, desirable or necessary.

New practices take hold when the MMCs line up. Thus, new materials (technologies, infrastructures), new or reconfigured competences (skills, know-how), and new meanings (ideas of what is normal, good, modern, responsible) become available together. Each element here is *mutually reinforcing* – introducing one without attending to the others will not result in a practice change. But not all three contribute equally. Meanings lead. A practice change that carries desirable associations – that signals modernity, success, independence, or community standing – will be adopted far more readily than one that does not, regardless of its material or technical merits. Conversely, a practice change that carries meanings of backwardness, dependency, or social decline will be resisted even where the material and competency case is strong. Meanings carry normative weight that materials and competencies do not: they tell people what kind of person does this, what it says about you, whether it aligns with your identity and social position.

Traditional development interventions have frequently focused on introducing a new technology – an irrigation canal, for example – and then wondered why practices did not also change. A new irrigation canal is meaningless in the absence of accompanying practice changes – people need to use it, after all. Perhaps construction of the new canal was accompanied by a suite of training interventions, but still, practices did not change. This is because meanings were not also addressed. We stress that simply introducing a new technology maintains an intervention at instrument level – and does not plumb the depths of systemic structure. Your ferment of foments must account for this: some need to target practices directly, but others need to target the regulatory structure – the power configurations, institutional arrangements, and market relations – that holds those practices in place.

⁴ Shove et al, 2012.

⁵ Douthwaite, 2002.



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This is the dual task described in the Opportunity Points section: reshaping the interaction space creates the conditions for practice change, but foments must also target the practice itself. One without the other yields either an opening that nothing fills, or effort that snaps back.

People are recruited when they have (or can easily acquire) the competences, can access the necessary materials, and find the associated meanings compelling in relation to their existing practices. The adoption of a new practice is more durable when it offers internally rewarding experiences, clear symbolic significance and strong embedding in wider networks (institutions, infrastructures, regulations, markets) that stabilize them and make alternatives harder. Over time, people develop 'careers' in practices, deepening their skills and identities as *practitioners*. This strengthens commitment but also enables them to innovate or defect, contributing to further change in what the practice is and who it recruits next.

The foment palette

Foments are not a single type of activity. As we mentioned in the introduction to this section, they should be strategically deployed to where, in your system sensing, they are most likely to perturb the system. In the Opportunity Points section, we describe how to identify the interaction spaces where foments are most likely to produce movement – the spaces where strands' regulatory fields overlap and where the quality of regulatory exchange can be shifted. They encompass a range of possible actions, each targeting different elements of practice configurations, ranges and depths of the system. What follows is a palette – a set of foment types that your intervention can draw on, combine, and adapt. Not every intervention will use every type. Some will fail, others will look promising. The choice depends on what sensing has revealed about your landscape: which practices need shifting, where power concentrates, where the system already has give. Once the ferment has been released, you will analyse, diagnose and re-assess as inputs into the design of a subsequent ferment.

Each foment in the palette works through one or more elements of the MMC configuration described in the Practices section. Stories and info-bombs target meanings. Boundary objects and demonstration effects target materials and meanings simultaneously. Bilateral engagement and institutional micro-shifts build competencies. The most effective foments, however, target all three elements in concert – which is why a ferment (multiple foments working different MMC elements within the same interaction space) is more likely to shift a practice than any single foment. The practitioner should be conscious of which MMC element each foment primarily targets, and design the ferment to address all three – because targeting a single element while leaving the others untouched guarantees unintended consequences (see Practices).

The team itself

Your first foment is already present before you have done anything at all. As the [Positionality](#) section makes clear, simply by being present you have changed the system. Your embodied positionality – race, gender, nationality, comportment – sends signals. Your enacted positionality – who you meet first, what questions you ask, what language you use, whether you accept hospitality



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– perturbs existing relational patterns. Your existential positionality – the sheer fact of an intervention’s presence – shifts what stakeholders think is possible, who they think is watching, and what they think might change.

The question is not whether your team perturbs the system – it does, inevitably – but whether you design for this deliberately and take advantage of it. Rather than generating no response, how will your team and its presence generate a promising one? Team composition signals what knowledge the intervention values: if your team is entirely biophysical scientists, that is a statement about what matters. If it includes social scientists, community development specialists, or people from the landscape itself, the signal shifts. How team members conduct themselves in early interactions – whether they listen more than they speak, whether they go where they are not expected, whether they spend time with people who are not on the official itinerary – these are foments, whether or not you name them as such. The challenge is to recognize them as such, get ahead of them, and design them for intent.

In our view, the only teams worth fielding for ILM interventions are those with long-term investment in a landscape – teams that are located in it, that feel it daily, and that derive income for their work from multiple sources rather than a single donor and/or a single project cycle. A parachuted team cannot read the system well enough to design good foments, cannot maintain the relationships through which foments travel, and cannot monitor the slow signals of cascading change that unfold over years. Douthwaite’s finding that the most successful innovation processes were those where researchers worked with the same networks of partners for twenty-five years is telling. The parachuting typical of traditional project approaches is, from an ILM perspective, already dead in the water. And multiple income streams are not just financial resilience – they are epistemic independence. They free a team to pursue what the landscape needs rather than what a single logframe demands.

Be deliberate. Design your team’s early presence as a foment: what do you want your arrival to signal, to whom, and what response do you hope to provoke? Then watch carefully for the response you actually get.

Bilateral stakeholder engagement

Initially, your team will probably work bilaterally – directly with a few stakeholder groups before bringing multiple groups into shared space. This is foundational work, and is itself a foment. Your interactions serve to impart meaning: to build trust between you and the target group, signal how you practise, and to manage expectations. These interactions shift the meanings, competencies, or material conditions within that stakeholder’s practice world. A farmer who has spent time with your team discussing market access is not the same farmer who walks into a multi-stakeholder forum six months later. Something has already shifted.

Bilateral work is particularly important where power asymmetries are severe. Bringing a marginalized group directly into a multi-stakeholder forum without preparation can reproduce exactly the power dynamics your intervention seeks to change – the powerful speak, the marginalized perform deference, and the forum legitimizes existing arrangements under the banner of ‘participation.’ Bilateral engagement can build the competencies and confidence that allow less powerful actors to participate meaningfully when inter-stakeholder spaces are eventually convened. We call this ‘borrowed power’ – here, a target group is



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emboldened because they trust you, even if there are other groups in the space that they consider adversarial. It is also an example of using your positionality effectively.

But note the limits. The bilateral relationship – intervention working with a single stakeholder group – is barely a ripple. It shifts something within one group's practice world. The cascade potential lies in inter-stakeholder relations – when stakeholders start exchanging directly with each other, outside your mediation. The purpose of bilateral work is not to create change in itself, but to prepare stakeholders for the inter-stakeholder exchanges where cascading becomes possible.

The Landscapes For Our Future programme learned this in practice. Several country teams found that breaking stakeholder engagement into sequential bilateral work – spending time with individual groups before convening multi-stakeholder interactions – produced more honest and productive exchanges when those interactions eventually happened.

Relational brokering

Deliberately connecting actors who do not currently interact – creating new exchanges in CDE terms (see the [Systems and Complexity](#) section) – is the next step beyond bilateral engagement. It is more targeted than a convened space: introduce the downstream fishers to the upstream irrigators. Introduce the women's savings group to the district agricultural officer. Connect the community forestry group to the legal aid organization.

The foment is not the meeting itself. It is the connection and whatever flows through it afterward. A well-brokered relationship creates a new channel through which information, trust, and eventually collaborative action can travel. The intervention's role is catalytic: make the introduction, support the initial exchange, then step back. If the relationship becomes self-sustaining, the foment has taken root.

Relational brokering draws on your positionality as a resource. You move in circles of influence that your target groups do not. You can open doors, confer legitimacy, and connect people who would not otherwise meet. This is not something to be embarrassed about; it is a capacity to be deployed strategically towards your [alt-heading](#).

In a Zambian fisheries case,⁶ the narrow technical challenge was fish spoilage. But working on that technical problem built relationships between stakeholders – fishers, government agencies, traders, researchers – who had not previously been collaborating. Those relationships then enabled them to tackle the much bigger challenge: overfishing. If they had tried to convene these groups around overfishing from the start, it would have failed because of the mistrust between communities. The technical foment built the relational infrastructure for the institutional cascade. This illustrates the sequencing logic: bilateral foments prepare the ground, relational brokering creates the inter-stakeholder connections, and cascading happens when those connections activate amplifying loops in the wider system.

⁶ Douthwaite and Hoffecker, 2017.



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Convened spaces

One of the major powers that an intervention brings to a landscape is convening power – the power to assemble. Multi-stakeholder fora are a staple of landscape work. They are not, however, a neutral container for dialogue, but rather, for deliberation. They are foments. They perturb existing relational patterns by creating exchanges that would not otherwise happen. The moment you put a downstream fisher and an upstream irrigator in the same room, you have introduced a perturbation into the system. Whether that perturbation generates anything useful depends on how the space is designed, how you capitalize upon it and your ability to detect it.

A workshop that simply brings people into a room and asks them to ‘discuss’ is a weak foment. A space that is deliberately designed – who is invited (and who is not), how the room is arranged, what information is presented, what questions are posed, who sits next to whom, what activities structure the interaction – is a much stronger one. This draws on nudge architecture: the design of the space itself shapes what people think, say, and do within it, working through the material and meaning elements of the space itself.

A convened space that is held too early – before bilateral work has built sufficient trust and before relational brokering has established some inter-stakeholder connections – will reproduce rather than challenge existing power configurations.

The info-bomb

New information is a powerful foment. *Knowledge is information practised*.⁷ The trick, of course – and which lies at the heart of this foment’s potency – is how do you package information in ways that mean it transitions into knowledge, and thereafter into practice? Many traditional interventions imagine that exposing target groups to information will yield practice change. ‘Awareness-raising’ or ‘dissemination’ are, in our estimation, inadequate ways of eliciting systemic response from this foment.

Information can be transmitted: data, maps, and monitoring results can be packaged and delivered. Knowledge cannot. Knowledge requires shared context and can only be volunteered, never conscripted.⁸ You can give a farmer a soil map, but whether that map becomes knowledge – something that changes how they understand and work their land – depends on whether it connects to their existing understanding, whether the context of sharing allows genuine engagement, and whether they retain interpretive authority over what the information means for them.

The design of this foment, therefore, lies not in the data itself but in the packaging – translating across epistemic boundaries without patronising, presenting information in ways that invite interpretation rather than dictating conclusions. The packaging is what you design carefully before release. But once released, you do not control what people do with the information – that is the system’s response, not yours. If you are a scientist, the information you are sharing may seem very important to you but not to your

⁷ See, for example, Cook and Brown, 1999; Orlikowski, 2002.

⁸ Snowden and Boone, 2007.



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target groups. The intervention's focus must be on how to convey the information's importance without just insisting upon it. For this to happen, it must resonate: target groups must be able to see how the information relates to them and their everyday lives. To achieve this requires an important competency in the intervention team: the ability to make technical information genuinely accessible without dumbing it down, and the humility to recognize that stakeholders may interpret the information in ways you did not expect and would not choose.

Stories

Stories are potent foments for both diagnostic and provocation reasons. In all societies, stories are used to structure, entertain, legitimate and to explain. They are fundamental to culture, providing identity, conveying history and origin. They educate, warning children of danger, illustrating wisdom, or folly.⁹

But stories are also profoundly political. They can convey difference: why we are better than them; why men are better than women; why this is beautiful and that is not; why failure is unacceptable and success is necessary; why this is ours and not theirs; why we belong and they do not; what progress is and is not; why we are civilized and they are not. Such themes can permeate societies, deeply informing their choices, what they are willing to put up with, and how they make the distinction between 'good' and 'bad'. They can underpin what is considered acceptable behaviour over what is not. The power of stories is formidable, and we have provided two in Boxes 1 and 2 to illustrate this.

“No one ever made a decision because of a number. They need a story.”
– Daniel Kahneman

On identity and stolen camels

Many years ago, one of us¹⁰ was doing fieldwork in Ethiopia. He was exploring the relationship between the Karayu and Afar peoples, which was not good. Conflict was frequent. People were being killed. So, he assembled a large group of Afar men, separate from another large group of male Karayu (neither group would allow their women to attend). He first asked both groups how they differed from each other, for they look very similar to the untrained outsider. Their men both wore white loincloths and cloaks. They all wore sandals made from tyre treads. They both shaved their hair well back from their foreheads. They all carried guns, and all wore a short sword on a leather belt. The Karayu said that they just knew. It was something in how the Afar walked, or in the way they carried their rifles across their shoulders, draping their arms over the stock and barrel. The Afar group huddled for a 20-minute conversation, after which an answer emerged: the Karayu, they said, wore their swords to the left, while the Afar wore theirs on the right. Our colleague then asked both groups why they were fighting each other. The Afar group responded that they had always fought the Karayu. It was just what they did.

⁹ Here, we conflate 'stories' with 'narratives.' There is a rich literature on the use of narratives in power and political strategies (e.g., Hajer, 1995; Roe, 1994).

¹⁰ Kim Geheb.



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The Karayu said that it was because the Afar had stolen some of their camels. Our colleague sensed that this was indeed a serious affront – for the Karayu, camels are common property. They wander around the landscape and, when a Karayu household needs some milk, they wait for the herd to pass by and select one to milk. When was this? He asked. This time, the Karayu huddled, and half-an-hour later, an answer emerged: five generations ago.

Did you get sucked into the story? Consider its two sides – it has been maintained for generations. Whether it is the version in which the Afar have always fought the Karayu, or a crime committed against the Karayu five generations ago. The stories legitimize the action and create identity. The fact that both groups felt the need to huddle and discuss their responses to our colleague's questions is positive – but also relevant. It suggests that the original stories had been lost to time; the stories had become reconfigured – for the Afar, fighting the Karayu was just something that they did; for the Karayu, fighting the Afar was about the camels – maybe.

In politics, they serve to rationalise and legitimate. 'Swidden agriculture is slash-and-burn which is bad.' 'Infrastructure is progress and is good.' 'The private sector will solve everything.' Typically, such stories are presented as unimpeachable fact. Very often they are very short – bordering on slogans. This compression strips out the argumentative scaffolding, so there is nothing to grab onto and refute. There is frequently considerable symbolism included, loading the story with affect (pride, identity, progress) that bypasses rational evaluation. Usually, they include a moral framing, thereby embedding a normative claim so it appears descriptive. And finally, such stories regularly play an obscuring function so that what becomes important is what the story silences (corruption, displacement, ecological loss) – trends and traits that may be as politically consequential as what the story asserts.

Identifying which stories your target groups tell, and how these influence your other target groups, is an important initial aspect of sensing. Particularly important are stories that power accumulators use to legitimize the things that they do. There will be a multitude of power accumulators influencing your landscape, and located in, near and beyond it. A key part of your initial sensing is to identify which stories they tell, and what these may obscure. This provides significant insight into the power vista.

This initial pass yields a series of interpretations, which can then be verified, enhanced, or discarded through a series of 'narrative collection' exercises with your target groups. Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) is a form of participatory action research in which people collectively gather and work with everyday stories of experience to make sense of complex situations and support better decisions. PNI treats stories as data for sensemaking, not just as illustrations or testimonials. People who live the experience both tell the stories and help interpret patterns in them, so inquiry is done with, not on, communities.¹¹ PNI is a method for sensing – it is diagnostic. What you do with the findings is where the foment lies.

¹¹ See Kurtz, 2026.



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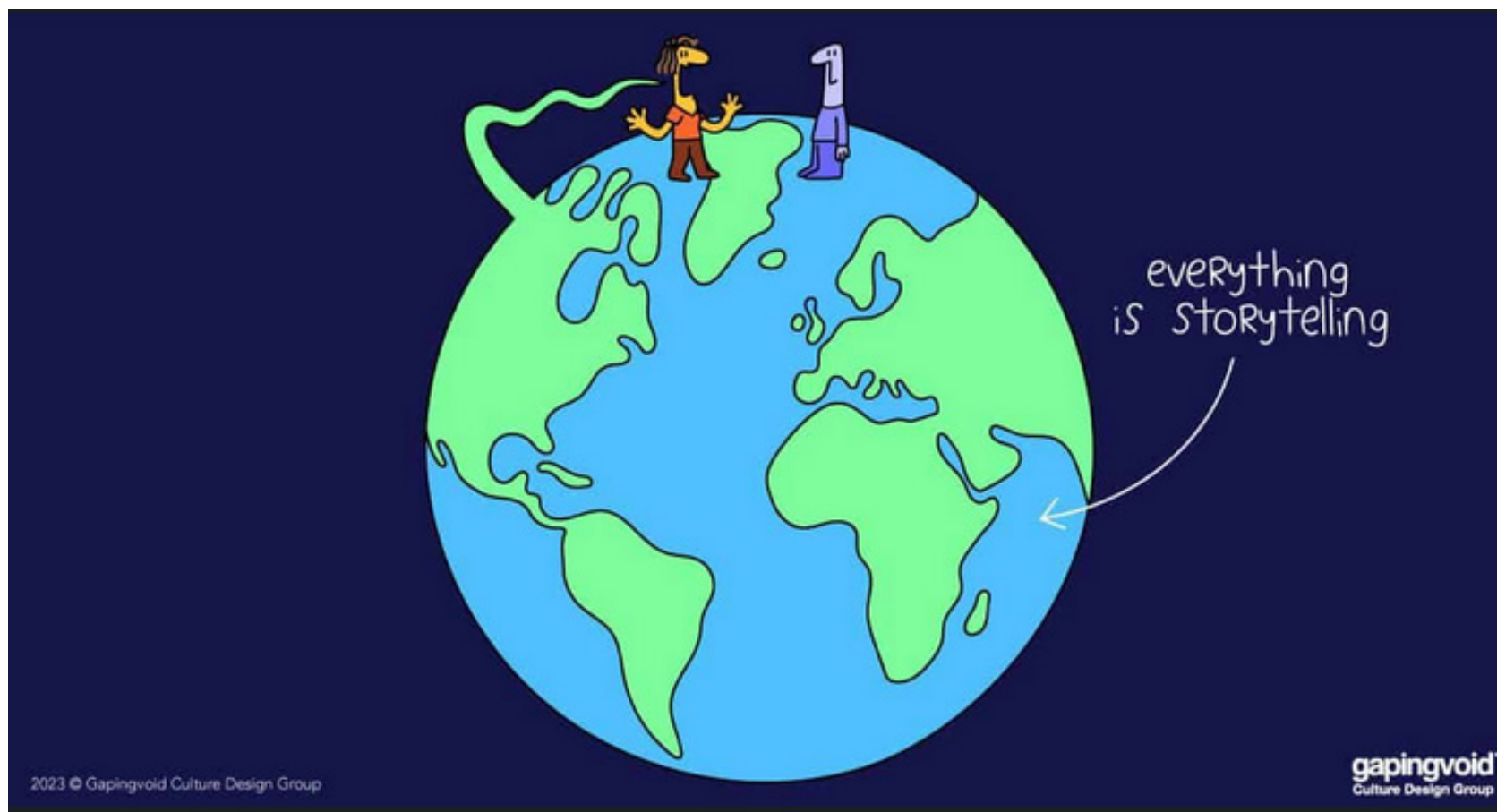
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What emerges from these analyses should reveal the stories that permeate the target groups you are working with – and which structure, influence and potentially even determine their practices. A foment in this case could (a) aim to amplify an ongoing story that may at present be weak or subservient to more dominant stories, and which is relevant to the alt-heading; and/or (b) to dampen a story that may be contributing to the current system heading.

The final benefit of storytelling is how it can contribute to the ways in which you engage with target groups. Packaging data, ideas, research and other types of ‘alien’ information as narrative, with beginnings, middles and ends, with characters and, hopefully, a moral, brings the intervention into play within the system. People respond to stories and paying close attention to the best ways in which to convey them – a narrative, a play, creative social media, role-playing or all of these – is itself a foment design choice.





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Where chivalry can go horribly wrong¹²

In 1346, the English and French armies squared off near Crécy-en-Ponthieu in northern France. The English, led by King Edward III, were outnumbered several times over by the French army led by King Philip VI. The French fielded thousands of heavily armoured knights – terrifying shock troops, rich and powerful men whose expensive equipment and devastating charges had delivered military success for 500 years. They also employed Genoese mercenary crossbowmen. The English had their longbowmen: men armed with immensely powerful bows, capable of firing ten arrows a minute at ranges over 300 metres.

The French had been marching all day. Although King Philip ordered a rest halt, many troops continued onto the battlefield, eager to impress their superiors. A summer shower passed over the armies. The English longbowmen disassembled their bows, keeping the strings dry under their hats. The Genoese crossbows were far more complex and could not be protected; their strings got wet, reducing range. Their *pavises* – large shields behind which they could hide while reloading – had not yet arrived, caught up at the baggage end of the still-marching army.

The Genoese fired first. Their bolts fell short. The English archers took a step forward and loosed their arrows so thickly that they fell, in one chronicler's words, like snow. The Genoese broke and fell back. King Philip, enraged, ordered the cavalry charge. Hundreds of the most eager French knights charged uphill through the retreating crossbowmen, hacking through them as they went. Their charge was slowed by the chaos, the rain-sodden ground, the uphill slope, and deep potholes that the English had been digging all day. The horses – unprotected, unlike their riders – fell to the arrows. The charge disintegrated. The French charged many more times. Each time the same result. As darkness fell, King Philip left the battlefield defeated.

Three stories matter here. First, King Philip did not take his crossbowmen seriously. He sent them into battle without their shields, then sent cavalry over them. Second – and this explains the first – the French chivalric code of honour bound the entire military culture. Knights would literally rather die than lose their reputation. For 500 years, that culture and the reliance on heavily armoured cavalry had delivered success. Until it did not.

That code of honour was not absent on the English side. Archers had been disparaged – it was felt dishonourable that they did not come close to their foes. But King Edward had long seen the longbowmen as his best chance. To embrace the longbow meant reshaping the story. He forgave the debts of the crafters who made the bows and arrows – symbolically far more important than just paying them a bonus. And he commanded that all men over the age of 12 should practise archery for two hours after church each Sunday, on pain of death. He created this law nine years before Crécy. English respect for the longbowmen had been carefully cultivated by the King.

¹² Derived from Harford, 2022 and Ellis, 2007.



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Boundary objects

Boundary objects are things (including conceptual things) that can serve as a locus for engagement and, possibly, integration among groups from different cultures, locations or professions.¹³ The ‘boundary’ references that these objects sit at the intersection between different social groups. They are things that all your target groups know what they are, but may see, understand, or interpret differently.¹⁴ A map, for example. To groups in central government, district administration or local communities it is a map, but each group interprets it differently, sees things that others overlook, highlights things that others consider unimportant. As foments, boundary objects are clear provocations – they surface perspective, meaning, identity and values – and, critically, points of similarity without interfering with difference. They can also surface power differences and conflicts, not just ‘bridge’ them, so attention to who participates, who controls the artefact, and whose categories it encodes is critical – particularly in unequal, post-colonial contexts.¹⁵

A boundary object becomes a foment when it is deployed deliberately to provoke exchange. A map sitting in an office is not a foment. A map placed in front of three stakeholder groups who are asked to mark what matters to them – that is a foment. One practical approach is to use progressive layering on a shared base: a facilitator puts a simple scaffold in the middle (e.g., a blank map, river cross-section, basic theory-of-change, timeline), and different groups successively add their own elements (uses, conflicts, indicators, institutions, seasons, risks) with colours, symbols or layers. A Participatory Three-Dimensional Model (P3DM) of a landscape, built jointly by diverse stakeholders, is a powerful example – the process of building it generates shared understanding without requiring shared interpretation.¹⁶ Alternatively, each group first draws or designs its own version (its ‘view’ of the landscape or problem), and then participants compare these side-by-side, extracting overlapping features and prominent differences into a new, composite object.

Whatever the approach, check that everyone agrees that the result is the ‘same thing’ yet can use or interpret it differently; that it supports information sharing, learning and coordination of specific tasks. Then use the artefact in interactions, meetings, participatory workshops, or joint planning exercises. Watch where it enables dialogue or exposes conflict, then revise it accordingly. If it works, stabilize it (e.g., standard template, routine tool in planning cycles) while allowing local tailoring, so it can travel across sites without becoming rigid or exclusionary.

Boundary objects work because they target materials and meanings simultaneously. They introduce a new material element (the map, the model, the dashboard) that carries meaning across epistemic boundaries.

¹³ Star and Griesemer, 1989.

¹⁴ Hawkins et al, 2017; Caccamo et al, 2023.

¹⁵ Hawkins et al, 2017.

¹⁶ If you're interested in this approach, see Rambadli, 2010.



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Demonstration effects

A common strategy in many agricultural sciences is the ‘demonstration plot’. Here, a plot is used to demonstrate the benefits of some alternative farming system, the yield of an unused crop variety, or unpractised soil preparation methods. The plot may be located in a recipient community, or perhaps farmers are brought to an agricultural research facility to view it themselves.

Such plots are materials. They emerge from the logic that if farmers can only see how beneficial these novel approaches are then they will adopt them. It implies that, if they do not, there is some kind of resistance in play. The latter may well be true – because farmers will know that if they adopt these novel approaches, some form of regulation – not government regulation necessarily, but the feedback loops that maintain the current practice configuration – will snap them back into the previous farming configuration that is held in place by the same regulations that caused its emergence in the first place. The science presented in the demonstration plot is almost certainly robust and of high standard, but it does not speak for itself, and it is not persuasive given the broader circumstances in which farmers find themselves.

A recent study¹⁷ in Tanzania found that distributing ‘trial packs’ alongside demonstration plots had no significant overall effect on technology adoption. The trial packs were small free packages of the inputs being promoted – in this case, seeds and a seed treatment. A broader review of forty-one randomised evaluations of agricultural extension¹⁸ concludes that extension recommendations based on controlled test plots often fail to translate to real farming conditions – the optimal approach for the experimental plot is not the optimal approach for the farmer’s field, where soil varies, labour is constrained, markets are uncertain, and land tenure may be insecure. Demonstration plots also fail on meanings: a plot on a research station does not tell a farmer what it means, socially, to be the kind of person who adopts this practice.

A demonstration *effect* is different. It is the visible consequence of a practice change that shifts what neighbouring actors think is possible. When a community that has adopted new governance arrangements for a shared water source visibly prospers – not because someone showed them a plot, but because their institutional change produced tangible benefits – that is a demonstration effect. This foment takes advantage of the human propensity to copy others in their decision-making (Box 3). It works because it targets all three MMC elements simultaneously: the materials are visibly different (the water source is better managed, the harvests are better), the meanings shift (other communities see that change is possible and desirable), and the competencies become legible (neighbouring actors can see what the community did and begin to imagine how they might do something similar). Crucially, the meaning element leads: what makes a demonstration effect powerful is not the material improvement by itself, but that it becomes desirable, aspirational, and something that signals a kind of community that others want to be.

¹⁷ Maredia et al, 2025.

¹⁸ Kondylis and Mueller, 2020.



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Mimetic theory

Mimetic theory was developed by the French historian, literary critic and philosopher René Girard. The theory seeks to explain human desire, conflict and culture through imitation: we learn what to want by imitating others' desires, which can generate rivalry and violence, managed historically through scapegoating and sacrificial mechanisms. Desire is not purely individual or spontaneous; it is triangular – a subject desires an object because a 'model' (another person or group) already desires it, which can turn the model into a rival. As people imitate one another's desires, competition intensifies, spreading contagiously and threatening social order (a 'mimetic crisis'). Communities historically restore order by converging their hostility on a single victim or minority, blaming them for the crisis, expelling or killing them, and afterwards remembering them ambivalently as both guilty and peace-bringing; this underpins myths, ritual sacrifice, and aspects of law and religion.¹⁹

The American economist Thomas Schelling argues that large-scale social patterns often emerge from many individually reasonable choices, and the aggregate outcome can be unintended, surprising, and even undesirable for the very individuals whose choices produced it – classic complexity. When he speaks of 'reasonable choices', these are deemed reasonable by the individual making them, and depend on how many similar or different neighbours they currently see, or how many people are already doing X versus Y. People do not just imitate; they calibrate – adjusting their choices based on what they see others doing. Even without conscious 'imitation of desire' (as Girard describes it), the mechanism is one of conditional alignment: my behaviour adjusts based on what I observe in yours.²⁰

These are but two thinkers on the extent to which humans, as a species, key off others' actions – there are many others. Taken together, these lines of work support the view that humans are deeply, perhaps constitutively, social: our perception, judgement and behaviour are continuously calibrated to what others do, which makes 'herd' effects the rule rather than the exception, especially under uncertainty or strong norms.

Demonstration effects are powerful because they activate social learning loops – amplifying feedback driven by observation and emulation rather than instruction. But they carry risks. They can be captured: the 'model farmer' is the village chief's relative; the 'successful community' had pre-existing advantages that are not replicable. And they can be misread: observers may attribute success to the wrong causes, adopting superficial features while missing the institutional or relational changes that actually produced the result.

¹⁹ Girard, 1987 [1978].

²⁰ Schelling, 2006 [1978].



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If our foments do their work and we see institutional change²¹ in one community, will neighbouring communities respond by adopting similar changes? The evidence is cautiously encouraging but demands realism.

The most thoroughly studied case is Nepal's community forestry programme, where Community Forest User Groups spread from a handful of donor-assisted experiments in the late 1970s to over 22,000 groups managing some 2.3 million hectares. The neighbouring-community effect was real: communities saw what was happening nearby and demanded similar rights. But this was not spontaneous diffusion. It required an enabling legal framework (the Forest Act 1993), a supportive bureaucratic infrastructure (district forest officers actively facilitating handover), federation-building (a national network connecting community groups and amplifying their collective voice), and decades of policy iteration. The institutional infrastructure had to exist for community demand to be met. And even this widely celebrated success story is now showing strain, with recent research documenting declining participation as livelihood diversification and out-migration alter the forest – people relationship.

A cross-initiative study,²² examining scaling out across five community-based conservation programmes in Chile, Nepal, Namibia, Madagascar, and Fiji, found that diffusion was more rapid where innovations were flexible enough to be adapted locally, where adopters could see tangible benefits, and where external support and facilitation were present. The most frequently identified bottlenecks were unfair benefit-sharing, unequal decision-making, inflexible rules, and top-down leadership – precisely the power configurations that the Playbook's approach to sensing is designed to diagnose.

What this tells us is that institutional change can propagate, but it does not travel by demonstration alone. It requires what we might call an enabling ecology: legal space for communities to act, facilitation infrastructure that supports adoption without prescribing it, flexibility for local adaptation, and – critically – visible, tangible benefits that neighbouring communities can observe and aspire to. Your foments can contribute to building this ecology: institutional micro-shifts create legal space; relational brokering builds facilitation infrastructure; building on what's already there provides flexibility by amplifying local adaptations rather than imposing blueprints; and demonstration effects create the visible benefits.

Endogenous innovators

All communities (whether rural farmers, small-scale traders, or a group of politicians) have among them someone keen to develop and/or embrace novel ideas and innovation. There is always someone willing to take a risk – usually tiny, and structured to be incremental – in order to see if something works. Think of this as foments at an individual, personal, level.

Identifying and working with these people can be a powerful entry point to motivating a demonstration effect. Everett Rogers'²³ diffusion of innovation theory found that if such people (he called them 'early adopters') are also credible, respected opinion leaders, their use of a new practice signals to the majority that an innovation is worth trying. Once enough innovators have moved,

²¹ As denoted by Ostrom (e.g., 1990).

²² Pienkowski et al, 2024.

²³ Rogers, 2003.



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a threshold is reached and diffusion accelerates. In your sensing work, identifying innovators or risk-takers among your target groups is important.

In landscape contexts, however, great care must be taken when working with endogenous innovators. Innovators may often be regarded as deviants by their own communities and are 'cut down' because they stand out – what is sometimes called tall poppy syndrome.²⁴ The threat of such community action can stifle innovation, risk-taking and excellence because people fear peer retaliation more than they value marginal gains. Communities police the boundaries of acceptable differentiation, and where material scarcity and fragile trust prevail, conspicuous local success can trigger fear, envy and accusations of betrayal. Innovators sometimes have to leave their communities to succeed, then re-embed once they can redistribute benefits. This shows just how intensely human livelihoods are entangled in relational expectations: success must be narratable as *for us*, not *over us*.

In the LFF project in Zimbabwe, several early adopters were identified – people who were already doing innovative things, and whom the project sought to support. Their social standing was not explored, even if it was already understood that these individuals were regarded as eccentric. One fenced off their crop and started agroforestry practices. To the rest of the villagers, the contrast was stark between his green field while the surrounding land was bare, baked and dusty. Just down the road, another early adopter had installed solar panels with the project's help. Other community members crept in while this individual was away and destroyed the panels, and subsequently, tried to poison him.

The implication for foment design is that you cannot simply identify endogenous innovators and work with them in the hope that others will follow. You need to understand local dynamics, and the tolerance of these societies towards their more innovative, risk-taking members. The innovators you choose to work with (and who agree to work with you) must have their political ducks in a row. Endogenous innovators and leaders are both opportunity points, but they require different foments and serve different functions. Innovators demonstrate possibility; leaders enable propagation. Your sensing must identify both – and understand their relationship to each other. An innovator who is also a trusted leader is the most powerful combination, but it is rare. More often, you need foments that connect innovators to leaders: relational brokering that allows the innovator's proof of concept to travel through the leader's trusted network.

Institutional micro-shifts

Small procedural changes within existing institutions – changing who is invited to a planning meeting, what data are presented in a routine report, how a decision is documented, which communities are consulted before a permit is issued – are foments aimed directly at the regulatory structure. They target the dampening loops that hold unwelcome patterns in place.

These foments are often invisible to external observers. They do not look like 'interventions.' But a planning meeting that now includes community representatives is a different planning meeting. A monitoring report that now includes livelihood data

²⁴ See Feather, 1989; and for the development context, Scott, 1985.



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alongside biophysical indicators frames decisions differently. These are Trojan mice in the purest sense: small enough to pass through institutional defences, consequential enough to shift how decisions are made.

Institutional micro-shifts require allies within the institution – individuals who see the value of the change and have enough positional authority to enact it. Identifying and supporting these allies is itself a foment (one that overlaps with relational brokering). The intervention does not impose institutional change from outside; it nurtures conditions under which insiders choose to make changes that align with the alt-heading.

Build on what's already there

Sensing will reveal places where the system already has give – practices that are already shifting, actors who are already doing things differently, collaborations that are already nascent, institutions that are already adapting. These are the opportunity points described elsewhere in the Playbook. Opportunity points are nascent foments – perturbations that the system has already generated from within, which your intervention can amplify.

Rather than designing foments from scratch and imposing them on the landscape, look first for what is already happening that moves in the direction of your alt-heading. A women's savings group that is already experimenting with collective marketing is a nascent foment. A junior district officer who is already including community data in their reports is a nascent foment. A neighbouring community that is already managing a shared resource through informal agreements is a nascent foment.

But note, also, the points made above on adjacent practices. It is important to look at practices that may not immediately appear to have anything to do with your alt-heading. These adjacent practices – the temple attendance, the school engagement, the market routines – can themselves contain opportunity points. Focusing on these can, once again, help to perturb the context surrounding your primary practices.

Your intervention's role is to recognize these, connect them, resource them modestly, and protect them from the dampening loops that would otherwise absorb them. This is not passive. It requires active sensing, deliberate choices about where to invest attention, and the judgement to distinguish genuine opportunity from wishful thinking. Not everything that looks promising is an opportunity point; some apparent shifts are temporary, superficial, or driven by incentives that will disappear when the project leaves.

Opportunity points are not the same as foments. With opportunity points, you learn to identify them, and to use them as launchpads for designed foments. A foment that builds on an existing opportunity point – amplifying something that stakeholders are already inclined towards – is far more likely to take root than one that introduces something entirely novel.



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What releasing a foment looks like

The language of 'releasing' a foment is deliberate. You do not implement a foment the way you implement a programme component. You release it into the system and observe what happens. The metaphor is ecological, not mechanical: you are introducing something into a living system and watching how the system responds.

It is also very like the sport called curling. Here, a player releases a stone across a sheet of ice towards a target area. The player tries to slide the stone – through their skill and experience – to get the stone into the bull's eye. The stone has its own momentum, its own interaction with the surface. The player does not control its trajectory. But the teammates run ahead of it, sweeping the ice in front of the stone to reduce friction where they want it to travel and leaving friction where they do not. They are not steering the stone; they are shaping the conditions through which it passes. A foment works the same way. You release the perturbation, watch which direction it actually moves, and then deploy your other foments – your bilateral engagements, your knowledge-sharing, your relational brokering – to smooth the path towards your alt-heading and leave the dampening loops intact where the perturbation is heading somewhere unhelpful. The ferment of foments is not a set of independent provocations; it is a coordinated surface-preparation exercise around perturbations that are already in motion.

Consider how this works in practice. Sensing has revealed that smallholder farmers in the upper catchment are locked into a practice configuration where monoculture maize dominates: the materials (seed supply chains, fertiliser subsidies) favour it; the meanings (for example, maize as 'real farming', diversification as 'backward') reinforce it; the competencies (agronomic knowledge, market navigation) are oriented around it. Your intervention proposes that shifting towards diversified agroforestry would improve both livelihoods and watershed function. But you also know – from sensing – that several farmers on the catchment's margins are already trialling fruit trees and nitrogen-fixing species, and that a women's group has been quietly developing skills in processing and marketing non-maize products.

These are your opportunity points. Your ferment might include: bilateral engagement with the women's group to understand and support their marketing initiative (building on what is already there); relational brokering to connect the experimenting farmers with each other and with the women's group (creating new exchanges); knowledge-sharing to present watershed data showing how upper-catchment practices affect downstream water availability (meaning-targeting); a convened space bringing these actors together with a district agricultural officer who is sympathetic to diversification (institutional micro-shift potential); and storytelling – supporting the experimenting farmers to tell their own stories of why they diversified, what happened, and what it means to them. Meanwhile, you are also targeting adjacent practices – perhaps engaging the agricultural college that trains the next generation of extension officers or working with the cooperative board that currently only markets maize.

None of these is large. None commits the intervention to a particular outcome. Each embodies a proposition – but remember the honest epistemology: you are confident that each will perturb the system, and you are betting that the perturbation will move broadly towards your alt-heading. You are not confident of the second part. And each generates learning: did the women's group



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engage? Did the connection between farmers produce anything? Did the watershed data shift how the district officer frames agricultural planning? Did the stories travel?

Crucially, you are not running these foments in isolation. They are a ferment, designed to interact. The bilateral work feeds into the convened space; the knowledge-sharing reframes what is discussed there; the relational brokering creates channels through which the stories can travel afterward. The ferment is itself a designed perturbation – a set of small provocations whose collective effect is greater than the sum of its parts, because each one shifts the conditions facing the others.

Notice that these foments approach the same interaction space from multiple angles – each targeting a different strand or a different element of the practice configuration. A ferment that works only one angle is unlikely to shift heading.

And then you watch. You monitor for ripples: is the women's group's marketing initiative attracting interest from other farmers? Is the district officer's framing shifting? Are the stories being retold? And you watch for the signals of potential cascading: are farmers who were not directly involved beginning to ask questions? Is the cooperative beginning to stock diversified products? Is the meaning of 'good farming' beginning to shift? If these signals appear, you sweep the ice – carefully, deploying further foments to smooth the path – without trying to control the process. If they do not appear, you ask why, and you redesign.

In all likelihood, the success that emerges will look nothing like what you initially imagined. Perhaps the women's group's marketing initiative takes off in ways you did not anticipate, becoming the platform for a broader shift in how the district approaches agricultural extension – while the watershed data lands with a thud and changes nothing. The outcome is real, and it is valuable, but it is not what the proposal promised. This is not a failure of the approach; it is how complex systems actually work. What matters is whether the system's heading has shifted, not whether it shifted through the specific causal chain you predicted.

What foments do for your intervention

Thinking in foments changes how you plan and how you implement. You are not rolling out a programme; you are releasing a ferment of provocations, *each one a question posed to the landscape*. The answers will reshape your landscape ambitions, your priorities, and sometimes your alt-heading itself. This is not a loss of control – you still control yourself and your intervention – it is how you work skilfully within complexity.

Foments serve your intervention in several ways. They probe the system, testing where change is possible. They perturb existing arrangements, creating openings for new practices. They plant ideas, relationships, and possibilities that may flourish. They generate learning – from both success and failure. And because they are held lightly, they can be abandoned when they are not working, freeing resources for more promising directions.

The utility of a foment, at its simplest, is to knock a strand off its current trajectory (see the [Systems and Complexity](#) section). A ferment is what shifts heading by deflecting many strands through many designed interactions simultaneously.



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Each foment in your ferment targets a strand in the interaction space, seeking to dampen its regulatory effect on the lighter strand you are concerned with, amplify a lighter strand that is already heading towards your alt-heading, or redirect a heavy strand so that its regulatory effect no longer bears on your lighter strand (see the Opportunity Points section for how these three logics map onto opportunity point categories).

This logic reflects a fundamental principle of complex systems: change is generated through the accumulation of micro-level interactions, not through singular decisive acts. In nature, systems optimize through precisely these small exchanges – because there is no single directing force, adaptation emerges from countless local adjustments. A foment operates at this micro-level: it introduces a small perturbation, observes how the system responds, and amplifies or dampens accordingly. The cumulative effect of multiple foments, running in parallel across a landscape, can shift the system's disposition in ways that a single large intervention cannot – precisely because each foment is too small to trigger the defensive response that larger, more visible change efforts provoke.

The Playbook rejects the language of 'scaling up.' What we describe is scaling deep – multiple foments probing the same practice configurations from different directions, targeting both primary and adjacent practices – and scaling out – the cascade process through which practice change propagates beyond your direct intervention, through demonstration effects, social learning, and institutional diffusion. Scaling deep is what your ferment does; scaling out is what cascading does. Multiple semi-autonomous teams could, of course, address the same set of practices in different communities, each developing their own foments – this is the mosaic approach described in the [Adaptivity](#) section.

A final note. Foments resist conventional monitoring, evaluation, and learning frameworks, for reasons that are structural rather than technical. Conventional MEL demands attribution: the ability to demonstrate that an observed change was caused by a specific intervention. But in complex systems, change is emergent, collaborative, and often unintended. The pursuit of attribution selects for interventions that are attributable over interventions that are effective – it is itself a dampening loop. If we are sincere about the desire to shift complex systems, attempting this in partnership or network with others is the only way it can be achieved. This raises profound questions about how we account for what we do and what we accomplish, which are addressed in the Playbook's MEL section.



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