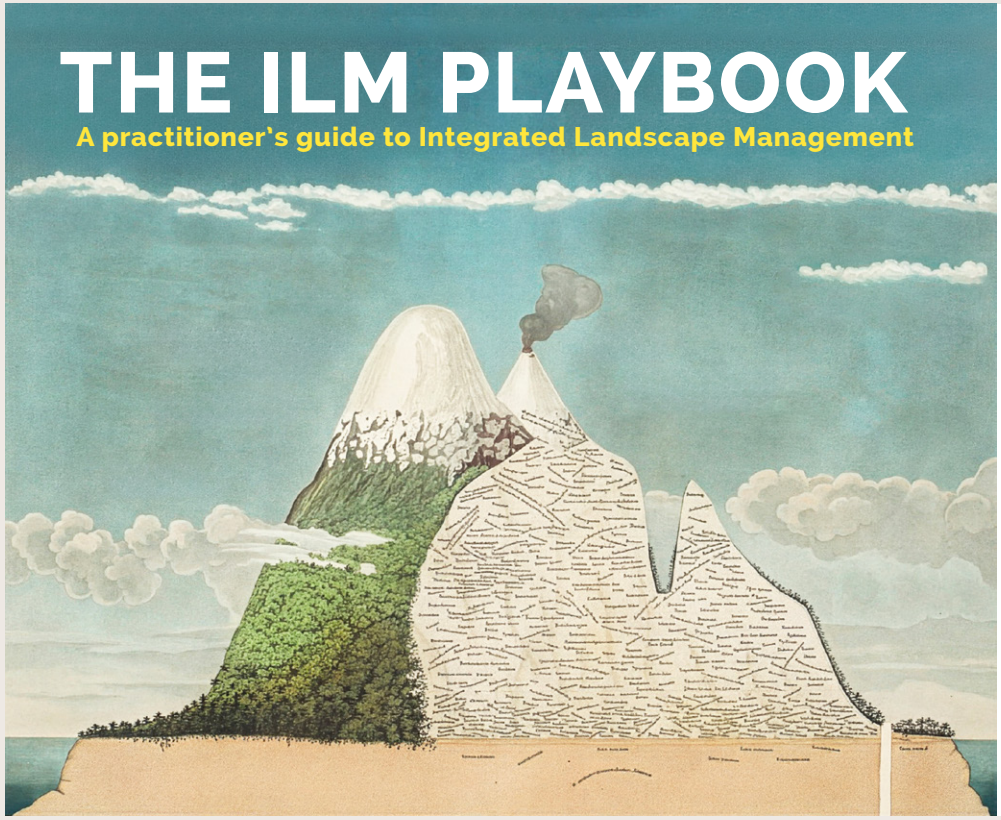
Extract from The ILM Playbook

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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Key take-aways

- Op-points are conditions in the system's regulatory architecture, not places – moments where the interactions between strands create potential for practice change and where a well-designed foment can amplify what that interaction produces.
- Interventions can target four depths – instruments (politically safe but trivial), information, regulation, and intent – and most development work stays at instrument level for structural reasons we name openly.
- Six categories of regulatory exchange make the most productive op-points: asymmetric dominance, regulatory incoherence, latent reciprocity, regulatory weakening, regulatory redirection, and convergent light strands.
- Opportunities range from obvious to occluded, and the deepest are visible only through sustained relational presence in the landscape, because the dominant information systems are structurally blind to them.
- Your interaction space is not where your target groups are – it is wherever the strands that regulate them originate, which may be a national capital 600 km away or an export market on another continent.

Introduction

Every complex system has points where it is more susceptible to influence than others – places where a modest intervention might generate ripples. They are *where* you intervene in the system. We call these *opportunity points* (op-points).[1] These are not fixed locations in the landscape. They are openings in the system's regulatory architecture: moments, relationships, or configurations where the patterns that hold the system on its current heading might be disrupted, redirected, or reinforced. An op-point is a condition: a moment where the interactions between strands create potential for practice change, and where a well-designed foment can amplify what that interaction produces.

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.

1 Note that the traditional systems literature identifies 'levers' – which are similar in many respects to our 'opportunity points'. We prefer the latter term because we do not see these as mechanistic, and taking advantage of opportunities does not imply the application of pressure or force.

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Elsewhere, we have described how system heading is produced by the interactions between strands – actor-specific trajectories constituted by practices. Opportunity points are where those interactions are most promising: where strands come into contact under conditions that create potential for practice change.

To change a system's heading, we have to change the interactions that maintain its current heading. We are, in effect, intervening in the system's foundational relationships. It makes little sense, after all, to put a bucket under a leak instead of fixing the roof; or treating only the symptoms rather than the disease. These underlying drivers are the power dynamics, institutional arrangements, regulations, and paradigms that dominate system heading (Actor A in Our Theory of Change). The question for any intervention is: are you putting a bucket under the leak (trivial) or repairing the roof (profound)? Trivial interventions are easier, more visible, and less threatening to existing power structures.

Changing a system's regulatory architecture is, in practical terms, changing the context within which actors operate. Context and regulation are two descriptions of the same phenomenon: regulation is how context is constituted – the dense web of norms, power relations, institutional arrangements, and incentive structures that together determine what is possible, permissible, and rewarded in a given setting. The practitioner who intervenes in the regulatory architecture is not adjusting an abstract governance mechanism; they are reshaping the lived context that generates people's everyday behaviour. This is what distinguishes regulatory-level intervention from instrument-level tinkering: instruments operate on behaviour from outside the context, whereas regulatory change alters the context itself, so that different behaviour emerges without being mandated.

Interaction spaces

But where, concretely, does the practitioner look for opportunity points? Here, we can be more precise. A strand – an actor group's set of practices sustained over time – does not merely follow its own trajectory. It radiates regulatory influence outward. A power accumulator's practices do not only constitute their own strand; they exert a regulatory field that shapes what other actors can do, how they do it, and what they think is possible. The upstream irrigator's water extraction regulates the downstream fisher's livelihood – not through a single encounter, but continuously, through the river. The district officer's enforcement practice regulates the community's resource use – not only when the officer visits, but through the standing threat (or promise) of what the officer might do. Or a far-away government exerts regulatory pressures on a local practice.

Where two or more strands' regulatory fields overlap, we have an **interaction space**: the space where practices exert mutual regulation. This will not usually be a place. It is, rather, the conceptual space where the regulation exerted by one strand modulates another. For example, let us imagine that you are concerned with the practices of a group of farmers. These degrade the landscape, and you would rather that they were using a different farming system that integrated a variety of ecosystem- and biodiversity-supporting effects, while also improving the livelihoods of the farmers. The trouble is, the practices the farmers are deploying are government sanctioned. There is an extension officer from the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) looking over your shoulder every step of the way. Chances are, then, that if you want your alternative farming system to be practised, your focus should not be here, with

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the farmers, but in the MOA in the capital city 600 kilometres away. This would suggest that foments need to be released among the farmers, as well as at the MOA. In most cases, it is more nuanced than this – but the moment a farmer tells you that they are practicing a deleterious farming system "because there is no alternative" you can bet they are working in a clear interaction space where their strand is far lighter than others that are in play.

When the interaction space shifts beneath you

One of our LFF interventions was being implemented in two provinces in a highland area of mainland Southeast Asia. This is a major coffee-growing zone, and the international organization implementing the project saw a clear opportunity to build on previous successes in one of the provinces. There, they had managed to connect coffee farmers with major international roasters who had, in turn, organized the farmers – and changed their practices – to deliver the grade and quality of coffee they needed. Market inducements can be a powerful foment. The implementing organization had established multi-stakeholder platforms at the district level, bringing together government, the private sector, farmer cooperatives, and civil society organizations around a shared interest in sustainable coffee value chains. International coffee companies had committed significant resources. Farmers were intercropping shade trees in their coffee plantations. A near real-time deforestation monitoring tool was in use. On paper, the interaction space between the coffee sector, government, and farming communities was productive and heading in a promising direction.

But the environmental problems associated with growing coffee in this part of the world remained significant. Native forest had been cut back to make way for intensive coffee farming. Coffee is a thirsty plant, and groundwater tables had been significantly lowered – farmers were accustomed to using far more water than was needed. Biodiversity loss in a globally famous biodiversity area was continuing. And, culturally, there were unaddressed tensions: most of the coffee farmers were lowland migrants, while the highlands were traditionally ethnic minority areas. The government had actively encouraged in-migration because the land was available and the population sparse. The migrants tended to do better economically, buying more land as they prospered. The ethnic minorities farmed more sustainably but were economically marginalized. Could the foments already in play be built upon – and tweaked – to yield stronger environmental dividends? And could the whole approach be replicated in a neighbouring province?

Then the interaction space shifted. A massive anti-corruption drive was being employed by the country's president to eliminate political rivals. The campaign came to dominate the ruling party's deliberations. It was being spoken about everywhere. Up and down government hierarchies, bureaucrats and administrators wondered if, at some time in their past, they had done something that might be construed as corrupt – such as criticizing the party leadership. The provincial governor who had championed the landscape approach lost his position – narrowly avoiding prosecution.

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This paranoia filtered into the provincial governments, and down through the departments responsible for coffee development. The result was administrative gridlock. No one dared to do anything without first gaining approval. What was said became guarded and careful. New ideas would have to be debated in the commune councils, then the provincial committee, and potentially passed up to central government. The project's design document became a millstone rather than a guide – no one was willing to deviate from it, and changing it was out of the question. Even corrections to typographical errors were resisted. Overseas development funds could only be authorised by the Ministry of Finance, so even funding streams froze. The intervention could not move.

Simultaneously, the government announced a sweeping administrative restructuring. Provinces were being merged – five highland provinces reduced to three, combined with coastal provinces. Districts were being dissolved. Hundreds of thousands of public servants were being laid off. Everyone was fighting for their positions and forgetting about projects. The multi-stakeholder platforms that the intervention had painstakingly built at district level suddenly had no administrative home.

One set of practices – the ruling party's exercise of power – heavily overshadowed all others, existing or potential. The interaction space had shifted. Central government had previously been distant, exerting regulatory influence at wide geographic range but with relatively loose grip on daily practice in the provinces. It was now intensely present. As the project leader told us: "We do what we are allowed to do and nothing beyond that. You don't come to the house of the owner and say you want to change the rules." Communities understood that they were "subject to support" – recipients, not participants. Local authorities could not propose new approaches. Decision-making had to follow the ways it had always been done.

In strand terms, the party's strand – always the heaviest in this system – had massively increased its regulatory weight. Its regulatory effect now bore down on every lighter strand in the landscape: the provincial bureaucrats, the district officers, the farmer cooperatives, the ethnic minority communities. The one-way regulatory exchange (A→B) that had always characterized this system intensified to the point where even the modest B→A capacity that the intervention had been building (through market connections, through multi-stakeholder platforms, through technical tools) was overwhelmed. The interaction space between the coffee sector, the farming communities, and government was not eliminated – but it was frozen. The conditions for productive interaction no longer existed.

A critical lesson here concerns the definition of the interaction space itself. The implementing organization had assumed that its interaction space was the Central Highlands – the two provinces where coffee was grown, where farmers and cooperatives and district officials interacted daily. But the anti-corruption campaign revealed that the interaction space had extended to the capital, 600 kilometres away. The party's strand had always been the heaviest in the system;

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the implementing organization had simply not been reading it because its regulatory effect had previously been diffuse enough to ignore. When that effect intensified, the 'local' interaction space turned out to be governed from elsewhere. The lesson: your interaction space is not where your target groups are. It is wherever the strands that regulate your target groups originate.

With such an overbearing regulatory force, the only option really available to the project was to take this story to the party itself, and to explore which newly designed foments could be released – to provoke some new debate or trigger concessions. This, however, did not happen. The intervention's institutional form – a donor-funded project operating through government channels – made it structurally incapable of confronting the regulatory architecture that was paralysing it. As the project leader reflected: "The Party wants to be seen as having done everything by itself. External support taints things. They can change, but the motivation must be internal."

This case illustrates several things in strand terms. First, interaction spaces are not stable – and their boundaries are not what you think they are. The regulatory conditions that make productive interaction possible can shift abruptly when a heavy strand intensifies its weight, and the space itself may extend far beyond your landscape. Second, an intervention must approach the interaction space from multiple angles: foments aimed at the farming communities (lighter strands), at the provincial bureaucracy (medium strands), and at the party itself (the heaviest strand). This project worked only the first two. Third, the project's own institutional constraints (a rigid project document, donor bureaucracy, sovereignty obligations) prevented the adaptivity that might have allowed it to navigate the new conditions – the intervention's strand was itself too light to exert regulatory force in the reconfigured space. And finally, the case shows why this Playbook insists that sensing the system must include reading the heavy strands – however distant they may seem – because their regulatory effect can transform your interaction space without warning.

A key thing to note is that the practices you may be concerned with are unlike the practices that influence them. The variable in play here is power and its regulatory effect. We are, therefore, concerned with the *quality of regulatory exchange* in the interaction space. When you're focused on an ecologically harmful fishing practice, it is a set of corrupt government practices that keep it in place. When you worry about localized logging, it is the breakdown of community structures that keep these in place.

If you can accept that power wielded by one actor (usually for completely different reasons) regulates the strand that you are concerned with, and whose heading you wish to shift, then, in the interaction space, you are concerned with:

- Dampening the heavy strand's regulatory effect on the lighter strand you're concerned with.
- Amplifying the lighter strand (if it's already heading towards your alt-heading).
- Redirecting the heavy strand so its regulatory effect no longer bears on your lighter strand.

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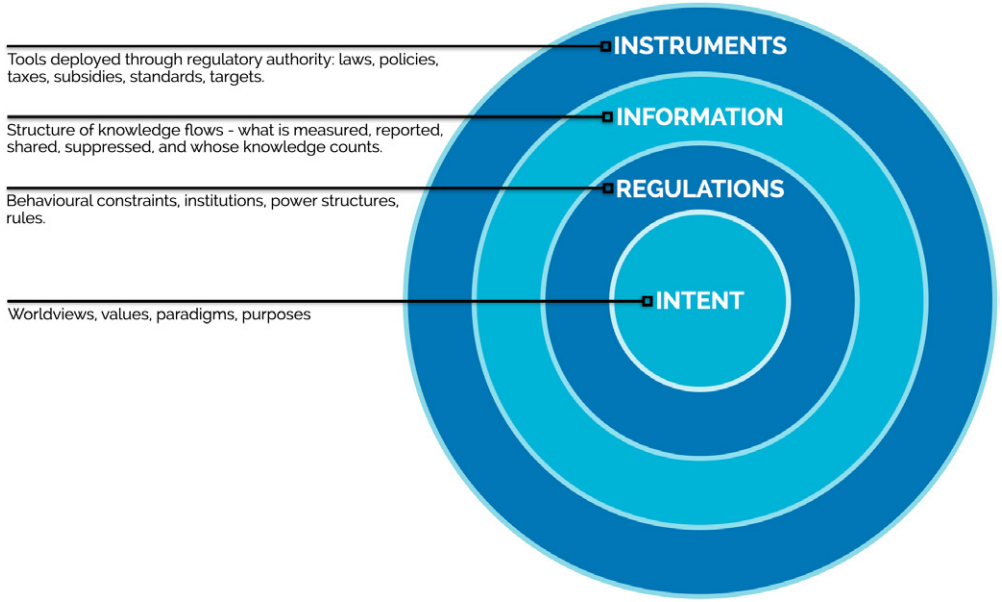
In most landscape contexts, the exchange in these interaction spaces is overwhelmingly one-way. One or more heavy strands —power accumulators' practices – radiate regulatory force that shapes lighter strands, but the lighter strands exert little regulatory force back. The community receives regulation; it has minimal capacity to regulate in return. In our notation: A→B. The intervention's task is to reshape these interaction spaces: first, to introduce some B→A capacity (the lighter strand begins to exert regulatory force back – through collective organization, market alternatives, institutional voice), and eventually to move towards A→B (a stable, bidirectional regulatory exchange). This is what we mean by *shifting* an interaction – not merely provoking a response but reconfiguring the directionality of regulatory exchange between strands.

Not all interaction spaces are equally consequential for system heading, and you cannot attend to all of them. You need to select those where the regulatory exchange is most consequential for heading and most amenable to being shifted by a foment. Discerning this requires exactly the systemic thinking and power analysis that this Playbook advocates: sensing who's doing what, when, where, why, how – and to whom.

Where to look: depths of intervention

Drawing on the systems thinking tradition – particularly Donella Meadows[2] – we can identify four broad depths at which interventions might target a complex system. Think of these as concentric circles, with the deepest – and most transformative – at the centre, and the most trivial on the outside.



2 Meadows, 2009. Meadows originally identified twelve leverage points, arranged from shallowest (constants, parameters, numbers) to deepest (the power to transcend paradigms).

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Intent

At the centre sit the worldviews and values that drive the system. These are the deepest patterns: the taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world works and whose interests it should serve. Shifting intent is the most challenging form of intervention, but also the most transformative. If the prevailing worldview holds that landscapes exist primarily to generate private profit, then every regulation, every information flow, and every instrument will tend to serve that worldview. Change the worldview – to one where landscapes are understood as shared commons requiring collective stewardship – and the downstream effects cascade outward through every other layer.

Regulations

The next ring comprises the regulatory architecture of the system: the rules, institutions, power relations, and governance mechanisms that pattern behaviour. Nobody sat down and designed these structures; they emerged from the interplay of power, interests, and historical contingency. But they regulate – they constrain some behaviours and enable others through the actual exercise of power via institutional and normative structures. We consider the regulatory architecture to be the most promising focus for ILM interventions, because it sits at a productive intersection: changes here can generate outward ripples (altering information flows and the instruments deployed) while simultaneously generating inward influence (gradually shifting the worldviews that actors hold). Restructuring institutions to be more inclusive, transparent, or adaptive does not merely change how decisions are made; over time, it changes how people think about what decisions are for.

Again, the power question is inescapable. *Whose regulations prevail?* In any landscape, the regulatory architecture reflects the interests of those who shaped it – typically government, donors, or powerful private sector actors. The rules of the game serve whoever wrote them. An ILM intervention that targets regulatory structures must therefore attend carefully to *whose interests the restructuring serves*, and to whether the change process itself redistributes or further concentrates regulatory power.[3]

Information

Moving outward, we encounter the structure of information flows within the system: who has access to what knowledge, in what form, and with what consequences for action. Information here refers to the political economy of knowledge: what is measured, what is reported, what is suppressed, and whose knowledge counts. Modifying information structures – making previously invisible dynamics visible or restoring suppressed signals – can shift a system's behaviour. Meadows' examples are instructive: identical houses consumed 30 per cent less electricity when the meter was in the hallway rather than the basement; US factory emissions fell 40 per cent after a public reporting requirement, with no fines or regulations attached. In neither case did a feedback loop change. A new visibility was created.

3 See the Regulation section for a detailed treatment of how feedback loops constitute the regulatory architecture of complex systems.

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Yet information, too, is politically constituted. Whose knowledge counts? In many landscapes, the information that matters most – market prices, government reporting, donor metrics – reflect the interests of powerful actors while suppressing signals from marginalized communities. A fishery might be collapsing, but if the dominant information systems measure GDP rather than community food security, the collapse remains invisible to decision-makers until it becomes catastrophic. Many governments and development interventions focus on 'awareness-raising' reflecting an information-deficit model: the assumption that if people only knew, they would act. But information interventions that do not address the regulatory architecture determining why certain knowledge is suppressed will generate the tiniest of ripples at best, never cascades.

Instruments

On the outside sit the instruments wielded by those who hold regulatory power: the laws, policies, taxes, subsidies, standards, targets, and quantitative settings that constitute the visible toolkit of governing. These may ease particular symptoms of systemic failure, but they do not address the underlying disease. Adjusting a subsidy rate does not change who controls the institution that sets the rate, which information flows justify the rate, or what worldview determines that subsidies are the appropriate response.

Instrument-level interventions are politically safe: they redistribute resources at the margins without disturbing the power structures that determine the overall distribution. They suggest that something is being done without addressing underlying structures and drivers. Much of what development interventions do – supporting new legislation, strengthening policy frameworks, building institutional capacity – is instrument-level work that looks deeper than it is. A new law is still an instrument wielded by the same power accumulators if the regulatory architecture remains unchanged.

An ILM approach worth the name must be willing to work at depth. That does not mean ignoring instruments; sometimes the symptoms demand immediate remedial attention. But it means recognizing that instrument-level interventions are necessary but not sufficient, and that the deeper work – confronting power dynamics, redesigning institutions, shifting paradigms – is where the intervention's real contribution will be made or not. Where you choose to aim on the target above reveals what you believe is possible, and what you are willing to risk.

Why most interventions stay trivial

This is perhaps the most uncomfortable observation the Playbook has to offer: the overwhelming majority of development interventions in landscape contexts operate at the instrument level. They pass laws, provide financial incentives, establish standards, and measure outputs – hectares protected, tonnes sequestered, livelihoods supported. These yield outputs, but rarely outcomes.

This is not primarily a failure of imagination or technical capacity. It is a structural feature of the institutional arrangements through which development is conducted. Bilateral and multilateral donors operate within frameworks that require them to respect the

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sovereignty and legitimacy of partner governments – even when those governments are embedded in the very power structures that generate the problems the intervention claims to address. An intervention that explicitly challenges existing governance arrangements, land tenure systems, or market structures risks its own institutional survival. The result is a systematic bias towards instrument-level tinkering: visible, measurable, politically safe, and ultimately trivial.

There is a deeper structural reason why interventions stay trivial. The hierarchical architecture through which development is conducted – donor to government to implementer to community – replaces relational proximity with bureaucratic abstraction at every level. It is structurally incapable of building the relational substrate that regulatory-level change requires. An intervention that genuinely aims to shift the regulatory architecture of a landscape needs the relational density of collaborative governance to succeed – but the institutional form through which it is delivered systematically prevents this. The noble goal is espoused at every level of the hierarchy; the mechanism that would deliver it is foreclosed by the hierarchy itself. This is the insincerity we diagnose in the section on Unstated Intent: the gap between what interventions say they want and what their institutional form allows them to achieve.

The recent pivot towards private sector engagement in development landscapes represents a variation on this theme, not a departure from it.[4] When donor frameworks encourage or require private sector partnership, the effect is often to introduce new power accumulators – corporate actors, frequently from donor countries – into landscape systems where they insist on the coordinative logic of monopoly control over supply chains, market access, and intellectual property. Power is reconfigured, structures reinforced, and power not redistributed.

An ILM approach that is sincere about systemic change has to be willing to work at regulation and intent level. This means confronting power. It means accepting that the intervention will face resistance from precisely the actors who benefit from keeping things superficial. And it means shaping the intervention itself for the kind of adaptivity that allows it to persist and manoeuvre in a politically contested space.[5]

Detecting opportunity points

As you 'read' the landscape, you will be looking for opportunity points. This is a proposition about where the system has 'give' – i.e., not only can you deliver influence to this point, but the system is amenable to receiving it. Your strand map – the read of who is driving the system where, with what weight – tells you which interactions between strands are most likely to produce movement towards your alt-heading. As a proposition, your interpretation may well be incorrect. But you have to focus somewhere in the system, and if you are adaptive in your trialling, you should be able to take this in stride.

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4 The increasing emphasis on private sector engagement in development represents a reconfiguration of who accumulates power, not a redistribution of it. Corporate actors, typically insist on monopoly or near-monopoly control over supply chains, market access, and intellectual property. This is coordinative logic: ordination of things in space and time, centralised and intolerant of diversity.

5 See section on Positionality.

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Identifying where to intervene in a complex system requires good landscape 'reading skills' and plenty of lateral thinking. A key question in this respect is *where* in the system will you apply your intervention? For example, perhaps you want to ensure that marginalized groups in a conflictual landscape are stabilized, and able to pursue their livelihoods. But the threat of violence is too high. It does not make sense to embark on such an intervention until the context has been dealt with. This may mean you need to focus your attention first on peace-building in the nation's capital city or at the UN General Assembly. Perhaps your first port of call will be belligerent warlords. Under other landscape sub-states, interventions will typically focus on both long range and local actors.

Types of opportunity

Not all opportunity points are equally visible. Some can be identified from your desk; others reveal themselves only through sustained presence in the landscape. The depth of engagement required to see an opportunity reflects the relational proximity needed to understand it. We distinguish four types, arranged by the depth of engagement they demand.

Obvious opportunities are initiatives in your landscape already doing more or less what you hope to do. Perhaps you want to amplify their work, extend its range, or build upon it. Taking advantage of their experience, relationships, and networks makes considerable sense. These are the easiest opportunities to find – but also the most likely to be crowded with other actors seeking the same thing.

Opaque opportunities are groups whose work aligns with your ambitions but is not an exact fit – at least not initially. If you are a research initiative, perhaps these are community development CSOs who could take your research results and push them from output to outcome. There is complementarity, a dovetailing, between what they do and what you seek. Bringing these groups on board may require working together so that their activities become better aligned with your intentions – and yours with theirs. The alignment is latent; it needs to be made visible through interaction.

Obscure opportunities are initiatives that, at first glance, seem to have no relevance to your ambitions. But look again. Perhaps it is a religious organization whose values resonate with your alt-heading, and who wield considerable influence in your landscape. Perhaps it is a private firm with outstanding distribution networks that you could take advantage of. Perhaps it is a politician who commands significant influence and whose support could open doors. Perhaps it is a dormant initiative with complementarity on paper but little current activity – an infusion of support and resources might revitalise it. These opportunities require creativity to see: the connection is not self-evident but must be constructed.

Occluded opportunities are invisible at the early stages of your process and only become apparent as you deepen your engagement. They require adaptation to accommodate. A good example are local institutions – the rules, norms, and shared strategies that communities have developed over time to organize collective action. These may govern how resources are shared, how conflicts are resolved, how decisions are made. Unless you spend time with your target groups, listening and observing, these institutions remain hidden. Similarly, cultural practices and meanings may not seem relevant until you understand why people do

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what they do. An ethnographer or anthropologist may have documented these, but often you will need to discover them yourself. The opportunity here is to work with the grain of existing social organization rather than against it.

Occluded opportunities are, in effect, weak signals rendered visible through relational proximity. The local institutions described above – the regulatory architecture that communities have built for themselves – are precisely what the Playbook argues is the most productive focus for intervention. They are occluded not because they are hidden in any mysterious sense, but because the dominant information systems (logframes, baseline studies, remote sensing) are structurally blind to them. The most important knowledge about a landscape is frequently tacit: held in the connections between people, expressed through stories and practices, and invisible to formal reporting. Seeing occluded opportunities requires investing in the relational presence that makes tacit knowledge accessible.

The progression from obvious to occluded reflects the depth of engagement required to see them. An intervention that focuses only on obvious opportunities misses the richness of what already exists in the landscape. One that can see occluded opportunities has a much richer palette to work with – and is far less likely to inadvertently work against existing social arrangements that it never knew were there.

Key opportunity areas

Based on our experience, some of the most important opportunity points are outlined below. Each focuses on interactions – between present and future, between interests, between ideas, and between people and their context. It is important to note that to generate a shift, you will need to come at these from both sides. It is insufficient to, for example, focus only on a group of farmers practicing a land-degrading farming system. There are reasons why their strand has arrived here, and you'll need to discover why that is. Perhaps their own internal community structures have been captured by central government, or market pressures leave no viable alternative, or the meanings associated with the current practice are too deeply embedded to shift without addressing the adjacent practices that reinforce them. In any case, you must approach the interaction space from multiple angles – different foments for different strands converging on the same space. A ferment that works only one side of the interaction is unlikely to shift heading.

Reshaping the interaction space – reducing the heavy strand's regulatory dominance, building the lighter strand's capacity to regulate back – creates the conditions under which practice change becomes possible. It does not, by itself, produce practice change. The lighter strand's own practices have their own internal logic (see the Practices section on MMCs), and foments must also target these directly. Regulatory space without practice-level foments yields an opening that nothing fills. Practice-level foments without regulatory space yields effort that snaps back.

We have framed what follows in terms of asymmetric dominance – a heavy strand overwhelming a lighter one – because this is the configuration most likely to be missed by conventional landscape analysis and most consequential for system heading. But

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it is not the only one. In some landscapes, the heavy strand is amenable, and the task is to work with it rather than against it: local authorities open to new approaches, willing to redirect their regulatory effect if shown a credible alternative. In others, the lighter strand's own practices are the primary problem, and the regulatory context is absent rather than oppressive. In others still, multiple strands of similar weight are in productive tension, and the task is to deepen their interaction towards deliberation and compromise (see the Compromise section). And in many cases, the goal is not to overcome the heavy strand but to assemble enough lighter strands that their cumulative weight offsets the heavy one – shifting system heading not through confrontation but through collective contra-regulation. Your sensing must read the actual configuration, not assume the adversarial one.

Do not assume that the lighter strand you are concerned with is heading in the right direction. A lighter strand may be practising a deleterious farming system not because a heavy strand is forcing it, but because its own MMC configuration – its meanings, materials, and competencies – produces that practice. In such cases, there is a sequencing issue: you may first need to work the lighter strand's own practices before – or alongside – working the interaction space. The two are not the same task, and confusing them will lead to frustration.

Asymmetric dominance – where a heavy strand's one-way regulatory effect is holding a lighter strand in a deleterious configuration. The opportunity is to build B→A capacity on the lighter side while simultaneously working to dampen the heavy strand's regulatory effect. This is probably the most common opportunity point in landscape work. Example: a mining company's extraction practice (heavy strand) regulates a downstream community's water access (lighter strand) unidirectionally. Your foments work both sides: bilateral engagement to build the community's collective capacity to regulate back, and institutional micro-shifts to introduce environmental monitoring requirements that constrain the mining practice.

Regulatory incoherence – where a heavy strand is trying to go in two directions at once, or where two heavy strands' regulatory fields contradict each other. The opportunity is that the regulatory pressure on the lighter strand is confused – it is receiving contradictory signals, which means neither heavy strand's dampening loop is operating cleanly. A foment placed here can exploit the confusion. Example: a government simultaneously promoting conservation and agribusiness expansion. The lighter strand (smallholder community) receives contradictory regulation – conserve and intensify. A foment can surface this incoherence and use it as leverage.

Latent reciprocity – where a lighter strand already has some capacity to regulate back but is not exercising it, or where two strands of similar weight are interacting but have not recognized their mutual regulatory potential. This means B→A capacity exists but is dormant or suppressed. Your foment amplifies it.

Regulatory weakening – where a heavy strand's regulatory effect is temporarily reduced, creating a window – such as when there are crises and disruptions. A drought, a political transition, a market collapse – these don't just destabilise the regulatory architecture in the abstract. They specifically weaken the heavy strand's capacity to maintain one-way regulatory exchange in particular interaction spaces. The dampening loops that normally absorb your foments are temporarily disabled. The window may be brief.

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Regulatory redirection – where the most promising move is not to resist the heavy strand or build B→A capacity, but to deflect the heavy strand's regulatory effect away from the lighter strand you're concerned with. Example: a power accumulator whose land-grabbing practice is degrading a community's agricultural land. Rather than confronting the accumulator directly (risky, likely to fail), you work to redirect their interest towards a different area or a different form of investment – perhaps connecting them with opportunities that are more profitable and less destructive. The heavy strand continues but its effect no longer falls on your lighter strand. This is politically realistic in ways that direct confrontation often is not, especially where the power asymmetry is extreme.

Convergent light strands – where multiple lighter strands are already interacting and their cumulative weight is approaching the point where they could exert meaningful regulatory force back against a heavy strand. This captures the insight from the Systems section: the most promising interactions may be between light strands, whose alignment can generate collective contra-regulation. The opportunity is that the light strands are already in contact – your foment does not need to create the interaction, it needs to deepen and align it. Example: several smallholder communities along a river, each individually powerless against upstream extraction, but whose shared interest in water quality creates a natural convergence. Your foment connects them, supports their collective voice, and amplifies their combined regulatory capacity.

Testing opportunity points: foments

If opportunity points are where the system is susceptible to influence, foments are how you test that susceptibility. An opportunity point is a reading of the system – a judgement, based on sensing, that this interaction between strands, this moment of institutional give, this convergence of practices, represents an opening. A foment is what you release into that opening: a discrete, time-bound provocation designed to stimulate a response. The opportunity point tells you where to aim. The foment is what you toss at it. See the Foments section for the full palette of foment types and how they are designed, released, and monitored.

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