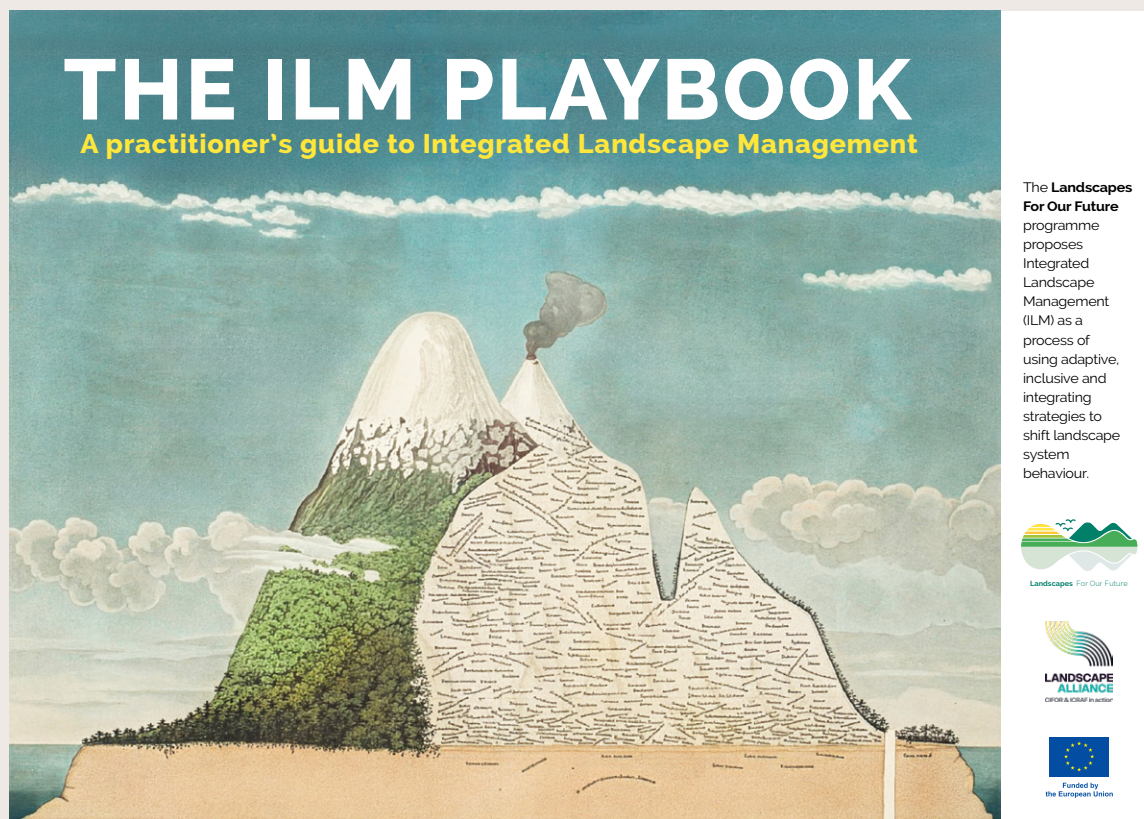


Extract from The ILM Playbook

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

Designing your intervention team: the principles

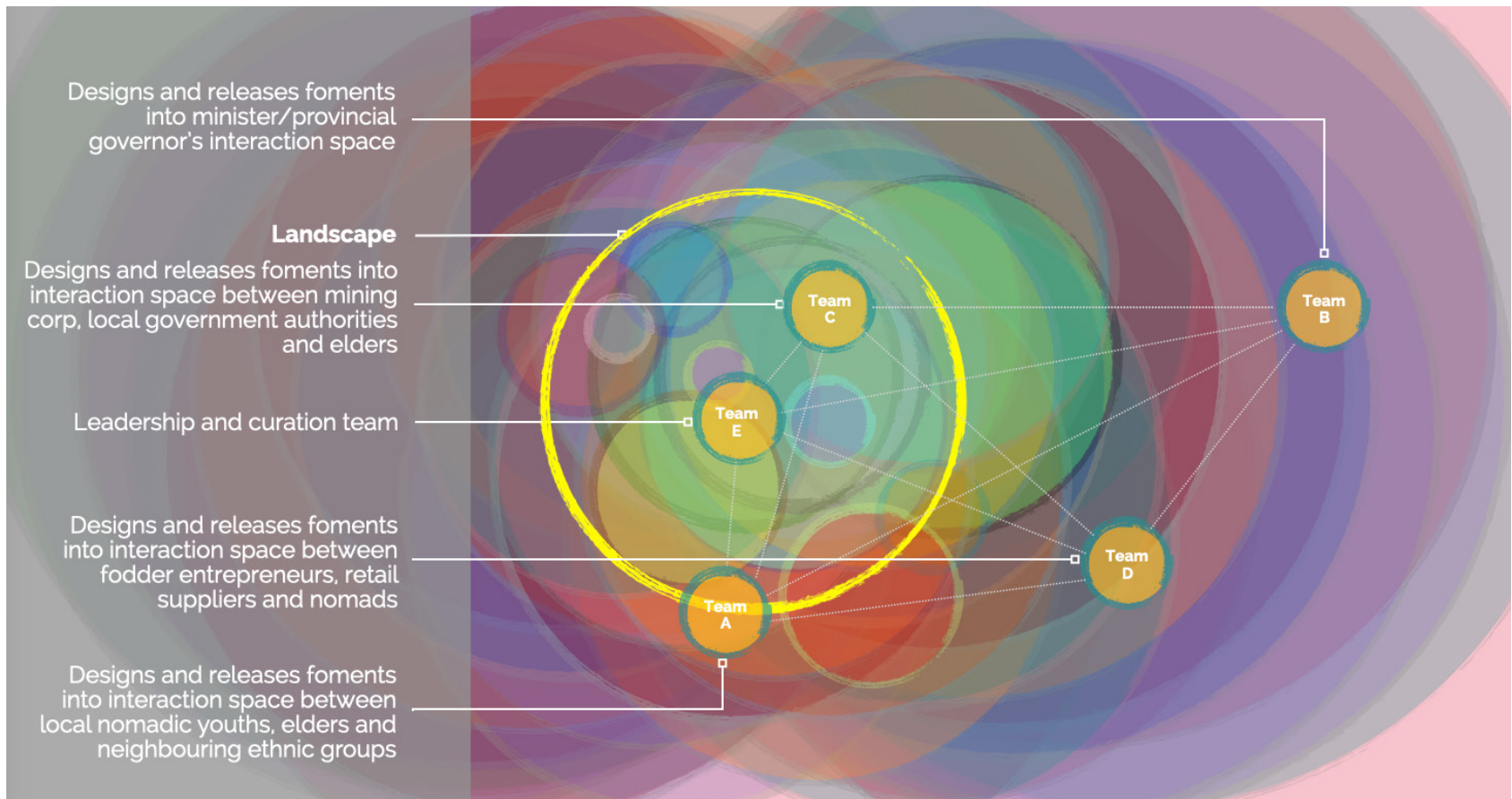
Key take-aways

- The team is the only element of the system you can truly control – its composition, dynamics, capabilities, conduct and operational culture are the principal drivers of intervention success.
- Recruit primarily for relational capacity, comfort with uncertainty, curiosity, reflexivity and polymathery – technical knowledge can be hired in; the relational and adaptive capabilities cannot.
- Distinguish leadership from management: the person who reads the system, holds relationships and steers heading is rarely the same person who manages the budget and writes donor reports – conflating them overloads one and underserves both.
- Embeddedness is non-negotiable: only teams that live in or near the landscape, with diversified income streams (epistemic independence) and continuity beyond a single project cycle, can sense and steer effectively.
- Mosaic structures with semi-autonomous teams – each working a different interaction space, plus a ‘Team E’ that curates (rather than collects) cross-learning – are the form most fit for complexity.

In complex systems, the only element you can truly control is your own intervention—its composition, dynamics, capabilities, practices, and modus operandi. How the team works – with its membership, and with its broader partnership – is critical to intervention success.

You are crossing a river by feeling the stones under your feet. You cannot see the whole path ahead. You cannot know which strategies will work until you try them. In turn, this has direct relevance to how your intervention team works, and its operational culture.

In the Integration section, we presented a graphic with a fictional landscape showing interaction spaces. In the Adaptivity section, we showed a graphic of a ‘mosaic approach’ – a dispersed team better able to capture landscape diversity and to respond to contextual changes and opportunities with agility. If we merge these two graphics it might look like the following:



In this rendering, we have five dispersed teams, each targeting a different interaction space identified through sensing as consequential for system heading. Team A works the interaction space between local nomadic youths, elders, and neighbouring ethnic groups. Team B operates outside the landscape, releasing foments into the minister/provincial governor's interaction space. Team C targets the interaction space between the mining corporation, local government authorities, and elders. Team D works the interaction space between fodder entrepreneurs, retail suppliers, and nomads. Team E curates learning across all teams. The grey lines connecting teams represent the cross-learning that holds the mosaic together: without it, the different interaction spaces risk being worked in fragmentation. Each team designs its own foments for its own interaction space, but the learning generated by each informs the others' foment design – because a shift in one interaction space changes the regulatory conditions facing all the others. Distribution is by target practice and interaction space, not by geography: Teams A and C are physically close but attending to entirely different strands. Team B is 600 kilometres away but integral to the ferment. The landscape boundary (yellow) is porous – the interaction spaces that regulate practices within it extend well beyond its geographic edge.

Obviously, the extent to which you can design your intervention in this way is constrained by the quantum of resources that you have access to – both human and financial. If these are limited, or there are other constraints in the way, you may be forced to field a single team. Nevertheless, important and influential work can still be done. To guide you, we provide seven key principles that should guide how an intervention team for a complex landscape system can be designed.

Principle 1: Build (and run) for complexity

Intervention team composition and dynamics are critical to successful ILM practice. In many respects, the expertise of individual team members is less relevant to success than how they interact with each other.

Why this matters

Your team is the vehicle through which your intervention acts. In complex systems, change happens through relationships, and your team's relational and adaptive capabilities matter more than technical expertise. Technical knowledge can be accessed when needed; the capacity to build trust, navigate uncertainty, and learn from failure cannot be hired in.

What to prioritize

Relational capacity over technical expertise: select people who can build trust across difference, facilitate difficult conversations, and navigate conflict.

Comfort with uncertainty: select people who can work with partial information and see ambiguity as interesting rather than threatening.

Genuine curiosity: look for people who ask good questions, listen well, and genuinely want to understand perspectives different from their own.

Reflexivity: working in complexity means encountering resistance and your own blind spots. Select people who can handle this without defensiveness.

Legitimacy: where possible, include people with established relationships and credibility within the landscape.

Essential functions

While team members may be anchored in some function or expertise, everyone understands that they are jack/jills-of-all-trades and masters-of-none. Polymathery matters in successful ILM. Key team functions are: sense-making; systems-convening and facilitation; knowledge brokering; relationship cultivation; and foment design.

Leadership

Leadership in complexity is not about command and control. It is about creating conditions for others to flourish. Effective leaders in this context delegate and trust their teams to act. They maintain a wide-scope perspective while empowering local decision-making. They value alternative (and unusual) perspectives and actively seek out views that challenge their own. They listen more than they direct. They ensure their teams take credit for successes. They absorb heat when things go wrong. They model the adaptivity and reflexivity they ask of others.

Structure

For a focused landscape, a minimum viable team is typically 4 – 5 people covering the essential functions. For larger landscapes, consider the multiple small teams each targeting different interaction spaces and the strands that regulate them, coordinated by a small central team. Distribution is by target practice and interaction space, not simply by geography – though in practice the two often overlap. Keep teams at a scale where trust and rapid communication are possible. Avoid hierarchical structures – they kill the nimbleness required for complexity. Locating some or all of your team within the landscape is essential – presence matters.

Principle 2: Design for engagement

Landscapes are socially produced. The things people are doing in your landscape establish its heading. Focusing on human practices is the best bet for changing system heading.

Why this matters

System behaviour emerges from the practices of actors and the relationships between them. If we want to shift a landscape system's heading, we need to influence what people do and how they interact. This means designing your intervention primarily around engagement – not infrastructure, not technology, not policy alone, but the human dimensions that animates all of these.

The relationship between your intervention and stakeholders matters, but what matters more is the relationships between stakeholders themselves. Your intervention's role is often to convene, broker connections, and create spaces where new relationships can form and existing ones can strengthen.

How to design for engagement

Focus on practices: we discuss practices in the Practices section. When we seek to change practices, we focus on fomenters that will change meanings, materials, and competencies. To change practices, we need to attend to all three. Ask yourself: who needs to be doing what differently for our alt-heading to emerge? What are they doing now, and why? What meanings, materials, and competencies would need to shift for new practices to take hold? What reasons and justification would we provide to incentivize a shift?

Influence from the beginning: your intervention begins the moment you start engaging with the landscape. Every early interaction – problem analysis, stakeholder mapping, initial workshops – is already shaping perceptions, establishing your presence, and influencing system heading. Use these engagements deliberately to design foments, build relationships, demonstrate your values, and create conditions for later change.

Attend to power: engagement happens within power relations. Power shapes what practices are possible, what meanings are legitimate, what materials are accessible, and whose competencies are valued. Read the power landscape: who has power over others? Who has power to convene? Who has power with (collective action)? Who has power within (sense of agency)?

Key questions

As you develop your design, the following questions may be helpful in guiding you:

- Which human practices are most responsible for current landscape trajectory?
- How can these practices be unpacked in terms of meanings, materials, and competencies?
- What seeds already exist—people, practices, relationships aligned with your alt-heading?
- How does power flow, where does it concentrate, and how does it shape what is possible?

**“If failure is not
an option, then
neither is success.”
– Seth Godin**

Principle 3: Design for adaptation and agility

Because landscapes are complex systems, interventions must be designed to adapt to new information as it emerges.

Why this matters

In complex systems, we cannot predict outcomes. The moment your intervention enters the landscape, it changes the system – and the system will respond in ways you cannot fully anticipate. Rigid plans fail. Blueprints become obsolete. Success depends on your ability to sense system responses, learn quickly, and adjust course.

Adaptive interventions create tight feedback loops, treat strategies as safe-to-fail provocations, embrace failure as learning, and maintain flexibility to change direction. They start small, learn fast, and amplify what works.

How to design for adaptation and agility

Design and release foments: foments are described in the Foments section. Foments are designed with a proposition: if we do X, we believe Y will happen, because of Z. It is important to remember that propositions are intended to be tested, not defended. Failure is an essential part of ILM – the knowledge we derive from it is as valuable as the knowledge of success.

Start small and release many fomenters: rather than betting everything on one large intervention, release multiple fomenters. If the landscape is large, break it down into smaller parts – multiple interconnected small-scale interventions from which large-scale change may emerge. Scaling happens by amplifying successful fomenters, not by replicating a master plan.

Create tight feedback loops: learning happens fast when system responses are quickly visible and immediately inform subsequent actions. Design for rapid feedback: short foment cycles, frequent check-ins with stakeholders, real-time sensing of system responses, regular reflection sessions. Avoid long gaps between action and reflection.

Maintain strategic flexibility: be prepared to change not just tactics but strategies – and even your alt-heading if evidence suggests it is implausible or undesirable. This requires authority to make adjustments without lengthy approval processes, resources held in reserve for emerging opportunities, and psychological readiness to abandon what is not working.

Key actions

- Frame strategies as testable propositions with explicit assumptions.
- Release multiple fomenters; invest in what works, abandon what does not.
- Build rapid feedback mechanisms into your intervention design.
- Schedule regular decision points to review and adjust.
- Negotiate flexibility with funders from the start.

Principle 4: Enable, don't control

You cannot control stakeholders or predict how the system will respond to your interventions. Attempts to control in complex systems typically fail or generate unintended consequences. Your role is to create conditions that enable stakeholders to change their own practices.

Why this matters

Control is an illusion in complex systems. You can influence, catalyse, broker, and support – but you cannot dictate outcomes. Interventions that try to control typically encounter resistance, generate dependency, or produce unintended consequences. Enabling is more effective and more sustainable.

Working with the grain

Understand what practices already exist in the landscape. Where possible, build on existing ones rather than trying to replace them wholesale. Look for 'positive deviance' – instances where desired practices are already happening—and explore how these can be amplified or spread. Swimming against a system's current is exhausting and rarely succeeds; the intention is to *shift* heading, not to replace the system.

How to enable

Invest in relationships: trust is the foundation for everything else. Without it, nothing moves. Build relationships before you need them.

Create and hold spaces: design workshops, roundtables, and dialogues for genuine deliberation – not just information transfer or consultation theatre.

Broker knowledge: technical information means nothing if stakeholders cannot understand or relate it to their interests. Translate across knowledge systems without distorting meaning.

Connect people: networks create opportunities; isolation limits them. Actively connect people who should know each other but do not.

Key actions

- Prioritize relationship-building in early engagement
- Design multi-stakeholder processes for genuine deliberation
- Make resources available without creating dependency
- Identify and amplify positive deviance

Principle 5: Design with positionality

Your intervention is not an external observer – it is a player in the system. Your presence carries power, creates expectations, and changes dynamics. Positionality is not just a bias to manage; it is a resource to deploy.

Why this matters

The moment you enter a landscape, you become a part of it. Your positionality changes the system you are trying to understand and influence. Pretending otherwise is delusional.

But this is not a problem only to be managed. Compared to many of the communities you work with, you are elite. You have credentials, networks, access to decision-makers. You move in circles of influence that others do not. This is power – and power is a resource for shifting systems.

How to design with positionality

Recognize your three forms of presence: embodied positionality (who you are) cannot be changed, but you can be aware of what it signals. Enacted positionality (how you behave) can be adjusted. Existential positionality (that you are there at all) cannot be eliminated – your presence is already an intervention.

Audit your power as a resource: what doors can you open? What legitimacy can you confer? What connections can you broker? What protection can you offer? Rather than minimising your power differential, ask how it can be deployed towards the alt-heading you seek.

Guard against development tourism: brief visits, professional biases, and standard consultation processes are misleading. Compensate by spending more time, seeking out those your biases make invisible, and asking communities how they experience your presence.

Design for reflexivity: build mechanisms for communities to give feedback on how they experience your intervention. Document how your framing evolves. Conduct power mapping that includes your own role. Create regular moments for examining whose voice is being heard – and whose is not.

Key questions

- What does your presence signal to different stakeholder groups?
- What power do you carry that you have been treating as incidental?
- How can your networks, credentials, and access be deployed strategically?
- What feedback mechanisms exist for communities to tell you how they experience your presence?

Principle 6: Design for embeddedness

The quality of your sensing, the trust you build, and the effectiveness of your foments all depend on how deeply your team is embedded in the landscape. Parachuted teams 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 change that unfold over years.

Why this matters

Research on innovation processes consistently finds that the most durable change happens when teams work with the same networks over long periods. Sensing improves cumulatively – each foment cycle deepens your sense of the system. Relationships compound: the trust you build in year one is the infrastructure through which your foments travel in year three. A team that has been present through a drought, an election, a market collapse, and a good harvest has a read of the system that no baseline study can replicate.

How to design for embeddedness

Locate in the landscape: teams that live in or near the landscape they are working in develop a feel for the system that cannot be acquired from a distance – or makes them vulnerable to development tourism. They sense seasonal rhythms, political shifts, and social tensions as they unfold – not as reports delivered weeks later.

Diversify income streams: a team funded by a single donor is beholden to that donor's logframe. Multiple income streams are not just financial resilience – they are epistemic independence. They free the team to pursue what the landscape needs rather than what a single reporting framework demands.

Build on what is already there: the landscape is not a blank slate. There are already people, practices, relationships, and initiatives that embody aspects of the alt-heading you seek, even if they are small, marginal, or struggling. Finding these and creating conditions for them to flourish is more effective than introducing entirely new initiatives from outside. Work with the grain of existing social organization rather than against it.

Resist the parachute model: the typical project cycle – design, inception, implement, close – works against embeddedness at every stage. Negotiate from the outset for team continuity, for presence that outlasts project cycles, and for the institutional flexibility that allows your team to persist in the landscape even as funding instruments change.

Principle 7: Design for learning

Every foment generates learning – from success, from failure, and from the unexpected. But learning that stays within a single team is a fraction of its potential value. In a dispersed mosaic, a shift in one interaction space changes the regulatory conditions facing all the others. Without deliberate cross-learning architecture, the mosaic fragments.

Why this matters

The Playbook's epistemological commitment – release, observe, adjust – is a learning cycle. But in a mosaic of dispersed teams, the 'observe' from each team must be assembled into the 'adjust' that reshapes the next ferment for all teams. Team A's discovery that the elder community is more receptive than expected changes what Team C should try at the mining – elder interface. Team B's finding that the minister is immovable changes what Teams A and D should prioritize locally. This cross-pollination is what the curation function (Team E in the graphic above) exists to provide.

How to design for learning

Establish a learning rhythm: regular shared reflection across teams – not reporting upward, but lateral exchange. What did you release? What responded? What surprised you? What should the rest of us know? The frequency matters: too infrequent and teams drift apart; too frequent and the overhead kills the fieldwork.

Curate, don't just collect: learning curation is not data management. It is the interpretive work of assembling dispersed observations into a coherent, updated read of the system. The curation team asks: what does this combination of findings tell us about how the system is responding? Which interaction spaces are shifting? Where has the regulatory architecture loosened or tightened? What should the next ferment look like?

Let failure teach: foments that produce no response or move away from the alt-heading are not waste – they are diagnostic. They reveal dampening loops you had not mapped, regulatory pressures you had not detected, or meanings you had misread. A team culture that treats failure as information rather than embarrassment will learn faster and design better foments. This requires psychological safety within the team and institutional protection from funders who penalise failure.

Document for the system, not the logframe: conventional reporting asks what you did and what it achieved. Learning documentation asks what you tried, what the system did in response, what you now understand differently, and what you will try next. The audience is the team and its successors, not the donor. If the documentation would not help a future team member understand the system, it is not learning – it is compliance.