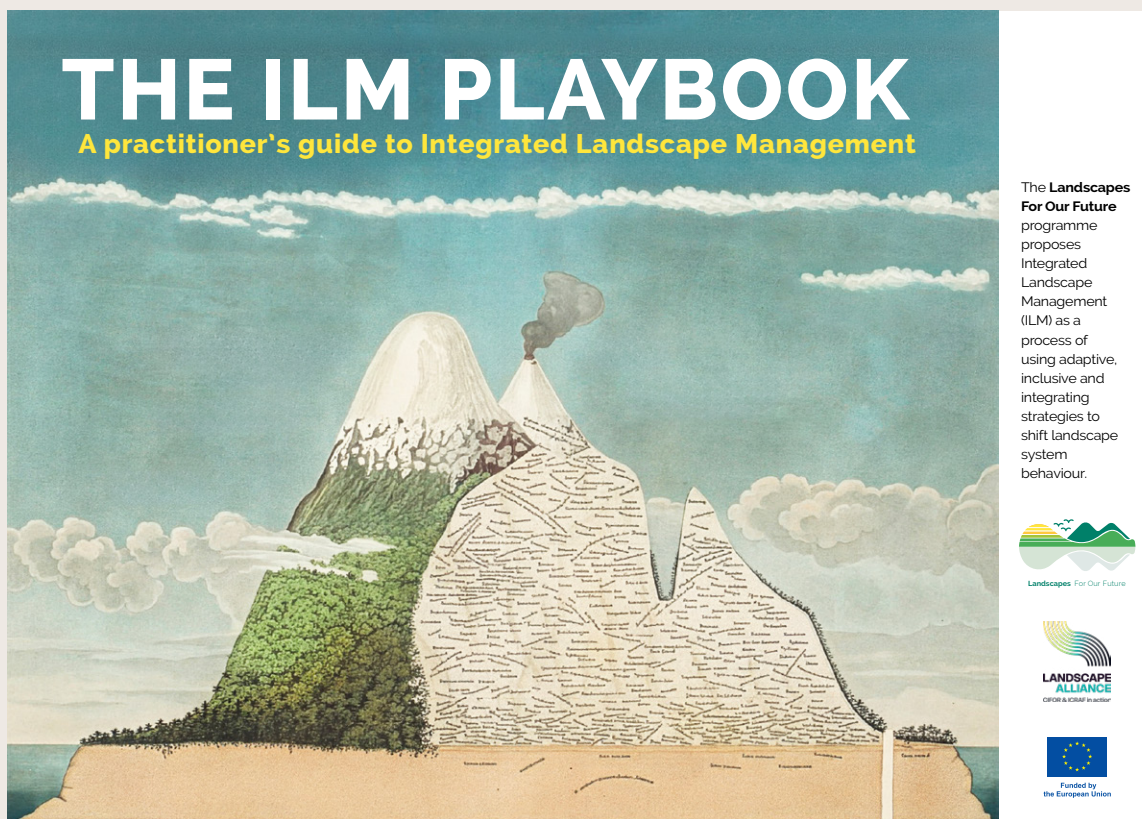


Extract from The ILM Playbook

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

Sensing

Key take-aways

- Sensing is an ongoing, relational diagnostic practice – not data collection – and produces an evolving read of the system that deepens with each encounter; only a team that stays in the landscape can do it.
- The components are observing, listening, asking, mapping, interpreting and trialling: foment release is itself sensing, because the system's response is what tells you whether your read was right.
- Attending to absence is the hardest part: who is not in the room, whose practice is invisible because it is normalized, what the formal reporting is not capturing – absence is itself a signal, often the most important one.
- Sensing is appropriately imprecise: you do not need to know everything about a system to produce a useful read – a few key functional relationships and a few well-asked questions are enough.
- We propose four approaches – circles of explanation, mind-mapping/crime boards, appreciative inquiry, and Participatory Narrative Inquiry – to be combined: at least one for structural clarity, at least one for narrative depth.

Introduction

Sensing is best understood as an ongoing, relational diagnostic practice that surfaces how practices regulate one another in the landscape. It is practice-oriented, power-attentive, and action-oriented. Sensing identifies major strands and estimates their regulatory weight: which actors' practices disproportionately shape current system heading, and which have lighter, more local effects. It aims to detect the perturbations that foments provoke. It focuses on interactions between strands, asking **who is doing what, when, where, why, how – and to whom?**, thereby shifting from observing behaviour to understanding practice-as-regulation. Sensing reads the inbetweenness – what flows between actors, what is blocked, what is amplified, what is dampened. It is not a catalogue of who is present but a diagnostic of how they relate.

Unlike standard diagnostics that catalogue problems or capacities, sensing attends to the bundles of meanings, materials, and competencies (MMCs) that constitute practices, and to the regulatory context in which these bundles sit. It recognizes that changing a practice requires reconfiguring both the practice's MMC bundle *and* its interaction space, so sensing is oriented towards uncovering those bundles and spaces, not just describing actors or incentives.

A baseline study happens once, at the beginning, and produces a dataset. Sensing happens every day, never stops, and produces an evolving read of the system that deepens with each encounter. A baseline study can be done by consultants who leave. Sensing can only be done by a team that stays – which is why embeddedness is a principle.

The act of sensing comprises, *inter alia*:

- **Observing:** watching what people *do*, not just what they say. How do people interact with each other when you are present? How do they interact when they think you are not watching? Who speaks first in a meeting? Who defers to whom? Who sits where? When a district officer arrives, what changes in the room? These micro-signals are regulatory exchange made visible. You are also watching the landscape itself – where is it degraded and where is it not, and what does the boundary between those two conditions tell you about whose practices produce each?
- **Listening:** and specifically listening to/for stories, for what is said casually rather than formally, for what is repeated, and for what is conspicuously absent. The farmer who says “there is no alternative” is telling you about a heavy strand. The officer who changes the subject when you ask about permits is telling you about unstated intent. The community leader who tells you the same origin story that three other communities also told you – that is a meaning that structures practice. Participatory Narrative Inquiry (see below) sits here, but so does the informal conversation at the end of the meeting, which is often where the real information surfaces.
- **Asking:** the anchoring question, operationalised. Not as a survey but as a disposition: every encounter is an opportunity to refine your answer to *who is doing what, when, where, why, how – and to whom?* But also asking laterally: what changed recently? What used to be different? What do people worry about most? What would they do differently if they could? What stops them? The ‘and to whom’ is the part most practitioners miss – without it you are describing behaviour, not regulation.
- **Mapping:** externalizing what you are learning into the three maps (strand map, power vista, practice map). But also informal, in-the-field mapping: sketching relationships on paper with your team after a field day, drawing influence diagrams with community members, building Participatory Three-Dimensional Models (see Rambaldi, 2010). The maps are not products to be delivered; they are thinking tools that get revised every time you learn something new.
- **Interpreting:** the team sensemaking practice. You come back from the field with observations. You sit together and ask: what did we see? What does it mean? What should we do about it? This is akin to Karl Weick’s retrospective sensemaking – meaning is constructed after the encounter, not during it. The Liberating Structures approach (Box 1) ‘What, So What, Now What?’ works

here because it forces a team through all three stages rather than jumping from observation to action. The interpretation is always a proposition, never a conclusion.

Box 1: Liberating Structures

These are a collection of 33+ simple, configurable facilitation methods – ‘easy-to-learn microstructures’ – that help groups involve everyone, share control, and work together on what matters. They replace conventional formats (presentations, managed discussions, open forums) with structured interactions that distribute voice and generate collective intelligence. We reference these tools throughout the Sensing section.

For the full collection, see Lipmanowicz and McCandless (2013) and <https://www.liberatingstructures.com>

- **Trialling:** your interpretations are propositions about the system’s regulatory architecture. You test them by releasing foments and seeing whether the system responds as your reading suggests it should. If you have read an interaction space as asymmetric dominance and you release a foment designed to build B→A capacity, and the system’s response is completely unexpected – your reading was wrong. The foment was diagnostic. Revise the map. This means that sensing and foment release are not sequential (sense first, then release). They are simultaneous: you sense, you release, the release generates sensing, the sensing reshapes the next release. This is the release-observe-adjust cycle, and sensing is where ‘observe’ lives.
- **Attending to absence:** perhaps the hardest part. Who is not in the room? Whose practice is invisible because it is normalized? What is the formal reporting not capturing? What did the community not tell you? Absence is itself a signal – often the most important one. The occluded opportunities from the Op-Points section are found here: they become visible only through sustained relational presence.
- **Attending to time:** what has changed since you arrived? What do people say used to be different? What slow trends are visible in the landscape but invisible in daily experience – soil depletion, groundwater decline, demographic shifts, changing market pressures? Temporal sensing connects to the Integration section’s treatment of temporal fragmentation: the future is embedded in the present, produced by practices whose consequences are already contained within them. Reading how the system has changed over time is essential for understanding where it is heading.
- **Attending to yourself:** reflexive sensing. How is the system responding to your presence? What are people telling you because you are an outsider? What are they withholding? Has your presence changed what you are observing? This connects directly to existential positionality – you are part of the configuration you are sensing.

Sensing, it should be stressed, is not the same as research. It is not delimited by hypotheses, methodologies, or disciplines. It should be 'appropriately imprecise.' In practice, this means:¹

- It is not necessary to know everything about the system to produce a realistic and useful analysis.
- Understanding the practices and other important properties of the system requires knowledge of only a few key functional relationships.
- Producing significant improvements in the performance of a system requires changes in only a few key strands.
- Identification and understanding of these key relationships and decisions requires that a limited number of appropriate key questions are defined and answered.

Below, we introduce four sensing approaches that we like, and which can help you to conceptualize your system, and identify key areas where foment can be introduced. Each approach surfaces different dimensions of the system, and no single approach gives you the full picture. We recommend deploying at least two in combination: one that provides structural clarity (the circles of explanation or mind-mapping) and one that provides narrative depth (appreciative inquiry or PNI). The combination of a structural and a narrative approach gives you both the architecture of the system and the meanings that hold it in place.

Circles of explanation

One way you can organize your sensing is with the 'circles of explanation'² which we present below. If drawn out as a basic template, the Circles can be used as a way of displaying your main practice (target) groups, the interactions within their own communities, and then the interaction spaces with other communities.

Here, actors (the different coloured dots) interact within each ring. Note the following:

First, this representation shows embeddedness rather than hierarchy. At the centre is 'A' – your site, the landscape. It is at the centre, not at the bottom. Community A is embedded in B, which is embedded in C, which is embedded in D. This is the Playbook's layered model – practices embedded in power embedded in the system – rendered spatially. The 'levels' are not above or below each other; they surround each other. This is horizontal geography with different ranges, not vertical hierarchy with different ranks.

Second, the arrows go both ways – inward and outward, and laterally within each ring. This is regulatory exchange. Community D's practices (perhaps a distant government, a global commodity market) exert regulatory force inward towards the land. But Community A's practices also exert outward force – however weakly. And within each ring, actors regulate each other laterally.

¹ Based on Conway (1985).

² These derive from Blaikie and Brookfield's (1987) 'chain of explanation' which, they say, "...starts with the land managers and their direct relations with the land (crop rotations, fuelwood use, stocking densities, capital investment and so on). The next link concerns their relations with each other, other land users, and groups in the wider society who affect them in any way, which in turn determines land management. The state and the world economy constitute the last links of the chain. Clearly then, explanations will be highly conjectural, although relying on theoretical bases drawn from natural and social science". This is, from our perspective, too hierarchical and linear. Geheb and Mapedza (2008) reformulate these as 'the circles of explanation' (although they do not call them this).

This is strand interaction within and across interaction spaces. As you radiate outwards, the size of the actor dots increase. This reflects the power asymmetries between actor groups – many actors with small claims at the centre, few actors with enormous claims at the periphery. This is also the heavy strand/light strand distinction rendered as a spatial property of the system.

At the centre, many people make small claims – their stake is existential but their regulatory weight is light. At the outer rings, few people make vast claims – their stake may be instrumental (profit, strategic interest) but their regulatory weight is heavy. This is what the Op-Points section describes as ‘asymmetric dominance.’ A mining company (outer ring) has a vast claim on the landscape but no existential stake in it. A local community (inner ring) has a tiny claim by comparison but their entire life depends on it. And yet the outer ring’s regulatory force overwhelms the inner ring’s. This asymmetry between stake and power is at the heart of what the Playbook is trying to address.

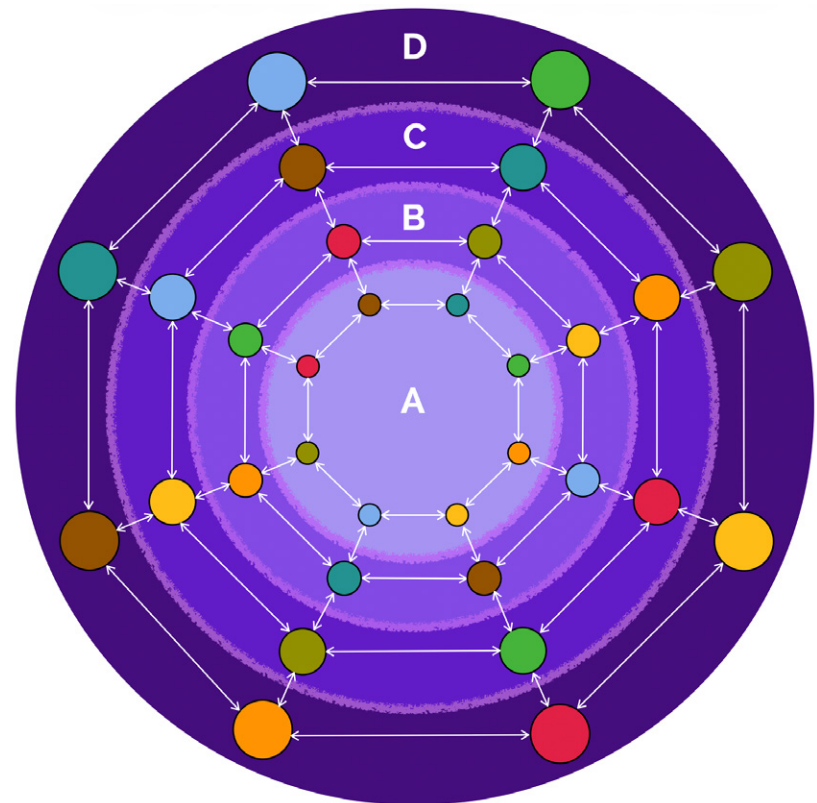
Third, between the rings (in light purple) are the amorphous the interaction zones – between the different regulatory fields. Characterizing these is a key focus of your sensing work. It is important to remember, however, that this is a representation used to clarify and explain. The interaction zone between A and B is not just between these two rings – there is also an interaction zone between A and C, and A and D.

The different rings may be described as follows:

Ring A: proximate regulation – actors whose practices directly regulate landscape practitioners through daily interaction. Their regulatory effect is felt personally and frequently – and often comprise other community members, institutions, norms etc. Note that when we refer to ‘communities’ these may not be local communities

Ring B: intermediary regulation – actors whose practices regulate the proximate regulators. District and provincial administration, regional markets, political representatives, NGOs operating in the area. Their regulatory effect reaches the landscape through the proximate ring – the district officer regulates the extension officer who regulates the farmer. You may need to travel to the provincial capital to find them.

Ring C: structural regulation – national-level actors whose practices set the terms within which all inner rings operate. Ministries, national policy, legislation, the judiciary, national markets, the ruling party, or the police force. Their regulatory



effect is diffuse but powerful – it reaches the landscape through administrative chains, legal frameworks, corruption, and market structures.

Ring D: global regulation – international markets, commodity prices, donor agencies, multinational corporations, international treaties, climate change. Their regulatory effect reaches the landscape through structural and intermediary rings. They may not know your landscape exists, but their practices shape what happens in it.

Mind-mapping and crime boards

At its core, a mind map is a visual diagram that organizes information around a central concept. It uses a non-linear, radial structure where main ideas branch out from the centre and are further divided into related subtopics.

Mind maps can be created on paper or digitally, and the process is straightforward:

1. Place your main idea or subject in the centre.
2. Draw lines out from your main idea with related or supporting concepts (these are called 'nodes').
3. Continue adding more nodes and details as you think of them.
4. Make connections between related nodes by drawing lines between them.

There is lots of mind-mapping software available if you feel like running this on a computer. We, however, encourage you to draw it by hand and to involve your team members – everyone gets to have a pen!

We also encourage you to expand on the original mind-map 'template'. You can go in multiple directions, but the police crime board is, we think, an important articulation of the mind-map. At a crime scene, detectives will observe many things, some of which are explainable. A bloody dagger lying next to a corpse with stab wounds is explainable – it fits the story the vista implies. But there are other things at the crime scene are more difficult to explain and their relevance is not as easy to explain – two glasses on the counter; a small ball of fluff found under the table; a black hair on a side table. These things must nevertheless be investigated to determine whether or not they are of



relevance to the crime. This pile of evidence is attached to a board, and as the investigation proceeds, detectives remove the things that are irrelevant, retain relevant things, and begin identifying the relationships between them: the black hair belongs to this person; the latter person turns out to be an acquaintance of the victim, so a photo is posted; she says that she was at a meeting at a hotel at the time of the murder, so a map is pinned up with the hotel and the crime scene circled in red. And so it goes on.

We like this approach because of its emphasis on multi-media (which provides texture and visual stimulation), Maybe you start with a map that shows your landscape. On it, you post pictures of land degradation; maybe photos of some of the key actors; press reports generated about some of them; prints of social media reports about violence flaring; a brochure provided by the open cast mining company; etc. This visual approach with so much media keeps your own mind perturbed and constantly wondering about the relations between the different elements that comprise your landscape and what relevance they have to system heading. The mind-map does not end. It remains with the intervention, being changed and adjusted throughout. While it requires energy to maintain, the dividend is that you have a persistent point of reference against which to assess how you are doing, what your foments are stimulating, and how far or close you are from your alt-heading.

For a good step-by-step resource on mind-mapping see Schmitz, 2025.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a strengths-based approach to change that starts from what is *working* and what people value, and then builds forward from those stories rather than beginning with problems or deficits. It treats inquiry itself as an intervention: the questions you ask start to create the future you are imagining.

AI rests on five classic principles:

- **Constructionist** – realities are socially constructed through language and conversation.
- **Simultaneity** – inquiry and change happen together; the first questions already start change. Here, questions become foments.
- **Poetic** – any system's 'story' can be read and rewritten in many ways.
- **Anticipatory** – images of alt-heading guide current behaviour.
- **Positive** – focusing on strengths and hopes generates energy for change.

In community settings, this usually means structured conversations about 'peak experiences,' existing assets, and desired alternative presents, rather than workshops centred on problems or needs.

There is an AI step-wise approach (often called the 4-5D cycle), but in practice the intervention team often spreads these moves across multiple visits or engagements, using different techniques in each phase.

1. **Define** (sometimes added as a first 'D'): clarify the affirmative topic or question (e.g., "how do we strengthen local cooperation around water?"), not "What is wrong with...?"

2. **Discovery – ‘what gives life?’** Use narrative interviews, pair work, or small groups to elicit stories of times when the community, organization, or group was at its best with respect to the topic. Then identify themes: strengths, conditions that made success possible, and existing assets.
3. **Dream – ‘What might be?’** Facilitate collective deliberation of the direction the ‘now’ should be heading. This is grounded in stories: alternative presents, what would make things better, community drawings, scenarios – if we did this, then what would happen?
4. **Design – ‘What should be?’** Translate the dream into enabling structures, relationships, and practices: principles, foments, or ‘design statements’ that describe how things will work if the alt-heading is accomplished.
5. **Delivery – ‘How do we sustain it?’** Support self-organised action, learning, and adaptation over time; check-ins, reflective sessions, and further appreciative interviews to document emerging successes.

The above has been adjusted to reflect this Playbook’s language. AI is often framed in visioning terms which, as we have discussed elsewhere, diminishes the potency of the intervention, and can disempower your target community.

Good guidance on AI can be found in Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2010; Ashford and Patkar, 2001; and Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005.

Participatory Narrative Inquiry

PNI is “an approach in which groups of people participate in gathering and working with raw stories of personal experience in order to make sense of complex situations for better decision making” (Kurtz, 2026). It is participatory, not extractive: stories are used so people can think together, not just so outsiders can analyse them.

Standard narrative inquiry often relies on researchers analysing a small number of in-depth stories; PNI uses many short, everyday stories, interpreted collectively, to support shared understanding and action. PNI is explicitly positioned as a form of participatory action research, where the goal is to help communities and organizations think, decide, and change together.

Typical stages

One widely used formulation describes PNI as having three essential stages, often supported by planning and return.

Planning (optional but wise)

- Clarify the purpose/questions, who will participate, and what you hope stories will inform (e.g., strategy, evaluation, design).
- Design prompts, story-elicitation questions, and simple self-interpretation questions; often test with a small pilot.

Collection (essential)

- Community members tell “everyday anecdotes, not polished performances” about “what happened,” not “what they think.”
- Stories can be gathered via interviews, group sessions, paper forms, or digital tools; people usually also answer a few short questions about each story (e.g., how they felt, who was involved, what changed).

Sensemaking (essential)

- Groups of participants (often including story-tellers) work with clusters, patterns, and contrasts across many stories to explore values, tensions, possibilities, and emerging themes.
- Facilitators use visualisation, sorting, mapping, and structured dialogue to help people see patterns and consider implications, not to impose an external interpretation.

Intervention/decision (often folded into sensemaking)

- Participants use insights from the stories to propose actions, design interventions, adjust policies, or reframe strategies.
- The focus is “not for preservation or persuasion, but to improve thought and discussion” that leads to better decisions.

Return and iteration (supporting stage)

Findings and decisions are taken back to the wider community; further rounds of story collection and sensemaking can track change over time.

Practical design features

- Use concrete prompts like “Tell me about a time when...” rather than abstract opinion questions, to keep stories grounded in lived experience *and the present*.
- Ask people to interpret their own stories (e.g., rating scales, multiple-choice questions, tags), which allows later pattern-finding across many narratives while keeping interpretation anchored in participants’ meanings.
- Combine qualitative reading of individual stories with simple quantitative views of the self-interpretation answers (graphs, clusters) to support group sensemaking.

The above pointers are derived from Kurtz (2026).

Methods for maps: vistas, strands, practices and interactions

The Intervention Design section describes four maps that constitute your read of the system. Each is produced by different methods, and no single method produces all four.

The **power vista** is produced primarily by Net-Map (influence network mapping), which yields actors, links, and influence towers showing regulatory weight. PNI contributes a narrative dimension – revealing whose stories dominate and whose are suppressed. The circles of explanation provide the spatial framework onto which Net-Map results can be arranged, positioning actors by regulatory range.

The **strand map** is not produced by a single method at a single moment. Strands are practices over time, and most methods capture a snapshot. The strand map is assembled cumulatively through sustained sensing: bilateral engagement repeated over months, seasonal calendars, temporal sensing, and stories that reveal how practices have changed. The mind-mapping and crime board approach is where this assembly happens – the team pins up what they are learning and traces trajectories over time.

The **practice map** is produced by the MMC analysis worksheet which we describe in the Practices section: for each target practice, unpack meanings, materials, and competencies, and identify which are internally generated and which are externally regulated. Agroecosystem Analysis feeds into this for agricultural and pastoral practices. Appreciative inquiry's 'discover' phase also contributes – what people say is working reveals the MMC configuration from the practitioner's perspective.

The **interaction spaces map** emerges from overlaying the strand map onto the power vista and asking: where are the most consequential overlaps? The circles of explanation show these visually as the interfaces between rings. This map is not produced by a separate method – it is the product of reading your other maps together.

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