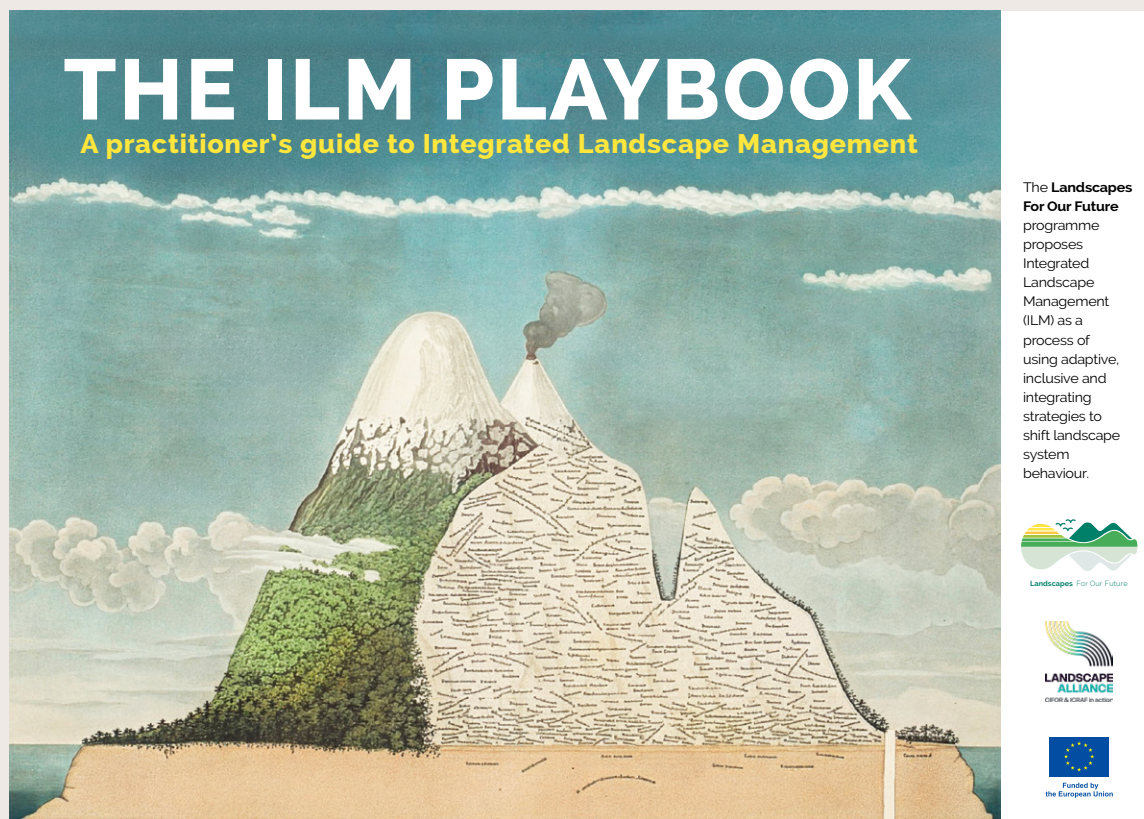


# Extract from The ILM Playbook

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](https://landscapesfuture.org/ilm-playbook)

# The alternative heading

## Key take-aways

- We work with an *alt-heading* – a navigational bearing, not a destination – because complex systems do not allow reliable prediction and a vision becomes a fiction long before it is accomplished.
- The alt-heading expresses three things: what practices should be shifting and in what direction, what should be amplified because it already works, and what should be left alone.
- A heading is falsifiable in a way a vision is not – and that falsifiability is what keeps the intervention honest and adaptive; recognizing the heading is wrong is not failure but navigational adjustment.
- The alt-heading emerges from sensing and is revised as the system responds – it is never fixed, and the team should build explicit heading-review moments into its rhythm.
- Visions are politically convenient because they cannot be falsified in the present, which is why we reject them as the organizing frame for intervention – they are abstract, deferrable, and ultimately disempowering.

Many interventions build around a vision that they want to accomplish. We, however, advocate for an ‘alternative heading’ (‘alt-heading’). **This is a sense of direction** – the trajectory along which we want the system to move. It is not a description of a destination, but a navigational *bearing*: a compelling and actionable sense of where ‘better’ lies.

With the alt-heading, we respond to the question: in what direction should this landscape’s system be moving? This comprises three important parts: (a) what practices should be shifting, and in what direction; (b) what should be amplified because it is already working; and (c) what should be left alone. The alt-heading is expressed in practice terms – who is doing what, when, where, how, why, and to whom – but as a *direction of travel*, not a blueprint.

“The future depends on what we do in the present.” – Mahatma Gandhi

An alt-heading emerges from the sensing work described in intervention design. It provides the *sense of trajectory* that guides the Theory of Change: without an alt-heading, foment has no direction and the intervention cannot distinguish between change that moves the system towards ‘better’ and change that merely moves it.

An alt-heading is a sense of what the landscape’s practices, power relations, and material arrangements would need to be shifting *towards* for the something to change: the regulations that make it viable, the market relations that incentivize it, the

meanings that normalize it, the absence of alternatives that sustain it.

The alt-heading emerges from the team's synthesis of everything it has learned about the system – what is possible, what is desired, and what the inter-relations between practices suggest about where the system might realistically be 'nudged.' It is expressed in practice terms (who should be doing what differently, and why), but as a direction, not a destination.

“Forethought we may have, undoubtedly, but not foresight.”  
– Napoleon Bonaparte

The alt-heading is not fixed. Your first formulation – which can be used as a baseline – will be based on the best understanding available at that time – which, at the start of an intervention, is necessarily incomplete. As the intervention learns from its foments and from the system's responses, the heading may need to be corrected, just as a navigator adjusts course in response to currents and wind. This is not failure; it is the intervention working as it should. In our Adaptivity section we show how the alt-heading can be revised as learning and experience accumulate.

Why a heading rather than a vision? We have three reasons for rejecting visions, and one for preferring headings:

- What we are dealing with is a complex system, which means that we cannot make *realistic* predictions about the future. The alt-heading is embedded in a present sense of the system's heading.<sup>1</sup>
- We advocate for *plausible change*. 'Plausibility' indicates that the strategies we employ are *realistic propositions* for the change we want to accomplish. Generally, the further into the future we envision, the more implausible things become.
- A vision is an abstraction – it has not yet occurred, and we cannot know if it will occur. Because it is abstract, we tend to discount it – i.e., because it is not 'real' then we can essentially aim for anything. The future cannot be falsified in the present, and when that future disappoints, it can always be deferred. With visions, the horizon recedes as one approaches it. For this reason, it is often employed in politics – it implies something concrete that is being promised, while in reality, nothing is promised. For this reason, the abstract nature of visions can be *disempowering*.

A heading, by contrast, is honest about what we can and cannot know. It says: given what we understand about this system, *this* is the direction in which we believe it needs to move. It acknowledges that the system will respond to our interventions in ways we cannot fully predict, and that the heading itself may need correction as we learn. Unlike a vision, a heading can be wrong – and recognizing that it is wrong is not a failure but a navigational adjustment. This makes it *falsifiable* in a way that a vision is not – and it is this falsifiability that keeps the intervention honest and adaptive. A heading is something you steer by, not something you build towards.

## References and further reading

Fry T and Perera D. 2024. *Contrapractice: action against defuturing*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts.

<sup>1</sup> Fry and Perera (2024) advance the idea of 'defuturing' in which they argue that it is current practices that are actively destroying future possibilities – they negate it through what we do now. The future is not a distant horizon connected to the present, but something that is being assembled now.