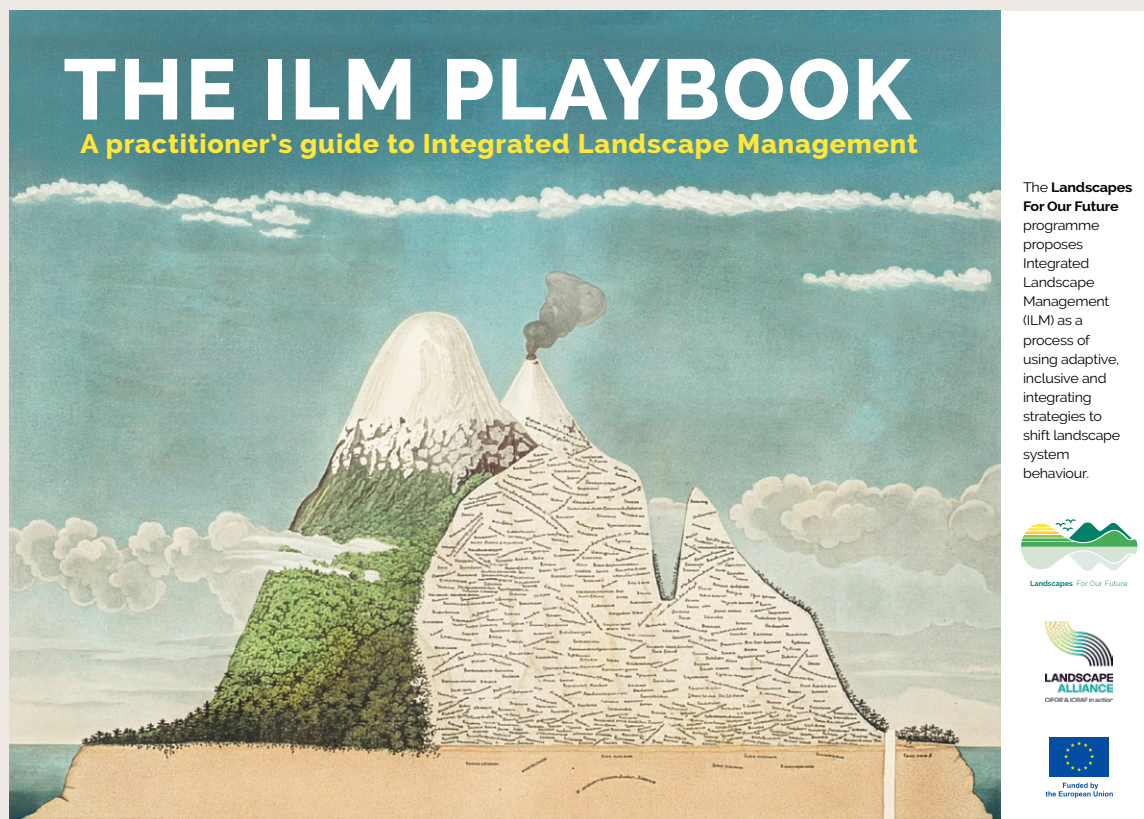


# Extract from The ILM Playbook

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:  
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# PRACTICES

## Key take-aways

- Practices are the unit of social life – the shared, routine ways of doing things that constitute system heading; the things people do are why the landscape looks the way it does.
- Each practice is a bundle of meanings, materials and competencies (MMCs) – and each element is itself a manifestation of power, so changing one without the others guarantees unintended consequences.
- Practice ≠ behaviour: behaviour can be mandated from outside, practice must be generated by shifting the conditions that produce it – which is why the Playbook targets practices, not behaviours.
- Power and practices are mutually constitutive, requiring a *pincer movement*: intervene on power to enable new practices, and intervene on practices to consolidate and extend power shifts – the two are simultaneous, not sequential.
- *Competencies* are what a practitioner can do; *capabilities* (after Sen) are what they are free to do – and capabilities are what the regulatory architecture either grants or withholds.

A key aspect of our approach is **practices**. These are a unit of social life and are *what people do*. Practices are the shared (i.e., collective), routine ways of doing things that people perform in their everyday lives or work.

Practices are fundamental to why systems have shape, character and purpose. The things that people do within our landscape system are central to its heading.

Key things to note about practices are:

- They are **socially organized** – shaped by and shared among groups of people.
- They are **embodied** – involving physical actions, skills, and know-how.
- They are **influenced by things** ('materially mediated') – dependent on objects, tools, and infrastructures.
- They are **meaningful** – carrying certain understandings and purposes within a community.

## Practices, power and systems

Elsewhere in this Playbook, we have described a layered model in which practices sit at the centre, embedded in power, which is in turn embedded in the broader system. This is not a hierarchy. Rather, it captures how each layer shapes and is shaped by the others. Understanding this relationship is essential if we want to change what a landscape does.

As we argued in the Power section, power is what *patterns* a system. It operates through regulation – determining which practices can exist, whose practices dominate, and how different practices interact. Power decides what is possible, what is permissible, and what is rewarded. The practices we observe in any landscape are not random; they are the expression of how power is distributed and exercised. When we look at a landscape and see particular clusters of activity – particular ways of farming, governing, trading, resolving disputes – we are looking at power made visible.

This is why practices are where we focus. System heading – the overall landscape trajectory – emerges from the interaction of practices within it. If we want to shift that heading, we have to change what people are doing. But here is the critical point: power and practices are **mutually constitutive**. Power shapes which practices can exist and whose practices prevail; but when practices shift, power relations can also shift. New competencies give previously marginalized actors capacity. New materials change who controls resources. New meanings legitimate different voices. The influence flows in both directions. This redistribution is not cost-free – it involves trade-offs.

This has a vital implication for how we intervene. You cannot simply change practices and hope that power follows – the existing power structure will snap practices back into place. This is why so many training programmes and technology transfers fail: they address one element of a practice while leaving the power configuration that sustains the old practice untouched. But equally, you cannot change power in the abstract. Power shifts have to manifest through changed practices to become real. This calls for what we might think of as a pincer movement: intervening on power relations to enable new practices to take hold, while simultaneously intervening on practices in ways that consolidate and extend those power shifts. The two prongs are not sequential; they are simultaneous and mutually reinforcing. It is the feedback loop between them that makes change durable.

This connection between practices and power goes deeper than the pincer metaphor might suggest. Each element of a practice – its meanings, materials and competencies – is itself *a manifestation of power*. Materials carry inherent power: a dam materially ties together the country it affects, reshaping who can do what with water regardless of what any treaty says. Meanings are power statements: the worldviews, values and narratives that define what counts as ‘good farming’ or ‘proper governance’ reflect and reproduce the interests of those whose framing has become taken for granted – what Gramsci called *hegemony*, the capacity to make a particular way of seeing the world appear as common sense. Competencies have long been instruments of empowerment and disempowerment: who has the skills, the knowledge, the credentials to participate shapes who is included and who is marginalized. When we shift any element of a practice, we are therefore shifting power relations – whether we intend to or not. This is why the notion that you can ‘just’ build capacity, or ‘just’ provide infrastructure, without attending to its power implications, is naïve. Every change to an MMC element is a change to the distribution of power.

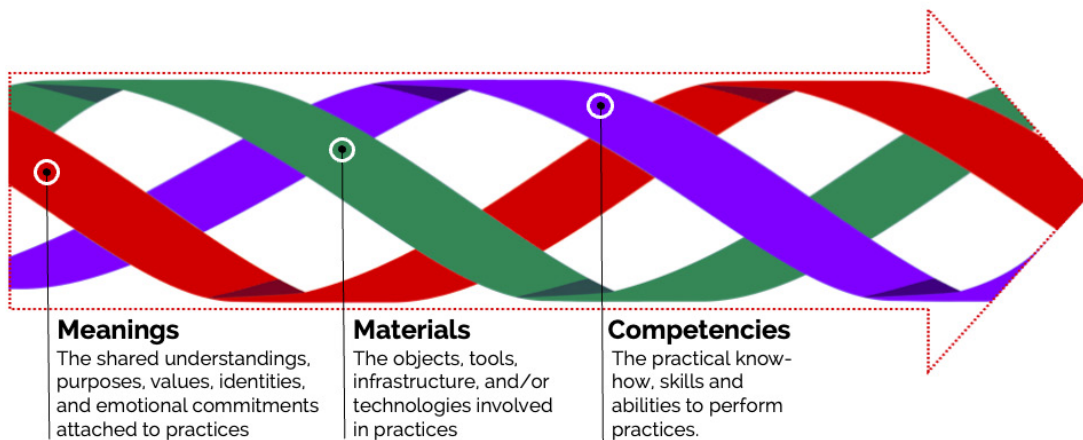
## Characterizing practices

Remember that elsewhere in this Playbook we have emphasized that the reason why a landscape system has a particular heading is because of what people are doing within it and how they interact. It makes sense therefore for us to focus on these practices if we want to change this heading. Practices are, in our view, key opportunity points in a landscape.

Practices comprise a 'bundle' of three interconnected things: meanings, materials and competencies (MMCs). We define these in the graphic below, and provide examples in the table further down.

What matters is not the individual elements alone but the *relations between them*. It is the connections between MMCs that constitute a practice, not the elements in isolation. A meaning only sustains a practice because of its relationship to specific materials and competencies; a material only functions because of the competencies people bring to it and the meanings that make its use intelligible. When we read a practice, we are reading these inter-relations – how the elements hold each other in place, and where the tensions or misalignments between them might create openings for change.

Change in this context focuses on introducing **misalignments** or **openings** that cause the existing bundle to become destabilised. This is what happens when we 'nudge' a system towards its alt-heading.



A critical caution follows from this. There is a persistent temptation in development practice to focus on a single MMC element – typically competencies (capacity building) or materials (infrastructure, technology transfer) – and assume that the other elements will follow. History suggests they do not. An irrigation scheme is a material intervention; but it immediately generates new power relations (who controls the water?), new competency requirements (who knows how to maintain the infrastructure?), and new meanings (who is now a 'modern farmer'?). If the team builds and walks away, the material change will be captured by existing power configurations. If the team watches for and nurtures the ripples across all three elements, durable practice change becomes possible. Foments should therefore always be designed with all three MMCs in view, even if the primary lever is one element.

The team should articulate a hypothesis about how change in one element will propagate to the others – and monitor whether it does. Targeting a single element in isolation does not merely *risk* unintended consequences – it *guarantees* them, because you have changed one element of an interconnected bundle while leaving the others to adapt unpredictably.

This practice-based approach can result in sustainable systemic change by reconfiguring the MMC bundle that makes up practices, rather than just trying to persuade individuals to act differently. It acknowledges that much of what people do is habitual, socially embedded, and shaped by their context rather than by conscious choice alone.

A note on terminology: a practice is not a behaviour. Behaviour is what an individual does – observable action. Practice is the socially organized, materially mediated, meaning-laden configuration within which behaviour occurs. Behaviour can be mandated from outside; practice must be generated by shifting the conditions that produce it. This distinction matters because most development interventions target behaviour (through incentives, training, or regulation) and wonder why the change does not stick. The Playbook targets practices – the deeper configurations that produce behaviour – because these are where durable change originates.

It is important to note that MMCs will vary wildly across different contexts, cultures, societies and political systems. As we design our intervention, we need to acknowledge from the outset that we only partially or do not know at all what our target groups' MMCs are. Therefore, high levels of adaptivity, learning, open-mindedness and flexibility are important if we are sincere about the alternative heading we seek.

|                                   | Meanings                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Materials                                                                 | Competencies                                                           |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Examples                          | Cattle have huge cultural significance, indicating status and wealth.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Land, grazing, water supply, kraals                                       | Herding, veterinary skills, fighting skills, knowledge about grasses   |
| Strategies for change (examples): | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reframe what the practice signifies or why it matters.</li> <li>• Connect practices to different identities or values.</li> <li>• Change the social status or desirability attached to doing something.</li> <li>• Develop 'recruit interventions'<sup>1</sup></li> </ul> | Introduce new materials such as technologies, or physical infrastructure. | Introduce new materials that require new competencies.                 |
| Examples                          | Honour the culture but focus on reducing the impact of large herds – e.g., stall feeding.                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Stalls, value chains for fodder, consider costs and distribution.         | Stall construction and maintenance; caring for semi-stationary cattle. |

<sup>1</sup> 'Recruit interventions' are interventions that attract people into performing new or alternative practices (rather than just modifying existing ones). We refer to this as 'demonstration'.

## Extending the MMCs

MMCs are interconnected – introduce a change in one, and the other two will also change. We argue that all three MMCs must be addressed in concert – failing to do so can result in unintended consequences, which can be hugely problematic. Each practice is its own system, and should be viewed as such, through the lens of MMCs.

On **meanings**: the meanings that groups derive from a practice may not always be obvious. We address this issue in our section on Unstated Intent. There is very often a difference between what people say they are doing and actual practice. This difference is important to detect in your sensing work, and corrupt practice is a major contributor to this subterfuge.

Meanings are a key opportunity point – if the society that surrounds a corrupt politician starts to frown upon and condemn the practice, this exerts a powerful regulatory force on the politician. If a group of people practising farming that causes erosion detect that the community they live and work in (and with) frowns upon the practice or considers it really uncool, they will feel it. Mobilising context to shift practices can be an extremely powerful way of shifting practice. This is what we mean when we argue that when seeking to change practices, we must come at these from both sides – not just the group doing it, but the societal context that keeps it in place by allowing it to flourish, or by rendering alternatives inaccessible.

**Materials** are things. They are beloved of many development agencies and governments – new highways, hydropower dams, ports, airports and buildings. In part, this is because materials are pregnant with meanings – they suggest modernity, national prowess, and progress. Materials can also, of course, be more modest: a village water pump, a rural clinic, a new blackboard in a school. Materials can generate profound systemic changes. As a rule of thumb, the bigger the material application, the greater the change; but so too, the bigger the change, the greater the likelihood of serious unintended consequences.

For Shove et al, **competencies** are the skills required to perform a practice. Having these can, of course, influence positive meanings associated with the practice, and may be essential when a new material is introduced (for example, the skill needed to run a piece of machinery). But we extend this into the realm of capabilities. Where competencies describe what a practitioner can do, capabilities describe what they are free to do – the degrees of freedom available to them within the regulatory context they inhabit. A practitioner may have the competency to farm differently but lack the capability – the freedom – to exercise that competency, because the regulatory architecture forecloses it. Capabilities are what the interaction space either grants or withholds. The idea of capabilities derives from Amartya Sen,<sup>2</sup> who saw them as people's real, substantive freedoms to be and do the things they have reason to value. We summarize his thinking in Box 1. For us, capabilities are suggestive of a person's (or group's) agency to exploit the degrees of freedom available to them in a particular regulatory context. This agency – whether latent or current – is important when it comes to characterizing and understanding competencies and associated practices.

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2 Sen, 1985 [1999]

## Capabilities

Amartya Sen uses capabilities to mean people's real, substantive freedoms to be and do the things they have reason to value – their effective opportunities to achieve valued 'functionings.' Functionings are the 'doings and beings' of a person (for example, being educated, being healthy, taking part in community life) that they value and have reason to value.

A person's capability (or capability set) is the set of these valuable functionings they can genuinely access or choose from – their effective freedom to live different kinds of life they have reason to value.

Sen repeatedly equates capabilities with real freedoms, stressing that what matters morally is not just resources or utilities but what people are actually able to do and be with those means.

Development, in this view, is the expansion of people's capabilities: their substantive opportunities to lead lives they have reason to value, across domains like health, education, political participation, and social relationships.

Agency is an important part of Sen's capabilities approach. This mainly references a person's role as a member of society, with the ability to participate in economic, social, and political actions. For Sen, 'an agent' is someone who acts and brings about change, whose achievement can be evaluated in terms of their own values and goals. Agency depends on the ability to personally choose the functionings one values, a choice that may not correlate with well-being.

Elsewhere in this Playbook, we reference what we call the 'power vista.' This can be perceived at the landscape level (and needs to be mapped out). But it also operates at the individual and group levels. We all have mental maps of the power vista and our location within it. This way, we can discern the regulations that affect us – the limits to our agency. On the flip side, we are also conscious of our 'degrees of freedom' – the extent to which we can exercise our agency without repercussions. The boundary between the regulatory field and the freedom field determines, for example, the line between rule breaking and rule adherence; or social acceptance and social rejection.

For us, therefore, capabilities references a person's or group's agency to exploit the degrees of freedom available to them.

## Strands

In our TOC section, we describe how practices sustained over time constitute strands – actor-specific trajectories that contribute to system heading. The Practices section is where strands are grounded: what makes a strand heavy or light is the regulatory force it exerts on others. Understanding the MMC configuration of a practice tells you what the strand is made of; understanding the regulatory effect it exerts on other strands tells you its weight. A practice is both regulated by other strands and regulatory of other strands – it is simultaneously shaped by its interaction space and a shaper of that space. This dual quality is what makes practices

the Playbook's unit of analysis: they are where system heading is produced, and where it can be shifted.

The TOC and Opportunity Points sections elaborate on strands, interaction spaces, and how to identify the most productive openings for foments within them. What this section provides is the anatomy of a strand – the MMC configuration that constitutes it – and the relationship between that anatomy and the power structures within which it is embedded.

The systems literature often regards 'path dependency' as a quality of complex systems. Path dependency means that where the system can go next is strongly shaped by *how it got to where it is now*, not just by current conditions. This can mean that past decisions constrain future possibilities. Thus, the very first fold of a piece of origami paper will determine which final shapes are possible. Early steps and contingencies 'bend' the trajectory, making some futures easy and others very hard. Our strands approach incorporates path dependency, but differs in several key ways. We elaborate on what path dependencies are and how strands differ in Box 2 below.

## **Box 2: Strands and path dependency**

The systems literature regards "path dependency" as a quality of complex systems: where the system can go next is strongly shaped by how it got here, not just by current conditions. Past decisions constrain future possibilities. Early steps bend the trajectory, making some futures easy and others very hard. Many thinkers distinguish between critical junctures (periods when multiple paths are open and small events can tip the system) from later periods of lock-in, when one path has become dominant and exit costs or coordination problems make switching hard. Path dependencies can explain why a sub-standard way of doing things is retained even when a better alternative exists.

A commonly used example is the QWERTY keyboard. Early typewriters suffered from typebar jamming when adjacent keys were struck in quick succession, so designers separated common letter pairs – despite "B" following "A" in the alphabet, they sit on separate rows. Typists were trained on it, firms standardized it, and later machines adopted it by default. In 1936, the more ergonomic Dvorak keyboard was released, promising fewer errors and faster speeds – but it made few ripples. Retraining and coordination costs were high, and the promised benefits contestable. QWERTY is a path-dependent lock-in: a historical solution to a now-obsolete mechanical problem that persists because the ecosystem around it – skills, devices, software, expectations – is deeply aligned with it.

Our strands incorporate path dependency, with three important extensions.

First, path dependency describes lock-in within a single trajectory. Strands are inherently relational – a strand's persistence is explained not just by its own internal lock-in but by the regulatory effect other strands exert on it. The farmer is locked into monoculture maize not only because the seed chains, credit structures, and competencies are built around it, but

because the Ministry's extension strand, the market's price-signalling strand, and the district officer's enforcement strand all hold the farming strand on its current heading.

Second, path dependency does not inherently carry a power analysis. It explains lock-in through increasing returns and switching costs – features of the system's architecture rather than of who benefits from it. Strands are explicitly about power: what makes a strand heavy is the regulatory force its practices exert on others, and that regulatory force serves interests. The path dependency of a corrupt governance arrangement is not just that switching costs are high – it is that powerful actors are actively maintaining the path because it serves them.

Third, path dependency points towards critical junctures. This is useful but somewhat passive: you wait for the juncture, or you try to create one. Strands point towards interaction spaces. You do not need to break the lock-in wholesale. You dampen, amplify, redirect – working the regulatory exchange between strands to shift what each strand's practices can do.

## Mapping practices – analysing MMCs

For each target practice, create an analysis with three columns – meanings, materials, and competencies – like the one above, where we have provided examples. This worksheet produces the practice map discussed in the Intervention Design and Implementation section.

To fill the matrix in, pose the following questions:

**Meanings:** what does this practice signify? Whose meanings are dominant? Are they contested? What stories sustain them? What would it mean socially to stop doing this?

**Materials:** what physical things enable this practice? Who controls access? What infrastructure does it depend on? What would need to change materially for the practice to shift?

**Competencies:** what skills reproduce this practice? Are they place-specific or portable? Who has them? What new competencies would be needed for an alternative practice? What capabilities (degrees of freedom) do practitioners have – and what forecloses them?

Finally, identify the regulatory context: which other strands regulate this practice, and through which MMC elements does that external regulation operate? For example, a government strand may regulate through materials (controlling access to land) and through meanings (defining what counts as 'productive' farming).

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