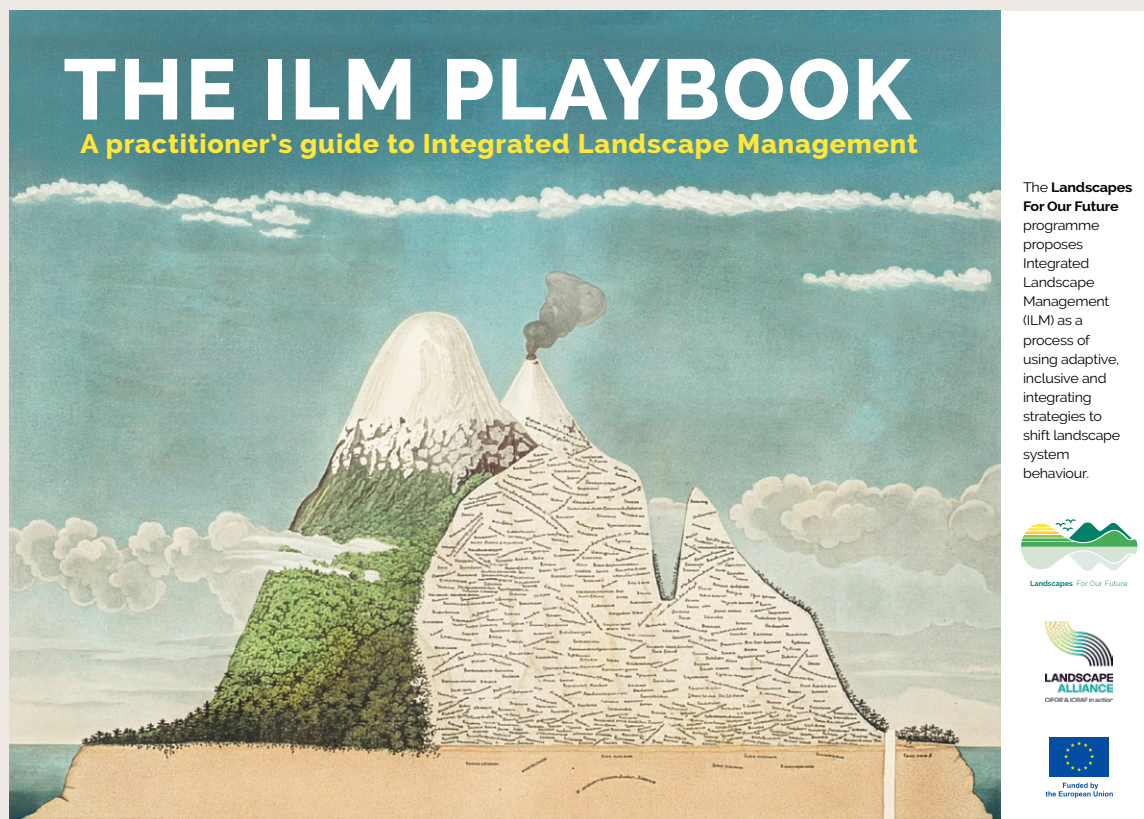


# Extract from The ILM Playbook

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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# POWER

## Key take-aways

- Power is everywhere – the substance of inbetweenness – and it operates through regulation: dampening loops constrain, amplifying loops reinforce, and together they produce the patterns we observe in the landscape.
- The question is not whether actors have power – they all do – but what they do with it: power accumulation produces fragmentation; power sharing produces integration.
- Power has *range* (how far it extends) and *aggregation* (how micro-capacities compound), but no vertical levels – hierarchy is an imposed ordering that abstracts away the relational substrate ILM most needs.
- Power cannot be destroyed, only redistributed; any heading shift therefore creates winners and losers, and powerful actors who benefit from current arrangements will resist.
- The intervention is itself an actor with regulatory capacity – convening power, resources, legitimacy – and the team's first reflexive task is recognizing and deploying that capacity deliberately.

## Power in the landscape system

Power is everywhere.<sup>1</sup> The interconnections between people, between places, and between people and the environment are all power relations. There is no human relationship that is not, in some dimension, a relationship of regulatory exchange – of influence exerted and received, of behaviour shaped and reshaped. This does not mean all relationships are coercive. It means all relationships have a regulatory dimension: each party's practices are modified by the other's presence, however subtly. Power is the substance of the inbetweenness – it is what flows through the connections that constitute the system. All people have power – whether or not they choose to use it. As we discuss elsewhere in this Playbook, the moment you show up in a system, you change it by presence alone. The same can be said for non-human elements in the system – their presence is also power, for it influences system dynamics, even if it is only in a tiny way.

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<sup>1</sup> “[Power] is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.” – Foucault, 1978.

Stand in any landscape and look around. Nothing is still. Water moves through soil. Cattle are driven to pasture. A truck loaded with charcoal heads for the city. A county official signs a permit. A woman walks an extra kilometre to a borehole because the nearer one has been fenced off. Every one of these movements is an effect – something is making something else happen. That is power.

If you refer back to our model, you will remember that we regard power as playing a significant role in a system's heading because of its role in patterning. Power sits between the system as a whole and the practices that people perform within it. The system generates power relations; those power relations shape what people do (their practices); and practices, in turn, are expressed through meanings, materials and competencies (MMCs). This layered relationship – system → power → practices → MMCs – is central to how we understand landscape dynamics.

## What is power?

Robert Dahl 's famous definition of power expressed defined it as follows: "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do."<sup>2</sup> This *sounds* coercive but could equally suggest that A offers B an alternative that B had never considered.

French (who Dahl drew upon in his famous paper) defined power not just in terms of A being able to get B to do something that B would not otherwise do but introduced the idea of push-back.<sup>3</sup> Thus, "the power of A over B ... [is] equal to the maximum force which A can induce on B minus the maximum resisting force which B can mobilize in the opposite direction." There is, therefore, a *blending* – if A asserts itself, and B pushes back, the nature of the interaction changes dependent on the extent to which A can apply its power, and the extent to which B can resist.

This is important for our understanding what power does. Power generates effects which modifies behaviour. In systems terms, this is regulation – the patterning of behaviour through feedback loops. As we explored in our Systems and Complexity section, dampening loops constrain certain behaviours (social sanctions discouraging norm violations) while amplifying loops reinforce others (success breeding more success). The balance between these loops determines which patterns persist, which fade, and where the system heads.

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2 Dahl, 1957.

3 French, 1956.

# Regulation

This leads us to a core claim: *if power is omnipresent, then its presence is felt through regulation*. If power generates an effect, then that effect is regulation.<sup>4</sup> Regulation is how power delivers patterning in systems. When we say power patterns a landscape, we are saying that regulatory feedback loops – operating through countless relationships in the system – shape what people do, what they can access, and what they believe to be possible. In Box 1 one below, we lay out some of the theoretical thinking behind this assertion.

## Regulation in theory

### Cybernetics: regulation as the foundational concept

W Ross Ashby defined cybernetics as the science of coordination, regulation, and control, and his ‘Law of Requisite Variety’<sup>5</sup> is that a ‘regulator’ (that which regulates) must have at least as much variety (possible states) as the system it regulates. Stafford Beer restated this as “only variety absorbs variety.”<sup>6</sup> For Ashby, regulation resonates with resilience – it is how systems maintain stability in the face of disturbance through the blocking or channelling of variety. Thus, topography, soil condition and vegetation cover are all ‘regulators’ of water’s variety of possible behaviours. The regulator does not need to be intentional or even animate; it just needs to constrain the field of possible outcomes. Every good regulator of a system must be a ‘model’ of that system.<sup>7</sup> There must be points of correspondence between the regulator and the regulated. For example, a lock and a key are very different things. But once the key is inserted into the lock, and the two pair, then the key can be turned and the lock opened. Thus, for many top-down development interventions, there is no point of engagement across which regulation can occur, and therefore no correspondence between the intervention and the system it aims to change.

### Foucault: regulation as the conduct of conduct

Foucault<sup>8</sup> defines government not as the state, but as the ‘conduct of conduct’ – which one commentator translates explicitly as “the regulation of behaviours.”<sup>9</sup> Foucault traces how this works through multiple mechanisms: sovereign power (laws, coercion), disciplinary power (schools, hospitals, military – shaping bodies and habits), and what he calls technologies of control (nudges, incentive structures, self-regulation). The critical point for is that Foucault insists power is not exercised solely through instruments like laws. It operates through institutions, signalling, education and normalisation.

4 In the systems literature, you may come across the idea of ‘barriers’. These describe a relationship between an actor (or practice) and a configuration of structures, norms, resources, etc. Barriers can both block new action and help hold an existing group – practice configuration in place – which therefore implies regulation. We, however, see a key difference between regulations and barriers in that the latter often treats context as a set of static obstacles rather than as interactive conditions that co-evolve with interventions and behaviours. See, for example, Hanger-Kopp et al, 2022.

5 Ross Ashby, 1956.

6 Beer, 1974.

7 Conant and Ross Ashby, 1970.

8 Foucault, 2007.

9 Sokhi-Bulley, 2014.

### Julia Black: decentred regulation

Julia Black<sup>10</sup> has done the most systematic work on what regulation looks like once you 'decentre' it from the state. She argues that regulation is diffused throughout society and that the state has no monopoly on it. She identifies five core features of this decentred understanding: complexity, fragmentation, interdependencies, ungovernability, and the collapse of public/private distinctions. Black defines regulation as a distinct activity concerned with how to change the behaviour of others. She builds a framework where regulation happens 'in many rooms' – between and within non-state actors, not just from the state downward.

### Regulation and access

A key source of regulatory power is control of access: the ability to benefit from things. By focusing on 'ability', this formulation brings attention to a wider range of social relationships that can limit or enable people to benefit from resources. For Ribot and Peluso<sup>11</sup> a 'bundle of rights' (of access) should be reconceived as a 'bundle of powers'.

Power is what enables or constrains your ability to derive benefit. It is not located in a single source but distributed across what they call "webs of power" – interconnected strands of different mechanisms through which actors gain, maintain, or control access. They identify two broad categories of mechanism: *rights-based mechanisms* – essentially property in its various forms: law, custom, convention. This is where formal regulation in the conventional sense sits. But for Ribot and Peluso, this is just one strand in the web. *Structural and relational mechanisms* – e.g., access to technology, access to capital, access to markets, access to labour and labour opportunities, access to knowledge, access to authority, access through social identity, and access via the negotiation of other social relations. These are explicitly heuristic categories, not a closed taxonomy. Each mechanism can enable, conflict with, or complement the others, producing complex patterns of benefit distribution.

Crucially, they also distinguish between three forms of social action around access: *gaining* access (establishing it in the first place), *maintaining* access (keeping open channels already established), and *controlling* access (mediating others' ability to benefit).

Ribot and Peluso explicitly refuse to theorise power as such – they treat it instrumentally, as the thing that makes access happen, without fully elaborating what power *is*. They acknowledge this, noting that critics have found their "webs of power" underspecified.<sup>12</sup>

10 Black, 2001, 2002.

11 Ribot and Peluso, 2003.

12 Peluso and Ribot, 2020.

Not all systems experience regulation in the same way. What distinguishes them is the number and character of the regulatory pressures bearing upon their elements.

Consider a simple system – the act of turning a tap. There are a handful of factors that determine how much water emerges: the extent to which the tap is opened, the diameter of the faucet, the diameter of connecting pipes, the water pressure, and the presence of a water supply. Each of these is a regulatory pressure – each has the capacity to dampen or amplify the effect. But there are only five of them, and each operates in a unilinear, highly causal way. They all exist to generate just two effects: the presence or absence of water, and the volume you receive. Regulation here is transparent and predictable.

An African elephant shrew faces a more complicated situation. Its preoccupations are hardwired through millions of years of evolutionary regulatory pressures – predation, prey availability, competition, climate, terrain – each of which has shaped its physiology, instincts, and behaviour over deep time. The outcome, however, is relatively simple: close to its small burrow, the shrew maintains an elaborate network of carefully tended paths. From the moment it wakes, it runs down these pathways. By running, it makes itself a blur to an overhead hawk or a coincidental snake. Millions of regulatory pressures, accumulated over evolutionary time, have yielded a beautifully simple behavioural routine. This is diachronic complexity yielding synchronic simplicity – a complicated process producing a straightforward outcome.

Now consider a pastoralist in northern Kenya. She faces dense regulatory pressures from every direction, simultaneously: rainfall patterns determine where grass grows; customary tenure rules determine which clans may graze where; county government permits regulate water abstraction; market prices for livestock fluctuate with drought cycles and export bans; cultural norms attach status to cattle ownership; national policies privilege sedentary agriculture over mobility; and neighbouring communities contest access to dry-season pastures. Unlike the tap, these pressures interact in non-linear ways. Unlike the shrew, the pastoralist has agency – she chooses how to respond. She can comply, resist, adapt, innovate, or exit. These choices, in turn, create new feedback loops that ripple through the system, generating emergent patterns that no single actor intended. This is the regulatory environment of a complex system: dense, interacting pressures combined with bounded agency, yielding patterns that are neither fully determined nor freely chosen.

The progression matters for ILM practitioners. In simple systems (few regulatory pressures), interventions are straightforward – adjust one pressure, get a predictable result. In complicated systems (many pressures but hardwired responses), interventions require expertise, but outcomes are knowable. In complex landscape systems (dense pressures plus agency), interventions are inherently uncertain – because the people you are working with will respond in ways that create new feedback loops, generating emergent patterns you cannot predict. This is why, in these systems, adaptivity and experimentation are so important.

## An ancient logos

Two and a half thousand years before systems thinking acquired its modern vocabulary, a philosopher in Ephesus was already describing something remarkably close to what this Playbook calls regulation. Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 535–475 BCE) argued that the cosmos was governed by *logos* – a word that resists easy translation but which the philosopher Angie Hobbs characterizes as “a rational regulating order or ratio to the universe which regulates the change, which regulates the tension between opposites, which creates – or indeed, *is* – the unity out of ... opposing surface tensions.”<sup>13</sup> Logos, for Heraclitus, was not something imposed on the world from outside. It was the ordering principle immanent in the flux itself.

This matters because Heraclitus saw the world as constituted by opposites in tension – hot and cold, wet and dry, life and death – and insisted that the tension was not a problem to be resolved but the very thing that held reality together. His image of the bow and the lyre captures this: both instruments work only because opposing forces pull against one another. Remove the tension and you do not get harmony; you get a piece of wood. In the language of this Playbook, the opposites emerge from power – accumulation and sharing, dampening and amplifying – and the logos is the regulatory patterning that emerges from their interaction. The tension is constitutive.

Heraclitus is perhaps best known for his river fragment: you cannot step into the same river twice. His follower Cratylus took this to mean that identity was compromised by change – that if the river never stays the same, it is never truly a river, and indeed nothing can ultimately be named. Because of the flux, Cratylus (according to Aristotle) decided that it is impossible to say anything true. Language, he reasoned, could not latch onto reality. Rather than speak, therefore, Cratylus thought one should say nothing and so moved only his finger. But Heraclitus meant the opposite. The river *is* a river precisely *because* it flows. Identity is secured through change, not despite it. A river that stands still is a pond. A system that ceases to change is dead. This is exactly the point we make about landscape systems: they are dynamic, constantly in flux, and their character – their heading – is determined not by stasis but by the regulatory patterning of forces that are themselves in constant motion.

There is one further resonance. Heraclitus drove home that opposites are perspectival – profoundly shaped by positionality. Sea water is poison to humans but life-giving to fish. The road up and the road down are the same road. Whether something is experienced as harmful or beneficial depends entirely on where you stand. This is not relativism in the modern sense – Heraclitus was emphatic that the logos holds, that there *is* a rational order. But within that order, perspective determines experience. For ILM practitioners, this is a direct echo of the positionality challenge: the same regulatory pressure – a conservation policy, a market price, a customary norm – will be experienced as liberating by some and as oppressive by others. The logos does not take sides. Understanding it requires understanding where everyone stands.

# How power patterns systems

Several important thinkers have explored how power creates and reproduces the patterns we observe in systems. Each illuminates a different dimension of the same phenomenon.

Anna Birney<sup>14</sup> frames systems change as the emergence of new patterns of organizing, with power as a relational dynamic. She explicitly notes that changing systems requires shifting power dynamics, and describes power patterns as fractal, meaning patterns at smaller levels replicate at wider scales. Power is a key opportunity point in systems – and small change to a system's power dynamics can yield big changes.

Anthony Giddens's<sup>15</sup> 'structuration theory' defines power as an 'intrinsic part of social encounters' and equates it with 'transformative capacity' – the ability of actors, drawing on resources, to reproduce or transform social structures. In structuration theory, structures are both the *medium and outcome of practice*: repeated use of 'authoritative' and 'allocative' resources patterns social systems over time. In other words, power is the capacity that produces and reproduces system patterns (rules, roles, routines), and those patterned structures in turn condition further action – i.e., a feedback loop.

Pierre Bourdieu<sup>16</sup> describes what he calls 'fields' – the structured spaces of positions in which actors struggle over various forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, symbolic). These struggles generate relatively stable patterns of domination and distinction. Power here is not only control over others but the capacity, via capital, to shape the structure and logic of a field – that is, to pattern the system of relations and the 'rules of the game' that then reproduce inequality. Feedback is explicit: structured fields shape habitus,<sup>17</sup> and habitus reproduces the field, generating regulatory loops between power, dispositions, and system patterning.

**The essence of  
tyranny is the  
denial of complexity.  
– Jacob Burkhardt**

From Foucault's perspective, power operates through disciplinary mechanisms that *regulate* space, time, and activity, and power is an everyday, socialised and embodied phenomenon that transcends politics and is exercised throughout the 'social body'.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, Foucault argued that for studying humans, the goals of power and the goals of knowledge cannot be separated – in knowing we control and in controlling we know.<sup>19</sup>

14 Birney, 2021.

15 Giddens, 1984.

16 Bourdieu, 1994.

17 Coined by Bourdieu, 'habitus' refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and ways of thinking that individuals develop through their upbringing and social environment. It shapes how people perceive the world and guides their actions, often without conscious thought.

18 Foucault, 1991.

19 Foucault, 1977.

What these thinkers share is the insight that power has a *dispositional capacity*<sup>20</sup> to shape and stabilize patterns of relations, rules, and flows in systems. Power creates the conditions for certain practices to emerge and persist while constraining others. When confronted by your landscape, the reason it looks the way it does is because of power. In part, this is because of ancient processes – vulcanism, tectonic shifts, wind, water and biochemical influences. But contemporaneously, it is power expressed through humans – between humans and nature, and between humans themselves – that patterns landscapes.

## How power is wielded: accumulation or sharing

All people have inherent power, expressed as agency: a capacity to generate effect. The question is not whether people have power – they do. The question is what they do with it.

As Ostrom explains:<sup>21</sup> “In prehistoric times, simple survival was dependent both on the aggressive pursuit of self-interest and on collective action to achieve cooperation in defence, food acquisition, and child rearing ... Our evolutionary heritage has hardwired us to be boundedly self-seeking at the same time that we are capable of learning heuristics and norms, such as reciprocity, that help achieve successful collective action.”

This tension – between selfishness and altruism, between taking and sharing – is fundamental to how power shapes landscape systems. It yields two pathways: power accumulation and power sharing. The distinction is not between having power and not having power – all actors have power. It is between what they do with it. As the Integration section argues, the character of a landscape is determined not by whether power is present (it always is) but by how it is configured: accumulated and concentrated (generating fragmentation) or shared and circulated (generating integration). The same regulatory capacity that produces domination, when redistributed, produces collaboration. This is why power is the Playbook’s primary opportunity point.

## Power accumulation

The inherent power of individual agency is never enough, which creates the impetus to take other peoples’ power. Power becomes something to accumulate, to hoard or acquire. Those who lose power become desperate, and therefore more self-serving. They see the powerful accumulating power and replicate this behaviour. This creates an internally reinforcing fragmenting dynamic. Reciprocity is squeezed out for selfish reasons, and the system disintegrates towards conflict.

Power accumulation does not typically occur through single dramatic acts of seizure. It proceeds through countless micro-level interactions – a favour granted here, a norm bent there, a small advantage compounded over time – each individually unremarkable, but collectively generating the patterns of domination we observe at the landscape level. This is why accumulation is so difficult to challenge: it is not one decision but thousands, not one relationship but a web. Conversely, power sharing also

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20 ‘Disposition’ is a property defined by what it can do under certain conditions. To say an actor or group has political power as a disposition is to say they have a standing capacity to bring about certain effects in other actors even when they are not currently exercising it.

21 Ostrom, 1998

operates through micro-interactions – reciprocal exchanges, small acts of trust, incremental norm-building – that compound into cooperative patterns. Understanding this micro-level dynamic is essential for intervention design, because it means that shifting a system's power configuration requires engaging at the level of everyday interactions, not merely at the level of formal institutional architecture.

In regulatory terms, power accumulators gather others' regulatory capacity – they monopolise the ability to monitor, sanction, decide, and control access. They direct system heading to serve their own desires (not needs – desires are unlimited, which is why accumulation is never enough). They introduce disequilibrium: the system is bent into configurations that serve the accumulator at others' expense.

Kenya's Mau Forest – the most important closed-canopy forest in East Africa and a critical water tower for the Rift Valley – offers a vivid illustration. In its latter stages, the Moi government declared large sections of the forest open for settlement, widely understood as political patronage to secure electoral support. The influx of settlers opening land for agriculture triggered rapid deforestation, while existing forest-adjacent communities – including the indigenous Ogiek – lost access to grazing, forest products, and land they had long managed. As powerful actors accumulated land through state-directed allocation, those dispossessed responded with further forest clearance for subsistence, accelerating the spiral. When the Kibaki government launched the 'Save the Mau' initiative in 2009, the resulting evictions were contested and traumatic, amalgamating forest rehabilitation with the reclamation of grabbed public land in ways that punished smallholders while leaving the structural dynamics of patronage intact. As Fuchs demonstrates, this was more than an environmental crisis – it was a political, economic, and socio-cultural crisis.<sup>22</sup> This is a classic extractive amplifying loop: state-directed accumulation → dispossession → desperate self-serving behaviour → further degradation → a punitive response that fails to address the underlying power dynamics.

## Power sharing

While individual power is limited, collective power is not. When power is shared – distributed, circulated, and mutually constituted – it yields effects that no individual can achieve alone. Success reinforces trust and reciprocity norms, creating an internally reinforcing integrating dynamic – another amplifying feedback loop, but one that amplifies cooperation rather than extraction. The system organizes towards collective action.

In regulatory terms, power sharers distribute regulatory capacity among themselves. They increase collective ability to monitor, decide, and benefit. System heading emerges from interaction rather than domination.

In Tanzania, the Duru-Haitemba and Mgori forests in Babati District were visibly degrading under central government management – the state forestry service lacked the resources and local knowledge to enforce protection. In 1994, communities living on the

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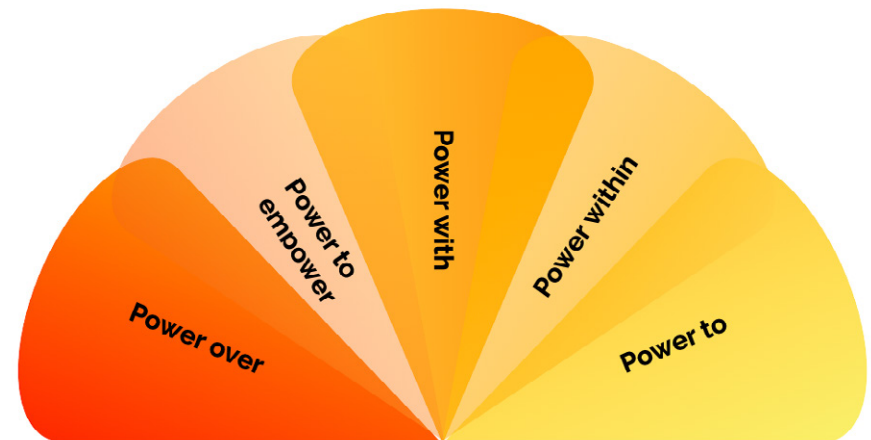
22 Fuchs, 2023.

edges of these forests secured the transfer of management authority to elected village governments. Crucially, as Alden Wily<sup>23</sup> argues, what was traded was not merely use rights but *power* – villages gained the legal authority to promulgate and enforce by-laws binding on all persons entering the forest, to exclude, to sanction, and to decide how forest resources would be managed. This redistribution of regulatory capacity built on existing village governance structures already recognized in Tanzanian law, giving it institutional depth. Forest condition improved markedly, and within a decade more than 500 villages across Tanzania owned and managed forest reserves. Because communities held genuine regulatory capacity – not just permission to harvest – they had both the incentive and the means to sustain the resource. Trust between villages strengthened as neighbouring communities coordinated management across forest boundaries. This is a generative amplifying loop: power shared → collective stewardship → forest recovery → reinforced trust → more sharing. The later finding that benefits in some reserves concentrated among local elites is itself instructive – it underscores that genuine empowerment means building *collective* regulatory capacity, not simply transferring accumulation from one set of hands to another.

## The five 'species' of power

The distinction between accumulation and sharing helps us make sense of the different ways power manifests in systems. The literature identifies five relational 'species' of power:<sup>24</sup>

- **Power over:** A dominates B. This is the characteristic expression of power accumulation – coercive, extractive, concentrating regulatory capacity in A's hands.
- **Power to convene:** A assembles B, C, D and others together and creates space for collective action. This sits at the threshold between accumulation and sharing – A uses its own power to create conditions for others to exercise theirs.
- **Power with:** A, B, C, D and others act together. This is the characteristic expression of power sharing – a powerful integrative force, building links across different sectors, interests and knowledges.
- **Power within:** an individual or collective sense of self-worth, value and dignity. A recognizes its individual differences while respecting those of B, C, D, etc.
- **Power to:** this is agency – the unique potential of every actor to shape their life and world.



<sup>23</sup> Wily, 1999.

<sup>24</sup> VeneKlasen and Miller, 2007; Cornwell and Scoones, 2011. Some thinkers also include the concept of 'soft power,' which seeks to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction by using culture, political values or foreign policies.

These are not truly different types of power. They are different configurations – different ways that the same underlying phenomenon is wielded. Power wielded to accumulate generates domination (power over). Power wielded to share generates collaboration (power with, power to, power within). But in every case, the underlying dynamic is the same: regulatory pressure that patterns what people do. The Integration section of this Playbook describes how different configurations of power – from violent fragmentation through coordination to collectivism – create radically different landscape patterns.

The challenge for ILM becomes identifying opportunity points that will enable a shift from power accumulation towards power sharing. Power cannot be destroyed – it can only be redistributed or reconfigured. You cannot make power go away; you can only change how it patterns.

## Power and scale

As we discussed in our Systems and Complexity section, landscape systems do not operate in hierarchical levels. There is no ‘local’ sitting below ‘regional’ sitting below ‘national’. Everything is horizontal. The hierarchical ladder is a conceptual instrument that power accumulators use to establish their primacy.

What we call ‘vertical power’ is really accumulated horizontal power – an actor who has accreted many others’ micro-powers through coercion, coordination, or capture. The accumulator is not literally ‘above’ the landscape; they are densely connected to many actors and positioned to interrupt or redirect flows. This gives them leverage, but the relations remain horizontal.

Think of it through the gravity analogy.<sup>25</sup> Individual hydrogen atoms exert almost imperceptible gravitational pull on one another. Yet when enough of them accumulate, they form stars. Stars accumulate into galaxies. At each extent, the same phenomenon produces qualitatively different effects. Power in landscapes behaves similarly: individual decisions, relationships, and exchanges are tiny regulatory pressures. But when they accumulate and pattern – through institutions, markets, norms, and infrastructure – they produce structures of domination and opportunity that shape entire landscapes. This is not a hierarchy of levels; it is horizontal accumulation of regulatory capacity.

For ILM practitioners, this means we should think in terms of two dimensions: **range** – how far a given power-capacity extends (how many actors, which arenas it reaches); and **aggregation** – how patterned micro-capacities compound into emergent macro regularities. An upstream sugar company that controls the only processing facility within 200 kilometres has extensive range (it shapes thousands of farmers’ decisions) and high aggregation (those individual decisions compound into a landscape dominated by sugar cane). It is not ‘higher’ than the farmers – it is more densely connected and better positioned in the system’s flows.

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25 We use this analogy cautiously – it is a metaphor, not a claim that social power behaves identically to gravitational force. But the structural similarities are instructive.

## Hierarchy, abstraction, and the relational alternative

If power in landscape systems operates horizontally – through range and aggregation rather than through vertical levels – then hierarchy requires explanation. It is not a natural feature of complex systems but an imposed ordering: a particular way of concentrating regulatory capacity that serves those who sit at its apex. Hierarchy works by abstracting. Each layer up replaces experiential knowledge with categories: the village becomes a district, the district a province, the farmer a ‘beneficiary,’ the landscape a ‘target area.’ This is what James Scott<sup>26</sup> calls rendering ‘legible’ – the state’s project of replacing the particular, contextual, and local with the general, standardized, and governable. The cadastral map replaces the lived knowledge of the landscape; the census replaces the social knowledge of who lives where and why. Abstraction is not a byproduct of hierarchy; it is the mechanism by which hierarchy operates.

Abstraction systematically strips out the relational knowledge that makes governance effective. A community in Southern Laos is an abstraction to government ministries in Vientiane – and is treated as such: in an unempathetic way, because the community’s problems are not experiential to distant administrators. The same works in reverse: central government appears to villagers as far away and incapable of understanding their problems. The experiential distance between governor and governed is not a communication failure that better reporting might fix. It is structural: hierarchy produces it, because hierarchy can only govern at a distance by replacing the particular with the categorical. The result is governance that is administratively efficient but epistemically impoverished – it can count hectares but not understand why people farm them the way they do.

People are, it seems, far more tolerant of administration they consider influenceable. Governance is influenceable when it is populated by people whose reasoning can be challenged, whose behaviour can be observed, and who share the consequences of their own decisions. This is why, in many of the countries where ILM operates, communities are remarkably tolerant of corruption – not because they approve, but because corruption is relational. It operates through personal connections, negotiation, and reciprocal obligation.<sup>27</sup> It is a way to influence administration, however imperfectly. People generally want less corruption, not the absence of it, because the alternative – a perfectly efficient but completely uninfluenceable bureaucracy – offers them nothing. The irony is that corruption, for all its costs, preserves a relational substrate that the formal hierarchical system has destroyed.

Much of the collaboration, participation, and commons governance literature implicitly argues for what organization theory calls heterarchy: a form of social organization in which regulatory authority is distributed laterally rather than concentrated vertically. In a heterarchical arrangement, multiple actors hold authority within overlapping domains, coordinating through negotiation rather than command. Polycentric governance is heterarchical as is adaptive co-management, multi-stakeholder platforms, community-based natural resource management, and every serious proposal for collaborative landscape governance. These literatures rebuke hierarchy consistently but stop short of naming heterarchy as the structural alternative – no doubt because the development industry is constituted by hierarchical state-to-state relations that cannot be openly challenged without threatening the

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26 Scott, 1998.

27 For example: de Sardan, 1999.

institutional architecture through which interventions are funded and delivered.

The deeper point is ontological. The Playbook's framework rests on what social theorists call relationalism: the proposition that social reality is constituted by relations rather than by entities that exist prior to their connections. Here, we should understand social phenomena not as the properties of individual actors but as patterns that emerge from relationships between them<sup>28</sup> thereby constituting space.<sup>29</sup> In other words, landscapes emerge – and are patterned by – the interactions between actors. This is the inbetweenness described in the Systems and Complexity section – and power is its primary content. Power is not a possession that actors carry; it is a capacity that exists in the relationship. Governance is not an apparatus imposed upon social life; it is social life regulating itself. If this is true – and the Playbook's entire analytical framework argues that it is – then how people relate to each other is not one factor among many; it is the primary material from which everything else is built. An ILM approach that does not centre relational dynamics is not merely incomplete; it is working with the wrong unit of analysis.

For the ILM practitioner, this means that the quality of relationships in a landscape – how people engage, negotiate, trust, monitor, and hold each other accountable – is not a soft variable to be addressed after the technical work is done. It is the regulatory architecture itself. An intervention that builds a technically sound governance framework but neglects the relational substrate through which it must operate has built a house without foundations. Conversely, an intervention that strengthens relational density – creates spaces for interaction, builds trust across difference, facilitates mutual accountability, or demands diversity – is intervening directly in the regulatory architecture, even if it produces no formal institutional output. The hierarchy that development practice typically imposes (donor → government → implementer → rural community) is structurally incapable of building this relational substrate, because it replaces relational proximity with bureaucratic distance at every level.

## How power shapes practices

Hopefully, the above has persuaded you that power determines what people do. These are practices, which we explore more fully here. The things that people do are not freely chosen in a vacuum; they are shaped by what is possible, permissible and rewarded given the power dynamics and regulations in which people are embedded.

Consider pastoralism in northern Kenya, a livelihood that has sustained communities for millennia. Pastoralist practices are shaped by meanings (cattle as cultural wealth and status, mobility as identity), materials (access to rangelands, water points, livestock) and competencies (herding skills, knowledge of grasses and seasons, conflict resolution). But each of these is, in turn, shaped by power.

Who controls access to water points and dry-season grazing? Often, this is contested between communities, and increasingly shaped by county governments, conservancies, and infrastructure projects. Who defines what counts as 'productive' land use? National policies have historically privileged sedentary agriculture over mobile pastoralism, marginalizing pastoralist communities

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28 Emirbayer, 1997.

29 Massey, 2012.

in resource allocation and political representation. Whose knowledge of rangeland management is valued? Scientific range management has often displaced indigenous ecological knowledge, even where the latter is better adapted to local conditions.

These power relations percolate into everyday practices. When rangelands are enclosed for conservation or commercial agriculture, pastoralists' mobility is constrained. When national policies favour permanent settlement, the meanings attached to mobile pastoralism shift from 'adaptive livelihood strategy' to 'backward practice to be modernised'. When credit schemes require land title as collateral, pastoralists without individual tenure are excluded from the materials they need to invest in their herds.

This means that when we seek to change practices, we often bump into power. An intervention that provides new materials (veterinary services, fodder, water infrastructure) may fail if powerful actors control access to those materials. An intervention that builds new competencies (training in sustainable range management) may be ineffective if pastoralists lack the power to act on what they know because their mobility has been curtailed. An intervention that tries to shift meanings (revaluing pastoralism as climate-smart land use) may struggle if national policy continues to privilege agriculture.

So, we see power in human practices and MMCs. Power, indeed, may be totally responsible for why people do the things they do. We can summarize the role of power in practice as follows:

| Element      | How power operates                                                                                  | Example (pastoralism)                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Meanings     | Power defines what's thinkable, legitimate, natural; whose knowledge counts; what framings dominate | National policy frames pastoralism as 'backward' versus agriculture as 'productive' – marginalizing pastoralist knowledge and identity                |
| Materials    | Power as regulatory capacity – control over resources, access, decision rights, enforcement         | County governments and conservancies control access to water points and dry-season grazing; credit schemes require land title, excluding pastoralists |
| Competencies | Power determines whose skills matter; gatekeeping of credentials; defining what 'expertise' is      | Scientific range management valued over indigenous ecological knowledge, even where the latter is better adapted to local conditions                  |

In the Our Theory of Change section, we describe how practices sustained over time constitute strands – and how strand weight is determined by the regulatory force a practice exerts on others. The power analysis described in this section is, in strand terms, a reading of which strands are heavy (whose practices dominate regulatory exchange) and which are light (whose practices are shaped by others with minimal capacity to regulate back). Your power vista is your strand map. The interaction spaces described in the Opportunity Points section are where these regulatory pressures are felt most acutely – the overlaps between different actors' practices where power determines the quality of exchange.

## Empowerment: redistributing regulatory capacity

Empowerment is a profound opportunity point. But there are two sides to this coin. By empowering one or some groups, you will end up disempowering some other group – something they will probably resist. This is an inescapable systems reality: because power cannot be destroyed, only redistributed, any shift in regulatory capacity has consequences throughout the system. Changing who regulates whom is a trade-off and comes with attendant risks that need to be carefully assessed.

Empowerment initiatives – increasing decision-making autonomy, political participation, gender equality, ownership and control over resources, agency and voice, awareness of rights<sup>30</sup> – are, in regulatory terms, about shifting who can monitor, who can sanction, who can decide, and who can benefit. This is repatterning through power redistribution.

In the 1990s, Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE programme devolved wildlife management rights from central government to communities in the Zambezi Valley, who gained the right to benefit from safari tourism and sustainable wildlife utilisation. This empowerment necessarily diminished the power of the central wildlife authority, safari operators who had previously held monopoly concessions, and local elites who had controlled access informally. Some resisted actively; others adapted. The programme's long-term trajectory depended heavily on whether its designers had anticipated and planned for this resistance.<sup>31</sup>

Three implications follow. First, powerful actors must be involved in or supportive of an intervention's goals wherever possible; where they cannot be brought on board, they need to be monitored **closely**. Second, empowerment requires working at multiple sites simultaneously – changing access (materials), legitimating new knowledge (competencies), and shifting what is thinkable (meanings). Third, genuine empowerment means building collective regulatory capacity (shared power), not simply transferring accumulation from one elite to another.

## Unstated intent: when power hides behind purpose

The discussion above treats power as though its exercise is transparent – as though we can observe who holds it and how they wield it. In practice, power often operates behind stated purposes that differ from actual ones. Government agencies formally committed to environmental protection may be primarily organized around rent extraction. Donors espousing transformative change may be driven by fiduciary control. Participatory processes designed to redistribute voice may function as legitimating devices for predetermined agendas. Scientists promoting degradation narratives may be defending paradigms that underwrite their institutional authority. In each case, the stated purpose (the 'espoused theory') and the actual operating logic (the 'theory-in-use') diverge – sometimes unconsciously, sometimes deliberately.

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Fetterman et al, 2018; Maiorano et al, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Balint and Mashinya, 2006.

These divergences are not incidental to power analysis; they are central to it. Corruption, in particular, is one of the most consequential yet least considered variables in intervention design for tropical landscapes. Where the regulatory apparatus nominally exists to manage resources but actually exists to extract rents, the practitioner who designs for the stated purpose is building on a fiction.

We explore this phenomenon – the gap between what actors say they want and what they actually want – in the section on Unstated Intent, which examines the unconscious, semi-conscious, and deliberate forms this gap takes, and their implications for intervention design.

## Power in intervention design

Power – how to detect it, how it flows, who holds it, and how they wield it – has several implications for intervention design:

- **Read the power landscape:** before focusing on practices or MMCs, understand the regulatory pressures that shape them. Who has power? What kind – accumulated or shared? Over whom and over what? The stakeholder analysis exercises in this Playbook are designed to help with this.
- **Anticipate resistance:** if your intervention succeeds in changing practices, it will also shift power relations. Those who benefit from current arrangements – power accumulators – may resist. Build this into your theory of change.
- **Work at multiple layers:** changing MMCs may not be enough if power relations remain unchanged. Equally, attempting to shift power without attention to practices may produce no lasting change. The most effective interventions work across layers.
- **Recognize your own power:** an intervention is itself an actor in the system, with its own regulatory capacity (to convene, to provide resources, to confer legitimacy). How you use that power matters. An intervention that arrives with substantial funding, international backing, and technical expertise exerts gravitational pull on the system – it bends behaviour around itself, whether or not it intends to.
- **Power can only be redistributed, not destroyed:** you cannot eliminate power asymmetries. You can only shift regulatory capacity – change who can monitor, sanction, decide, access, and benefit. This means interventions must simultaneously build capacity (empower communities) and shift structures (change who controls access, rewrite rules). Changing practices without changing power is temporary and unstable. Changing power without supporting new practices is capacity without direction.

The Integration section of this Playbook describes how different power configurations – from violent fragmentation (power contested and fragmenting) through coordination (power accumulated) to collectivism (power shared and circulating) – create radically different landscape patterns. Understanding power dynamics is essential for navigating that spectrum.

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