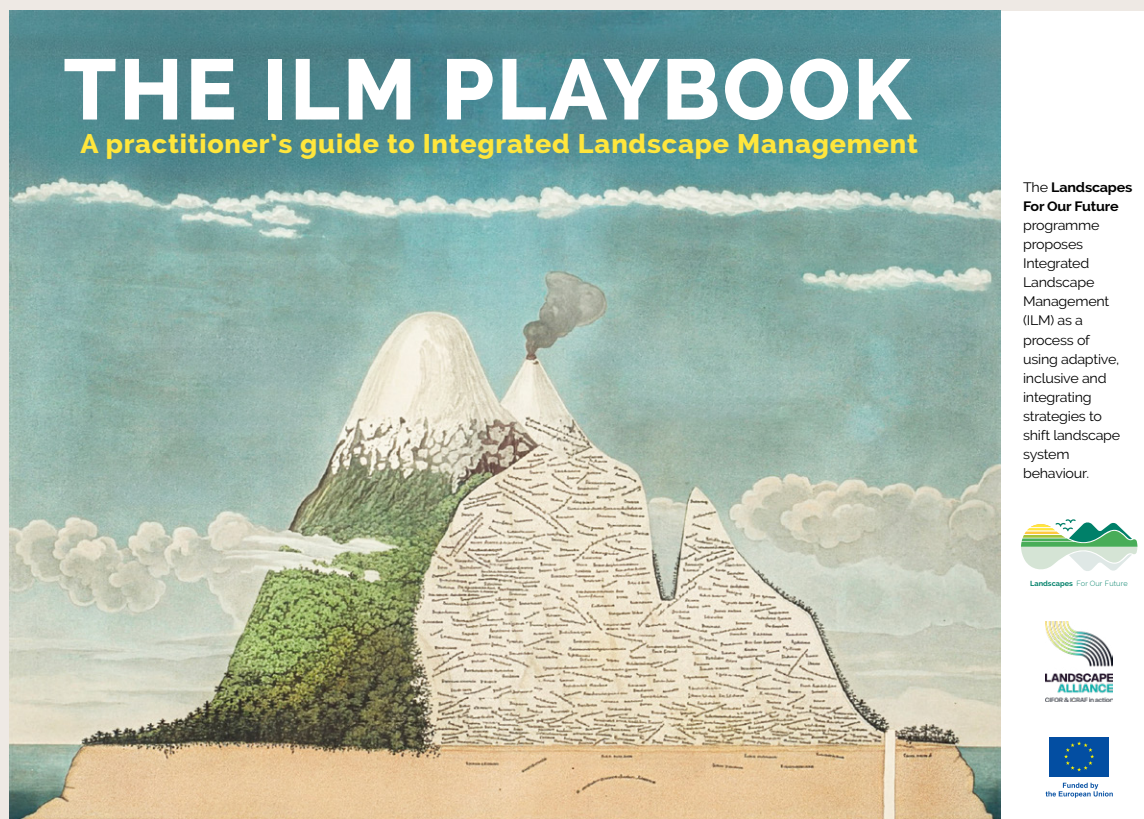


Extract from The ILM Playbook

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.



Developed by

Landscapes For Our Future Central Component, Landscape Alliance

Lead writing and synthesis

Kim Geheb

Conceptual development, review and editorial contributions

Khalil Walji, Mieke Bourne and Dominique le Roux (Landscape Alliance); Marcela GalvisHernandez (FAO Colombia); Camila Alvarenga, Lucimara Marcelino, José Luís Monteiro and Rogério Rosa (Oikos)

Design and production

Dominique le Roux and Elinore de Lisle

With contributions from

Landscapes For Our Future project teams and partners across 36 countries

Explore the full interactive ILM Playbook or access the complete reading edition at:
landscapesfuture.org/ilm-playbook

Governance and Institutions

Key take-aways

- Governance is an emergent property of the system, not a designable input – it cannot be engineered directly, only influenced by altering the interactions and institutions through which agents engage.
- Governance is not the monopoly of government: customary authorities, corporations, religious institutions, civil society and households all contribute, and in many landscapes non-state actors are dominant.
- Institutions – formal rules and informal norms alike – are the infrastructure of governance, encoding settlements about who gets what; the *rules-in-use* often diverge sharply from the *rules-in-form*.
- Informal institutions are frequently the dominant regulatory force; interventions that ignore them encounter the snap-back effect as the system's institutional architecture restores prior practice.
- Institutional micro-shifts are powerful op-points because changing an institution ripples through the practice configurations it sustains.

Governance

Governance is one of the most used and least understood words in natural resource management. It is routinely conflated with government, treated as something that can be designed, and assessed as 'good' or 'bad'.

We take a different view. In a complex system, governance is not an input variable that can be dialled up or down. It is an **emergent property** of the system – a pattern that arises from the interactions of multiple agents, each pursuing their own interests, constrained by their own institutions, and operating with imperfect information. For us, governance is *the outcome* of how society shares power, benefits and risk. The shift from process to outcome matters. It positions governance as something that results from actor interactions, not something that can be engineered independently of them (see graphic below). Like a flock's flight pattern or a market's price signal, governance emerges from below and feeds back from above.



Governance as emergent property. Multiple agents contribute influences of varying magnitude; the resulting governance arrow is shaped by their interaction, not by any single agent. As always, Actor A's dominant weight illustrates power asymmetry.

Three things follow from this framing.

Governance is not the monopoly of government

Governments are organizations that provide inputs into a governance system, but they are not alone. Corporations, customary authorities, religious institutions, civil society and households all contribute. In many developing countries, government can be weak, distant or almost irrelevant at local level, and governance emerges primarily from non-state actors. The concept of *polycentric governance* captures this reality. Stephan et al. (2019) describe polycentricity as connoting multiple 'centres of decision-making authority' that are *de jure* independent or *de facto* autonomous. In such systems, rules, norms and strategies are formed, applied, interpreted and reformed across multiple overlapping arenas. Ostrom (1990; 2010) demonstrated that self-organized polycentric arrangements are often better adapted to local conditions than centralized control.

Governance is not an input variable

Conflating governance with management leads to a seductive error: that we can 'improve governance' by designing better rules or more inclusive processes. But if governance is emergent, it cannot be directly manipulated – only influenced by altering the interconnections between agents, or by changing the practices, power relations and institutions through which those agents interact. 'Governance reform' is therefore not a technical exercise but a systemic intervention that must work through the same opportunity points that shape the system's heading more broadly.

Governance requires focus on human behaviour

There is a strong inclination in natural resources management to forefront ecosystem impacts: deforestation rates, water quality, species loss. These are important, for they reveal consequences. But knowing that a forest is being cleared does not yield its conservation. It is necessary to focus on the human drivers – the practices, incentives, power structures and institutional arrangements that make deforestation rational for the agents involved. We therefore prioritize human behaviours in our understanding of governance.

Finally, there is no objectively ‘good’ or ‘bad’ governance. What appears as desirable governance from one vantage point may represent an unacceptable trade-off from another – but the system does not care. This redirects attention from moralising about governance quality to understanding the configurations of power, practice and institutions that produce the outcomes we observe.

Institutions

If governance is the emergent pattern, institutions are a critical part of the infrastructure from which it emerges. North (1990) defined institutions as the ‘rules of the game in a society’ – the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction. These include formal rules (laws, regulations, contracts) and informal constraints (norms, conventions, taboos). Ostrom (2005) extended this by distinguishing *rules-in-form* from *rules-in-use*: the written rule may say one thing, but the operative institution is the one that is practised and enforced in daily life.

In the vocabulary of this Playbook, institutions one major source of **regulation**. They constrain some behaviours and enable others: who can access a resource, who decides about its use, what sanctions apply, how disputes are resolved. A grazing institution that allocates dry-season pasture among clans regulates where livestock move, when and in what numbers. Institutions are power made structural – they encode historical settlements about who gets what and whose interests count.

Institutions also represent a potent **opportunity point**. Because they pattern practices, changing an institution can ripple through the practice configurations it sustains (what we refer to as institutional micro-shifts in the Foments section). New land tenure rules can shift grazing practices, alter power relations, and change a landscape’s ecological trajectory. But institutions are nested, overlapping and often contradictory. Formal law may say one thing while customary practice does another. Institutional change is not a technical fix but a perturbation whose effects may or may not unfold as intended.

Critically, institutions are not only formal. The norms governing how much firewood a woman may gather, or the unspoken rules about who speaks at a community meeting, are institutional in exactly the same sense as a national forestry law. In many landscape contexts, these informal institutions are the dominant regulatory force. Interventions that ignore them will encounter the snap-back effects discussed elsewhere: the system’s informal institutional infrastructure resists and returns practices to their prior configuration.

To summarize: institutions regulate practices; in doing so, they express and reproduce power relations; the aggregate effect of multiple institutions, operating across multiple agents, produces governance as an emergent outcome. Institutions sit at the junction of power and practice in our layered model – they are where regulation becomes tangible.

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