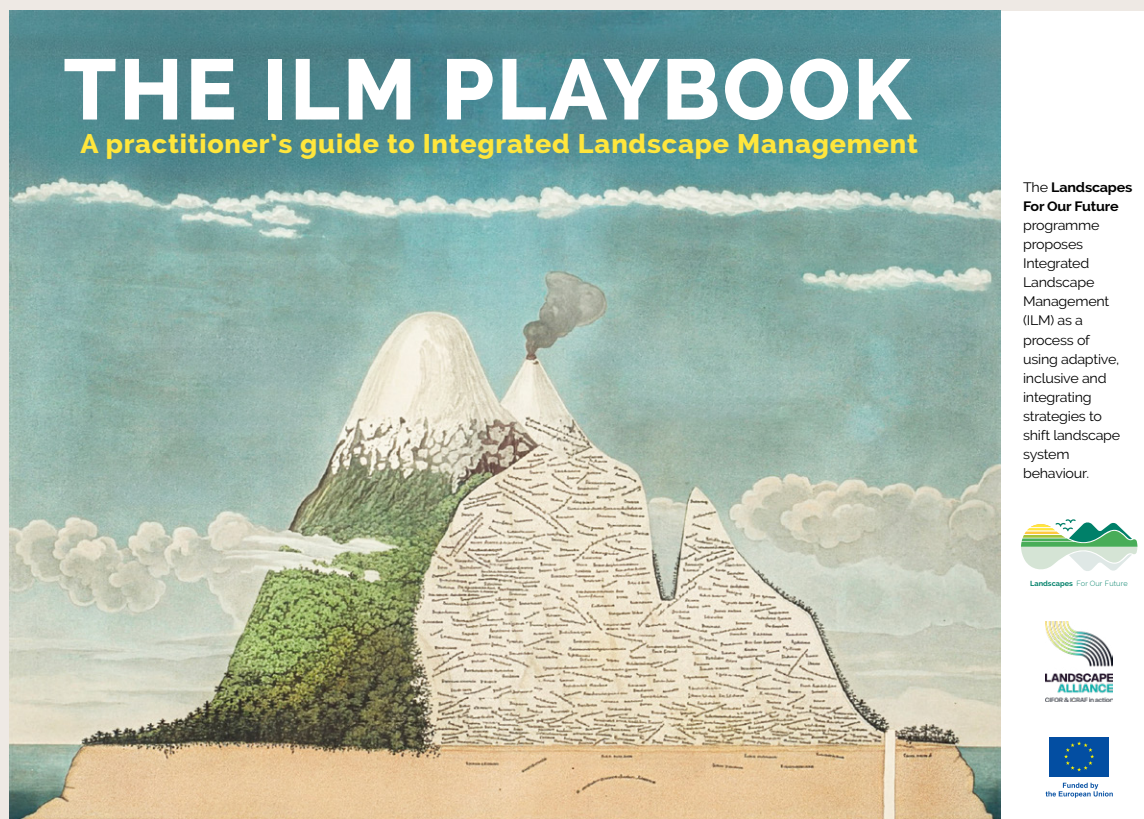


Extract from The ILM Playbook

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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Unstated intent

Key take-aways

- There is almost always a gap between what actors say they want (espoused theory) and what actually drives their behaviour (theory-in-use) – and intervention design that takes statements at face value is built on unstable ground.
- The gap is often unconscious – donor logframe fixation, institutional survival, “received wisdom” narratives that persist because they justify budgets, expertise and authority – and is the main mechanism by which noble goals become fundraising language rather than operational targets.
- The gap can also be deliberate: participation deployed as legitimisation, sustainability as market positioning, environmental regulation as discretionary rent extraction – these must be diagnosed, not moralised.
- Corruption is one of the most useful indicators of power in the landscapes where ILM operates, and it has types – rent extraction, patronage distribution, community-level capture, systemic lubrication – each pointing to a different dimension of the power architecture.
- The most consequential form of unstated intent is the refusal to distribute regulatory capacity to those best placed to exercise it (the relational fabric of communities), dressed in the language of technical governance and capacity building.

What actors actually want

In the section on systems, we mentioned that the purpose of a system is what it does. This is a system-level reading: we deduce purpose from observed behaviour which is the culmination of the interactions – and the interactions between interactions – of the system’s elements. As we have argued, when it comes to landscapes, it is interactions between the human elements – organizations, communities, societies – that dominate system behaviour and heading. If we zoom in to look at how individual actors behave, there is frequently a mismatch between what they say they are doing and what they are *actually* doing. This difference matters – because it affects their interactions with other actors and has huge implications for how we ‘read’ and understand system behaviour.

This matters for ILM because intervention design typically begins with what actors say they are. Project proposals articulate noble goals. Donor strategies espouse transformative ambitions. Government policies declare environmental protection, poverty reduction, sustainable development. The practitioner who takes these statements at face value and designs accordingly is building on unstable ground. The question is not whether actors are lying – most are not – but whether their stated goals capture what actually drives their behaviour.

The unconscious gap

Chris Argyris and Donald Schön¹ drew a distinction between what they called **espoused theory** and **theory-in-use**. Espoused theory is what people say they believe and what they tell others governs their actions. Theory-in-use is the tacit mental map that actually drives behaviour. The two often diverge, and the actor is typically unaware of the gap. A development organization may sincerely espouse transformative landscape change while its actual behaviour – the decisions it rewards, the metrics it tracks, the risks it avoids – is governed by a quite different set of priorities.

Consider a common ILM scenario. An organization prepares a proposal espousing a noble goal – say, restoring degraded landscapes to improve livelihoods. A donor funds it, because they too subscribe to the goal. But as implementation proceeds, certain patterns emerge. The donor displays obsessive attention to expenditure, quibbling over minor line items. Progress reporting centres not on landscape outcomes but on logframe compliance – activities completed, milestones ticked, indicators populated. The practitioner finds themselves spending more time managing the reporting relationship than delivering the programme. What has happened? Neither party has abandoned the noble goal. But the donor's theory-in-use – their actual operating priorities – centres on fiduciary control and administrative accountability, not landscape restoration. The noble goal remains the espoused theory; the logframe is the theory-in-use. And because the donor controls the resources, their theory-in-use shapes the programme's actual behaviour more powerfully than either party's espoused theory.

This pattern has deep roots in organizational sociology. Robert Merton² identified what he called **goal displacement**: the tendency for means to become ends in themselves. Procedures originally designed to serve an organization's objectives gradually become the objectives, as compliance with rules displaces substantive achievement. The logframe, designed as a planning tool, becomes the purpose of the exercise. Reporting, designed to track progress, becomes the progress that is tracked.

Robert Michels³ took the argument further. Studying European political parties in the early twentieth century, he observed that organizations founded to pursue radical or idealistic goals consistently displaced those goals with a more fundamental one: institutional survival. The socialist parties he studied had been created to transform society, but their leaders came to prioritize the continuation of the party – and their own positions within it – over the transformative mission. Michels argued this was structural,

1 Argyris and Schön, 1974.

2 Merton, 1957.

3 Michels, 1911.

not a matter of individual corruption. As organizations grow and professionalise, survival becomes an implicit operating priority that gradually crowds out the stated mission.

This is recognisable in many development and conservation organizations. Internally, phrases around institutional survival – securing the next funding cycle, maintaining relevance, protecting market position – are constantly invoked. Externally, the organization subscribes to the noble goal. The gap between internal discourse and external messaging is a textbook case of unstated intent, and it profoundly shapes what the organization actually does in landscapes. Institutional survival is not inherently illegitimate – an organization that ceases to exist cannot pursue any goal at all – but when it becomes the dominant theory-in-use, the noble goal functions less as an objective and more as a fundraising narrative.

When conviction becomes convenient

Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns⁴ documented how ‘received environmental wisdom’ about African landscapes persisted for decades despite mounting evidence that it was wrong. Colonial-era narratives about deforestation, desertification, and soil erosion – and the local populations supposedly responsible for them – were repeated so often and by so many authoritative voices that they became unquestioned truths. Scientists, policymakers, and development practitioners sincerely believed them. They were not lying. But Leach and Mearns showed that these narratives were not simply errors awaiting correction. They persisted because they served functions. The degradation narrative justified external intervention: if local populations were destroying their environment, then experts, states, and donors had a mandate to step in. It legitimated particular forms of knowledge – remote sensing, carrying-capacity models, equilibrium ecology – over local and indigenous understanding. It sustained funding flows, careers, and institutional mandates. The scientists who promoted these narratives were not cynically fabricating evidence; they were operating within a paradigm that confirmed what their institutional position required them to see.

Tiffen et al.⁵ made the same point through a devastating counterexample. Their study of Machakos District in Kenya showed that over sixty years – a period during which population had increased fivefold – environmental condition had actually *improved*. Terracing had expanded, tree cover had increased, and soil conservation had intensified. This directly contradicted the narrative that more people inevitably meant more degradation – a narrative that had driven decades of policy in the area. Yet the narrative survived the evidence. It continued to inform policy, justify intervention, and structure funding because it served too many institutional interests to be abandoned simply because it was wrong.

These cases occupy an uncomfortable space between the unconscious and the deliberate. The scientists and policymakers holding these beliefs were, in Argyris and Schön’s terms, genuinely espousing them – they were not conscious of a gap between their stated theory and their theory-in-use. Many *really* believed in the primacy of their knowledge. But the beliefs served institutional functions so powerfully that they proved resistant to evidence. And when challenged – when Leach, Mearns, Tiffen, and others

4 Leach and Mearns, 1996.

5 Tiffen, Mortimore, and Gichuki, 1994.

presented countervailing findings – the response was not curiosity but defence. At that point, what began as an unconscious gap became something closer to a power assertion: the defence of knowledge claims that underpinned institutional authority, funding streams, and professional status. When what you sincerely believe also happens to justify your budget, your expertise, and your authority, the boundary between conviction and convenience dissolves. And once the evidence arrives and is rejected, the unconscious gap has become something the actor is choosing to maintain.

For ILM practitioners, this matters because landscape interventions routinely encounter ‘expert’ narratives – about degradation, about carrying capacity, about what local populations are doing wrong – that function as Unstated Intent. They are presented as science, but they persist because they serve interests. Surfacing them requires not just better data (the Machakos evidence existed for years before it shifted the debate) but an understanding of why the existing narrative is so tenaciously held – which is to say, an understanding of whose authority it underwrites.

The deliberate gap

Not all unstated intent is unconscious or even semi-conscious. Sometimes the noble goal is mobilised strategically – as a legitimating resource rather than a genuine objective.

Philip Selznick’s⁶ study of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) provides a classic case. The TVA espoused grassroots democracy and community empowerment as its operating philosophy. In practice, Selznick showed, the TVA pursued a systematic strategy of co-optation – absorbing local elites into its governance structures in order to neutralise opposition to its programmes. The language of grassroots participation functioned not as a genuine commitment to democratic inclusion but as a political resource that legitimated accommodation with existing power structures. The result was that the TVA reinforced the very inequalities – racial exclusion, the dominance of large landholders – that its democratic rhetoric implied it would challenge.

Cooke and Kothari’s⁷ have famously documented the same pattern in contemporary development practice. Participatory processes – community consultations, stakeholder workshops, participatory rural appraisals – were supposed to redistribute voice and decision-making power. In practice, they showed, participation frequently functioned as a legitimating device for predetermined agendas. The consultation was held; the community was heard; but the decisions had already been made. The language of participation served not to redistribute power but to render its existing distribution more palatable. This is Selznick’s co-optation in contemporary dress – and can be pervasive in the multi-stakeholder platforms through which much ILM is often conducted.

Greenwashing operates through the same logic. A palm oil company that destroys primary forest while displaying sustainability certifications is not suffering from goal displacement; it is deploying the language of sustainability as a market instrument. The certified sustainable label does not describe the company’s actual practice; *it manages the perception of that practice*. The stated

6 Selznick, 1949.

7 Cooke and Kothari, 2001.

goal (sustainability) and the actual goal (market access, premium pricing, regulatory avoidance) are deliberately decoupled. Adams⁸ makes a complementary argument about environmental governance more broadly: that 'green development' narratives frequently serve to extend state or corporate control over resources under the banner of sustainability, displacing community management in the process. The noble goal – saving the environment – becomes the vehicle through which control is consolidated.

An important dimension of the deliberate gap concerns the state. In many landscapes where ILM operates, government agencies are formally committed to environmental protection, poverty reduction, or sustainable development. Their actual operating logic may be quite different. In the early 2000s, an EU-supported research project on Kenya's Lake Victoria tested the ability of local fishers to regulate their own fisheries. At one beach – a community-driven tilapia fishery on a small bay – national fisheries laws were suspended for six months. The community responded with rigour: documenting landings, seizing illegal gear, deliberating disputes through compromise. A pile of confiscated nets grew outside the cooperative office. When the suspension ended, Fisheries Department scouts arrived, declared that 'no one was above the law', seized the nets, and sold them to passing fishers. The community's enforcement effort became the state's inventory.⁹

What the project's researchers had not grasped was that their presence was the only thing standing between the community and a regulatory apparatus whose actual purpose was not sustainability but discretionary enforcement – and the rents it enabled. The state's espoused theory was fisheries management; its theory-in-use was revenue extraction through selective regulation. The scouts' insistence on legal authority was not about law; it was about reasserting control over a revenue stream that community self-governance had interrupted. This illustrates several dimensions of deliberate unstated intent in government. The state may regard community self-governance as a challenge to its monopoly on regulation. It may view successful collective action as an implicit rebuke – an island of effective community management that highlights the inadequacy of official regulation. It may seek to absorb the initiative into its own narrative, claiming credit for results it did not produce. And, as in this case, the regulatory apparatus may be primarily organized around corruption, such that any alternative governance arrangement threatens an income stream. The naïveté of the Lake Victoria researchers – their failure to recognize that their own presence constituted a power that shielded the community – is itself a cautionary tale with direct implications for positionality.

Corruption deserves particular attention because it is so common in the tropical landscapes where ILM typically operates, yet so rarely treated as a variable in intervention design. Corruption has been described as an institutionalised system of nature/society interaction forged from state authority and moulded around local social power.¹⁰ In many countries, corruption may be the primary motivation for how natural resources are regulated.¹¹ Consider how corruption functions in a landscape. Informal payments to officials determine who receives permits, whose land claims are recognized, and whose environmental violations are overlooked. These are regulatory pressures – they pattern behaviour as effectively as formal law, but they channel benefits towards those with

8 Adams, 2009.

9 Anecdote provided by Kim Geheb, who worked on the project.

10 Robbins, 2000.

11 Williams and Le Billon, 2017.

connections or resources. The stated purpose of the regulatory apparatus (environmental protection, resource management, land administration) is the espoused theory. The actual purpose (rent extraction, patronage, elite accumulation) is the theory-in-use. Unlike the unconscious gap, the actors involved are typically well aware of the discrepancy; the fiction is maintained because it serves them.

An intervention that introduces transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms is, in effect, trying to reroute regulatory feedback loops away from corrupt channels. This is not a technical challenge – it is a direct assault on an established theory-in-use, and those who benefit from existing arrangements will resist. The practitioner who designs for the espoused theory (good governance, sustainable management) while ignoring the theory-in-use (rent extraction) is designing an intervention that will be captured, subverted, or destroyed by the very forces it fails to diagnose. Ignoring corruption in intervention design is to ignore a powerful regulatory pressure shaping the system.

Corruption is, in fact, one of the most available and useful indicators of power in the landscapes where ILM operates. Where corruption is visible, it reveals where regulatory capacity has been captured and privatised. Unpacking its manifestations is analytically productive. *Rent extraction* – the siphoning of value from resource flows by those who control access points – tells the practitioner where material bottlenecks lie and who controls them. *Patronage distribution* – the fragmentation of institutional mandates so that each fragment can be allocated as a political reward – tells you why governance is disintegrated: the fragmentation is not an administrative failure but a power arrangement. *Community-level capture* – the appropriation of project resources by locally powerful individuals – tells you that power asymmetry operates at every ring of the circles of explanation, not only at the structural and global levels. And *systemic lubrication* – the informal payments that determine whether government agencies act or remain inert – tells you where the formal regulatory apparatus has been hollowed out and replaced by a relational one. Each type points the practitioner towards a different dimension of the power architecture. Naming them – rather than treating corruption as an undifferentiated moral failing – opens them to the kind of analytical use that sensing demands.

The deliberate gap is harder to surface than the unconscious one, precisely because the actors involved are invested in concealing it. But it leaves traces. If the stated goal and the actual behaviour consistently diverge; if the actor resists transparency measures that would reveal the divergence; if the noble goal is invoked most vigorously when the actor's legitimacy is under challenge – these are diagnostic signals that the espoused theory is functioning as cover rather than commitment.

Implications for practice

For ILM practitioners, unstated intent – unconscious, semi-conscious, and deliberate – is not an incidental complication but a structural feature of the landscapes in which they work. Every actor in a landscape carries goals they do not articulate, either because they are unaware of them, because they have never been challenged to examine them, or because they prefer not to. If the practitioner does not surface these, the intervention is designed around what actors say they want, not what they *actually* want – and it will be shaped by the unstated intents regardless.

There is a further dimension of insincerity that deserves explicit attention. If the stated goal is genuine – if the intention really is to sustain resources, improve livelihoods, protect ecosystems – then the most powerful regulatory mechanism available is the relational fabric of the communities who inhabit the landscape. Ignoring this powerful regulatory resource is irrational. How people relate, engage, negotiate, monitor, and hold each other accountable constitutes the regulatory architecture through which any governance arrangement must ultimately operate. Collaborative and commons-based governance takes advantage of this relational density because of the regulatory potential and strength it represents. An intervention that pursues a noble goal while ignoring this potential – while continuing to govern through hierarchical abstraction rather than relational proximity – is sacrificing the mechanism most likely to deliver the goal in favour of maintaining existing power arrangements. The noble goal is not abandoned; it continues to be espoused. But the systemic structure that would deliver it is set aside because it threatens hierarchy. This is perhaps the most consequential form of the gap between espoused theory and theory-in-use: the refusal to distribute regulatory capacity to those best placed to exercise it, dressed in the language of technical governance, institutional strengthening, and capacity building. It makes no sense to have a noble goal if it does not take advantage of social relations to deliver it.

This connects directly to our power framework. Unstated intent is a form of regulation in the power sense: it patterns behaviour without being formally visible. The donor's logframe fixation regulates programme activity as surely as any contractual obligation, but it operates beneath the stated purpose of the funding relationship. Institutional survival regulates organizational strategy as surely as any board directive, but it is rarely acknowledged in strategic plans. The degradation narrative regulates whose knowledge counts as surely as any credentialing system, but it presents itself as objective science. Corruption regulates access to resources as surely as any permit system, but it operates through a parallel structure that the formal system officially denies. Surfacing unstated intent is therefore a diagnostic task – part of the power analysis that precedes any intervention – and a practical one. Effective deliberation requires that real interests, not just stated positions, are on the table. Without that, compromise is negotiated between espoused theories, while the theories-in-use continue to drive behaviour unchanged.

Donella Meadows¹² observed that people within a system often do not recognize what whole-system goal they are actually serving. The practitioner's task is precisely this recognition: to read the system's behaviour, identify the goals that are actually being pursued – whether they are the donor's logframe, the government's rent extraction, the scientist's paradigm, or the organization's survival – and design interventions that engage with those goals rather than with the noble fictions that sit above them.

12 Meadows, 2008.

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