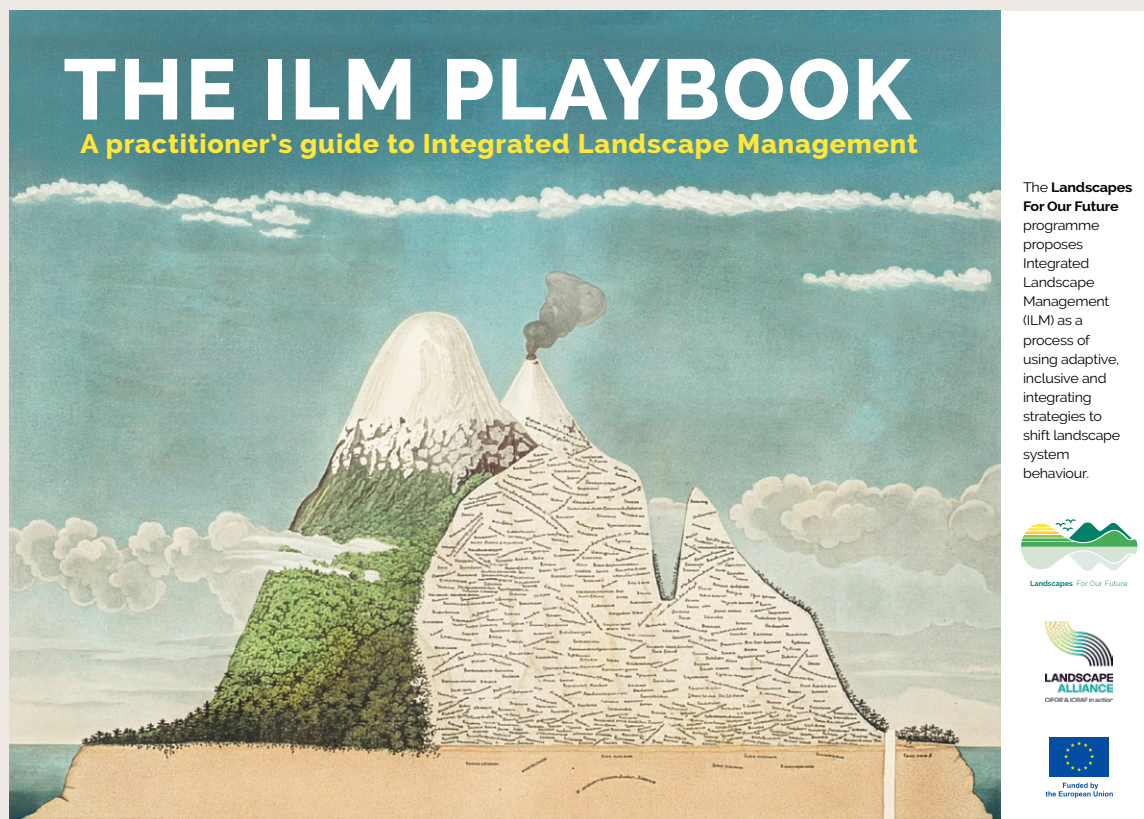


Extract from The ILM Playbook

The ILM Playbook is a practitioner curriculum developed through the EU-funded Landscapes For Our Future programme. Its **interactive web edition** provides a quick, non-linear route through the concepts and tools, while the **full-length PDF** provides the conceptual foundations, evidence and methodological depth behind them.

The concepts, methods and practical guidance were developed through the Central Component's work with project teams, partners and practitioners across the programme, and through the experience and learning generated in participating landscapes.



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

Adaptivity

Key take-aways

- Foments embody an honest epistemology: high confidence that they will perturb the system, low confidence about the direction of the response – this is what distinguishes trialling from experimentation.
- The mosaic approach distributes semi-autonomous teams across the landscape, each “optimally unprepared” – enough knowledge to act usefully, but not so much prior framing that they see only what they expected to find.
- Building information systems oriented towards surprise rather than confirmation – narrative and qualitative sensing alongside indicators – is a core adaptive capability.
- The intervention is itself a deliberative system: a “safe operating space” of power sharing within the team is the precondition for honest learning, and where senior interpretations always prevail the learning structure collapses regardless of formal design.
- The alt-heading itself may need correction: explicit heading-review moments are not failure but the intervention working as it should – there is no virtue in maintaining a heading that experience tells you is wrong.

Because of unanticipated consequences and system complexity, we need to design our interventions to be **adaptive**. Adaptivity is the only way for us to navigate complexity. Adaptivity has implications for how we design our intervention, and for how it addresses the system of which it will be a part.

Adaptivity refers to the inherent ability of an intervention to modify itself in response to the changing system of which it is a part. This refers to modifications in response to (a) experience and learning; (b) systemic pressure (potentially threats); and (c) opportunities as they emerge.

By being adaptive, an intervention consistently adapts its approach, inputs and foments to maximize the likelihood that it will move towards its alt-heading. Adaptivity is a critical part of intervention design for ILM.

There are five main ways in which interventions can be designed to achieve this. We discuss each below.

“We will cross the river by feeling the stones under our feet, one by one.”
– Deng Xiaoping

Trialling

This is the epistemological stance of your intervention – how you gather, analyse, and accumulate knowledge. Actions are treated as provocations rather than commitments. Foments are released, observed, modified, abandoned, or pursued based on what emerges – not defended as sunk costs.

Remember, we cannot know in advance how the system will respond to our foments. While we may design them as carefully as sensing allows, they may still produce no response, or a response misaligned with our alt-heading. This is the trouble with complex systems – there is a fundamental tension between what we plan and what happens when we are immersed within them. Our best bet is to trial, observe, and adapt.

We call our provocations **foments** – discrete, time-bound micro-interventions introduced into the system to stimulate a response. We develop this concept fully in the Foments section. Here, the point is that foments are the operational expression of adaptive design: they are how an intervention trials, learns, and adjusts. Each foment embodies a double claim: high confidence that it will perturb the system, low confidence about the direction of the response. This honest epistemology – knowing that you are confident of the perturbation but genuinely uncertain of the direction – is what makes trialling different from experimentation. You are not converging on a correct answer. You are navigating within complexity.

Foments’ deliberate unobtrusiveness is not merely an epistemological choice but also a strategic one. As we explore in our section on power, power accumulators – including state actors – may perceive community empowerment as threatening their regulatory monopoly and may move to absorb or destroy an intervention once it generates visible success. Small-scale trialling reduces the likelihood of triggering such attention. This is adaptivity as a form of protection: by keeping individual foments modest and distributed, the intervention avoids presenting a single, conspicuous target to hostile actors in the system.

Diffusion

Rather than concentrating effort in a single large intervention, you distribute many small, interconnected interventions across the landscape. This limits exposure to any single failure while multiplying opportunities for emergence. System repatterning, if it comes, emerges from this distributed activity – not from a single, centrally controlled effort. Diffusion also has a protective dimension: by spreading activity across multiple sites, no single success becomes conspicuous enough to attract the unwelcome attention of

power accumulators in the system, whether state actors or local elites.

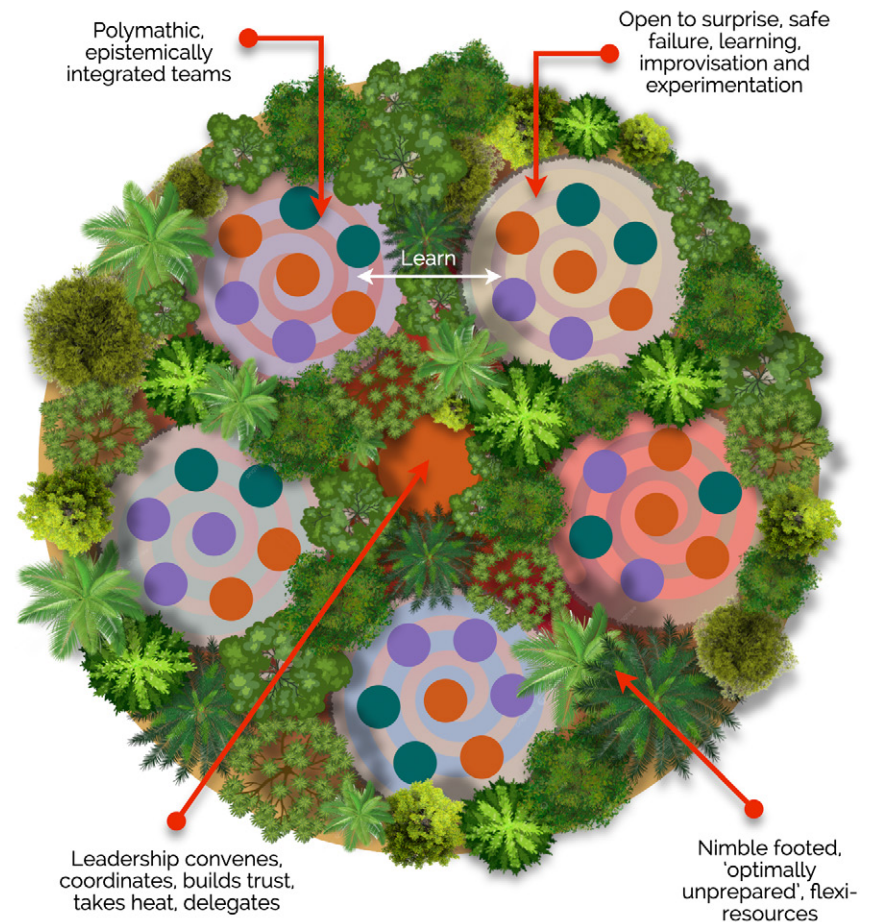
We call this a **'mosaic approach.'** Picture the landscape as a series of interconnected sites, each targeting different strands within its part of the landscape, each learning from the others.

One way of achieving this is to distribute several semi-autonomous teams across the landscape. These teams are epistemically integrated – drawing on multiple knowledge systems (scientific, local, experiential) using diverse methodologies. They are 'optimally unprepared': having enough knowledge to act usefully, but not so much prior framing that they see only what they expected to find. It means leading with curiosity rather than certainty, holding one's expertise lightly, and remaining genuinely open to what the system might teach you. There is preparation – but it is for surprise. They are nimble-footed, capable of responding rapidly to new circumstances and emerging knowledge.

Each team is embedded in its part of the landscape system, oriented towards the alt-heading the intervention seeks. Leadership convenes, coordinates, builds trust, and delegates, but the teams have the autonomy to act and adapt. Note that this structure itself enacts power-sharing: rather than accumulating decision-making at the centre, regulatory capacity is distributed among the teams. The intervention practices what it preaches.

As teams release foments, they know that most will produce unexpected responses and many will fail to generate movement towards the alt-heading. This is expected: failure generates knowledge as valuable as success. When foments produce promising responses, these may reveal opportunity points that the intervention can work with – connecting what is emerging in one site to conditions elsewhere in the mosaic, or amplifying a shift that is already underway (see the Opportunity Points section).

Crucially, the sites learn from each other. Diffusion is not parallel isolation; it is a networked effort where insights travel between teams, informing the whole.



This networked learning reflects a deeper principle: in complex systems, adaptation emerges from the accumulation of micro-level interactions rather than from centralized direction. Each exchange between teams – a foment result shared, a failure analysed, an unexpected pattern noticed – is individually small but collectively shapes the intervention’s evolving understanding of the landscape. The intervention’s learning architecture should therefore be designed to maximize the frequency and quality of these micro-interactions, trusting that intelligence will emerge from the pattern of exchanges rather than from any single analytical act. Together, the distributed teams constitute a deliberative system – each performing different functions, the whole judged by how the parts interact and compensate for each other’s deficits (see the Compromise section on deliberative systems).

Learning structures

This is your infrastructural capacity. Tight feedback loops, persistent sense-making, and deliberate rhythms of reflection ensure that system responses are captured quickly and translated into adjusted action. This is what makes trialling cumulative rather than merely reactive.

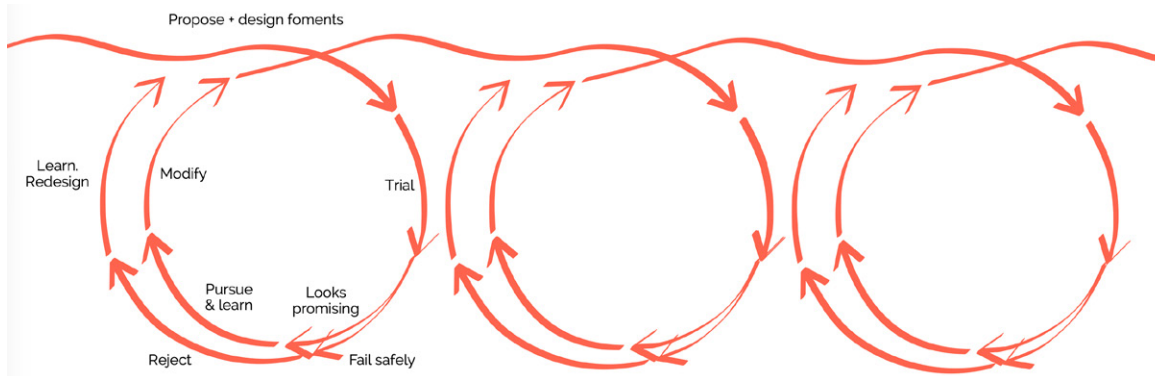
Being structured for learning means your intervention is constantly sensing: gathering intelligence, observing, exploring, and deliberating. You can build this in by introducing explicit **‘learning moments’** into your intervention design: regular gatherings where your team and partners reflect together, trying to discern meaning in what the landscape is telling you.

A particular form of sensing that deserves explicit attention is the detection of weak signals – early, faint indicators of emerging change that standard monitoring systems are calibrated to miss. A practice shifting at the margins, a narrative beginning to evolve, a previously stable relationship fraying – these are evidence that the system’s disposition is moving. Because complex systems change through phase transitions rather than gradual increments, weak signals often provide the only advance warning that a significant shift is approaching. Building information systems oriented towards surprise – that surface what is unexpected rather than confirming what was predicted – is a core adaptive capability. This means investing in narrative-based and qualitative sensing alongside quantitative indicators, because the most important knowledge in a complex system is often tacit: held in the connections between people, expressed through stories, and invisible to formal reporting systems.

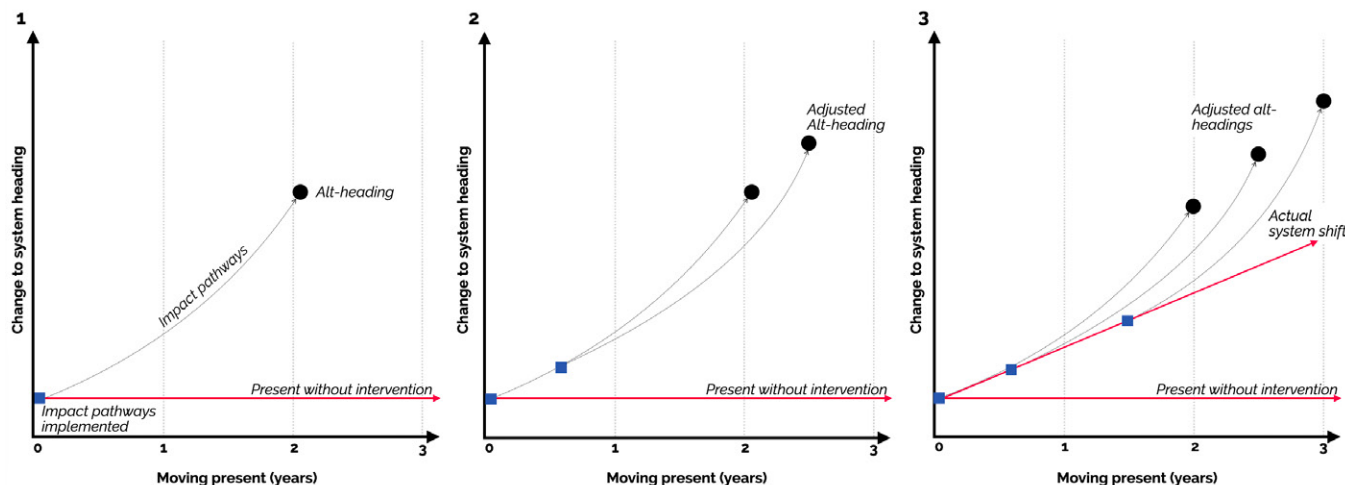
But equally important is structuring your intervention as a ‘safe operating space’ – an environment where team members feel comfortable sharing perspectives, doubts, ambitions, and stories. This means cultivating social norms that lean towards the familial rather than the strictly professional. Learning flourishes when people feel safe to say what they actually see.

In terms of the power framework developed elsewhere in this Playbook, a safe operating space is an environment of power sharing within the intervention team: power to speak, power to question, power to challenge established assumptions. Where power accumulates – where a senior researcher’s interpretation always prevails, or where funder expectations silence dissent – the learning structure collapses regardless of how well it is formally designed.

As the intervention progresses, implementation moves through a series of **'whirlpools'** of action and reflection (see graphic). Foments are proposed and designed, then released as provocations. Some will fail safely; others will look promising and are pursued further, generating new learning. Some require modification and re-launch. Either way, each cycle feeds into the next: reject, learn, start again; or pursue, learn, and adapt.



Learning also operates at a larger scale. Experience may reveal that the alt-heading itself needs correction. The system may respond to early foments in ways that expose blind spots in the team's initial understanding; practice inter-relations may turn out to be different from what sensing suggested; power configurations may prove more entrenched, or more fluid, than anticipated. All of these are signals that the heading needs adjustment. The graphic below illustrates this process: as the intervention unfolds and the system responds, the alt-heading may shift. What triggers such a correction is not a single dramatic failure but the accumulation of evidence from foments, from monitoring ripples, and from ongoing landscape conversations.



The team should build explicit heading-review moments into its learning rhythm – periodic points at which the question ‘is our heading still the right direction?’ is asked openly and honestly. Multiple course corrections over time are not failure; they are the intervention working as it should. There is no virtue in maintaining a heading that experience tells you is the wrong direction.

Agility

This is the psychological capacity of your team – the ability to release attachment to previous approaches when evidence points elsewhere. Without this, the other three adaptivity aspects can be perfectly designed and still fail. A system might be structured for learning, diffused across the landscape, and full of well-designed foments, but if the people within it cannot let go of established ways of doing and being, adaptation stalls.

Above all, agility implies commitment to the intervention’s alt-heading while recognizing that there are many possible routes along which to pursue it. Defining those routes requires openness to information from potentially unusual sources – sources that may lie outside individual team members’ expertise and comfort zones.

But agility as a psychological disposition does not appear automatically. It emerges from how teams are composed, how members are equipped to think, and how teams are led. Certain capacities make it easier to let go, to see differently, to respond rather than defend. We outline four such capacities below – not as substitutes for psychological agility, but as the conditions that enable it.

Systems thinking: an approach to understanding and intervening in complex systems that recognizes interconnections, feedback loops, and emergent properties. Rather than viewing problems as isolated issues with single causes, systems thinking examines how different elements interact to produce system-wide behaviours and outcomes.

Landscapes are quintessential complex systems: they comprise heterogeneous networks of human and ecological actors whose interactions generate the landscape conditions we observe. Having systems thinkers in your intervention team is a key strength and lends itself to your agility. Systems thinking for landscapes requires particular attention to:

- Power relations that shape system heading – particularly the dynamics of power accumulation and power sharing, and how these generate regulatory feedback loops that pattern the landscape.
- Interactions between *unlike* elements across domains (ecological, social, economic, political).
- Cross-domain dynamics where local and broader forces meet.
- System *heading* – which strands contribute most to current heading, and how interactions between strands produce the trajectory you observe.

Polymathery: a ‘polymath’ is a person with wide-ranging knowledge and skills across different fields. Because landscape patterns emerge from interactions between often *unlike* elements (ecological processes meeting social dynamics, customary practices meeting market forces), team members need breadth to *see* these cross-domain interactions that specialists may miss. This does

not mean that the intervention should not work with people expert in a particular field; but, rather, people who are comfortable working outside of their fields – so-called ‘T-shaped skills’.¹ Polymathery implies a disposition to different types and sources of knowledge, recognizing that these are the only way that the mosaic that is your landscape can be explained.

Epistemic integration: there is much in the ILM and landscapes approach literatures that calls for ‘inter-disciplinarity’ and ‘trans-disciplinarity’. Frequently, this applies to the idea of people, with diverse capacities, working together – which is definitely a good thing from the perspective of integration. Within the context of agility, however, the emphasis is on drawing on diverse knowledges as part of sense-making. Epistemic integration means being able to engage respectfully, humbly and effectively with multiple knowledge systems – academic disciplines, Indigenous knowledge, farmer expertise, trader insights, bureaucratic logics – without privileging any one. This is about:

- Recognizing when different knowledges are relevant.
- Creating space for knowledge-holders to contribute.
- Translating across epistemic boundaries without distorting meaning.
- Understanding power dynamics in whose knowledge gets heard.

Moving among and drawing upon these different types of knowledges not only require agility, but feed and reinforce this capability.

Relational and engagement skills: you will remember that we have argued that when we are dealing with complex landscape systems, focus should be on who is doing what, where, when, why and how. You will also recall that we have emphasized that integration is equivalent to collectivity between landscape stakeholders. And you will also remember how we see power as playing a profound patterning role across the landscape system – and how the dynamics of power accumulation and power sharing shape what is possible. Confronting these characteristics requires some important skill sets, among which are:

- **Facilitation** that surfaces rather than suppresses conflict (see the Compromise section on deliberation).
- **Mediation** that addresses power asymmetries, particularly between power accumulators and those from whom power has been extracted.
- **Negotiation** that recognizes different actors have different degrees of power to negotiate.
- **Socio-political sensing** capabilities that can read room dynamics, identify hidden interests, and navigate sensitive topics.
- **Cultural competence** to work across diversity respectfully.
- **Conflict transformation** that can shift relationships, not just manage disputes.

These are not ‘soft’ skills – they’re among the hardest and most consequential capabilities for landscape change.

¹ T-shaped skills are a mix of **broad general knowledge** across many areas and **deep expertise** in one specific area. The top bar of the ‘T’ represents the ability to collaborate across disciplines and connect ideas. The vertical bar represents a strong specialist capability that lets a person to solve hard problems in their core field.

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