

THE ILM PLAYBOOK

A practitioner's guide to Integrated Landscape Management

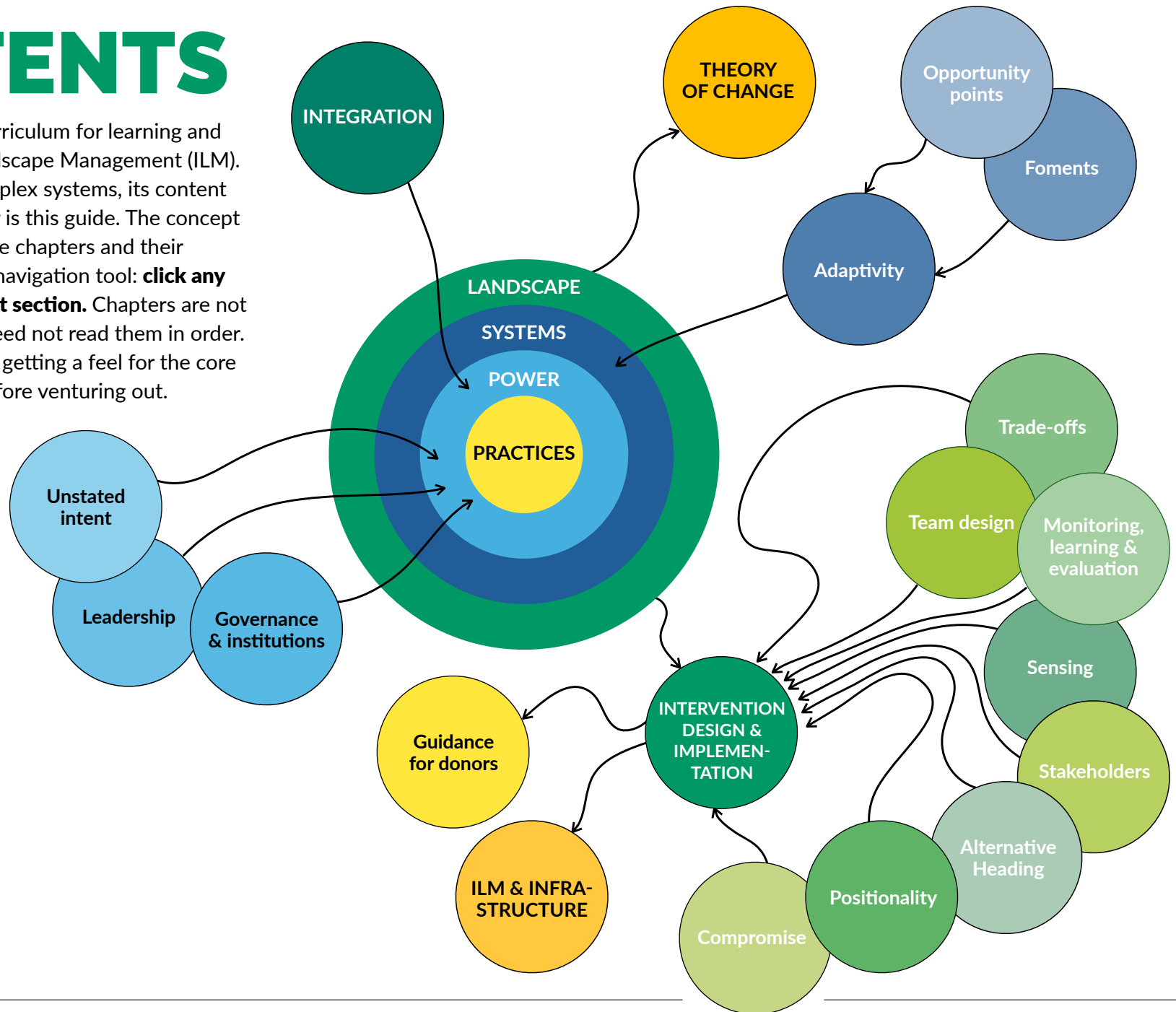
By Kim Geheb

The **Landscapes For Our Future** programme proposes Integrated Landscape Management (ILM) as a process of using adaptive, inclusive and integrating strategies to shift landscape system behaviour.



CONTENTS

This ILM Playbook is a curriculum for learning and practising Integrated Landscape Management (ILM). Because ILM deals in complex systems, its content is not linear – and neither is this guide. The concept ecosystem below maps the chapters and their relationships, and is your navigation tool: **click any node to go directly to that section.** Chapters are not numbered because you need not read them in order. That said, we recommend getting a feel for the core concepts at the centre before venturing out.





Click any heading below to go directly to that section

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

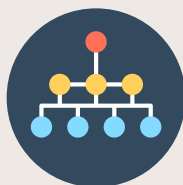
[PART 6 Glossary](#)

How to design and implement an ILM intervention



Step 1 Scope your landscape

Define where you will work and why – not just geographically but in terms of the system you are entering. Establish the right analytical disposition from the outset: the biophysical problem is not the problem; it is a symptom of regulatory dynamics that must be traced.



Step 2 Assemble & orient your team

Design a team fit for complexity; establish how the team will conduct itself; distinguish leadership from management.



Step 3 Enter the landscape – presence, relationships, & initial sensing

Establish presence, begin bilateral engagement, and start sensing – recognizing that your entry is itself a foment and that sensing begins the moment you arrive.



Step 4 Deep sensing – strands, power, practices

Read the system's regulatory architecture. This is the deep sensing work – sustained, iterative, and never complete. The anchoring question: **who is doing what, when, where, why, how – and to whom?**



Step 5 Identify opportunity points & refine your alt-heading

Determine where the system has give – where your intervention can most productively work – and refine what you are working towards based on what sensing has revealed.



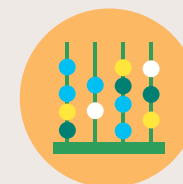
Step 6 Release, observe, adjust

Introduce the foment into the system and learn from the system's response. This is where design becomes implementation – but the distinction is artificial. You have been implementing since Step 3 and designing since Step 1. What changes here is that you are now deliberately releasing designed provocations and systematically observing what happens.



Step 7 Iterate, deepen, & sustain

Sustain the intervention through multiple cycles; attend to your own growing presence in the system; plan for what endures after you leave.



Step 8 Design your foment

Select, design, and sequence foments for each target interaction space.

Click any step to learn more



PART 1 **Introduction**



Click any heading below to go directly to that section

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning & evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

BACKGROUND

The Landscapes For Our Future (LFF) programme was a €100 million investment by the European Union that supported 22 Integrated Landscape Management (ILM) projects across 36 countries in the tropics.

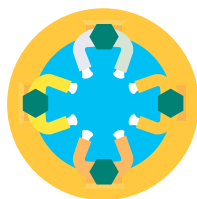
Each of these was typically led by a consortium of partners, in turn headed by a diversity of institutions. Most of these were international conservation NGOs, but notably also some UN agencies.

We would characterize most of the project consortia as highly technical – i.e., institutions that typically rely on science to inform their project designs. As mainly conservation NGOs, many of these partnerships were obviously strongly motivated by the desire for conservation outcomes. Only one lead institution in the partnership pool was a development NGO.

The EU determined that it would introduce a project that it called the ‘Central Component’ into this mix. Its role was primarily two-fold: (a) to provide advice and guidance to the 22 LFF projects; and (b) to learn what it could about ILM – what ingredients it should contain, what actions it should apply, and the thinking that should be brought to bear – if such an approach were to be successful. The Center for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF), a unity with considerable experience in the landscapes space, was selected to implement the Central Component. What we learned through our engagements with the 22 projects is what this Playbook is based upon.



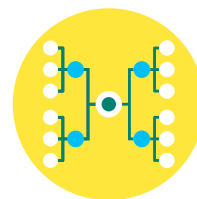
Stakeholder identification
Identifying stakeholders and the assessment of relations amongst them is an essential prerequisite to forming MSFs.



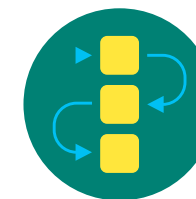
Multi-stakeholder Fora
The locus for integration. ‘Safe’ spaces in which stakeholders with different interests can gather, deliberate, negotiate, learn, plan and make decisions.



Common vision
Provides a destination behind which people and initiatives can line up. A vision can provide strong incentives for buy-in, inclusivity, a basis for collective action, and a baseline against which trade-offs can be evaluated and common concerns identified.



Institutionalisation
ILM fora or processes are incorporated into a landscapes governance structures, and ob/ retaining decision-making ability. Institutionalisation contributes to the long-term sustainability of interventions, and advances as the MSF progresses.



Adaptive management
Institutional flexibility and nimble-footedness enable ILM interventions to navigate complexity - in particular, multitude claims on a landscape. Adjustments to implementation are supported by evidence derived from M&E and research.



Tools
These are means to an end, and can include established methodologies, remote sensing, guidelines, etc.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

There are several important points that influenced our approach to 'sensing' the individual projects. While the LFF was large, 22 implementing projects is still a relatively small sample. In addition, projects were distributed across Southeast Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and South America. The Central Component team comprised eight to nine people – whether we liked it or not, we were thinly spread. Resources – in terms of budget and time – were another constraint: we could never visit the projects as much as we would have liked.

Individual projects were contracted to their respective EU Delegations. The Central Component played no role in pre-defining ILM or reviewing project proposals, and projects were never under any obligation to accept the advice that we dispensed.

To start, we accepted that there were many variants of 'landscape approach'. We were also very conscious that interpretation of ILM among the projects varied widely. Hence, we developed a set of key 'ILM ingredients' (graphic below) that we would use as an initial proposition for assessing the ways in which the projects interpreted ILM, and how they implemented it.

Adaptive management evolved to the adaptivity we discuss in this Playbook. Several were subsumed into new ingredients that emerged – for example, stakeholder identification was absorbed into power and design considerations. Two were eventually rejected – as we explain in our [Alt-heading section](#), visioning can become a liability. 'Tools' was also dropped as too amorphous.

At the end, we arrived at the key constituent parts of ILM that you see in this Playbook. In what follows, we summarize the field-based learning on which we base the ILM approach that we describe here. It is important to note that, in many cases, we were confident that one or another approach was effective ILM praxis. But we were also informed by what was *not* present in the projects, despite significant amounts of literature that suggested it as a critical ingredient. The presence of multi-stakeholder fora among our starting ingredients, for example – no projects had anything that they referred to as a multi-stakeholder forum. While stakeholder engagement was widespread and common, it was rare that they assembled a diversity of interests in the same room. And yet, the literature suggests that multi-stakeholder fora can be a highly effective way to obtain integration.

We should also stress that much of the evidence on which this Playbook is based was *implicit*. For example, we noted that team dynamic – which directly informs our section on [Team Design](#) – played a significant role in project implementation. So, too, lead institutional practices. Highly bureaucratic organization, that emphasized high levels of control, undermined learning and limited adaptivity. Neither of these traits that projects typically offered by way of success or limitations to the latter.

Our noting the presence or absence of ingredients was not criticism. The wide dispersal of projects, accompanied by an equally variable understanding of ILM, was a phenomenal resource: seeing how ILM was conceptualized and interpreted, and observing the challenges they faced and how they addressed these was a rich source of learning. All projects faced challenges. There was no project that could be judged a 'failure' inasmuch as none could be called a 'success' either. The approach taken by the EU in implementing a single, massive, global foment called for considerable courage and receives our admiration.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

This Playbook emerges out of a desire to assemble our learning. We accept that for those of you with a technical background, the uncertainty that is such a focus of this work will seem galling.

One project (you know who you are), perhaps frustrated with our various entreaties, made a request: if we wanted them to do things differently, we should produce a step-by-step guide to ILM.

This was the second motivation for producing the Playbook. The trouble is, ILM is not well-suited to step-by-step processes. When you and your intervention arrive in a system, it will try to ensure that any changes (whether tiny or gigantic) will not affect its heading. It will work to resist the intervention, to snap back to its usual way of doing things. This demands nimble-footedness. So, the 'steps' we present here prompt more questions than answers – which is their intent. The steps remain true to the ambiguities of the system within which you are operating and all of its unknown unknowns.



A WALK THROUGH THE TEA

“‘Landscape’ is not a reference to the physiognomy of the terrain. Rather, it evokes the possibilities and limitations of space: encompassing the physical land, the people on it, and the culture through which people work out the possibilities of the land. ‘Landscape’ means ‘existence’.”¹

I grew up in Kenya. When I was a child, my family and I would occasionally visit friends in Tigoni. From our house, close to the Nairobi city centre, it wasn't far – maybe 40 km. But we were a relatively sedentary family for whom weekends mostly meant the local swimming pool, where my father would do his lengths and my sister and I would jump off the diving boards. So, driving to Tigoni felt like an *expedition*. Tigoni is Kenya's largest tea growing area.² Look at it on Google Earth. It is an ocean of tea. It rolls on and on, as far as the eye can see, from horizon to horizon. I found it mesmerizing and awe-inspiring. So, four years ago, when my family and I returned to Kenya, we found a house to rent there, and moved in. It's an old farm owner's house nestled in a grove of indigenous trees. And all around it, the green ocean spreads out for miles.



The ocean of green, Tigoni

What would pop into your mind if I said 'landscape' to you? The tea fields of Tigoni in the picture above surely qualifies as 'landscape.' For me, as I imagine it would for many of you, landscape is vista – the expanse of land to the extent that the eye can see. Tigoni is beautiful, no?

¹ Cohen and Odhiambo, 1989.

² Today, Tigoni is a small township in the Tigoni-Ngecha Ward, part of the Limuru Constituency, in turn, part of Kiambu County.

PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

But perhaps, when I say 'landscape' to you, another type comes to mind: the painting. When I was an undergraduate, one of our tutors – Brian Short, a cultural geographer – ran a class on how paintings could tell us something about what was valued at the time it was painted, the ways in which it was considered 'beautiful' and how paintings said things about how the world should be. The painting below, *Stour Valley and Dedham Church*, was painted in 1814 by the famed English landscape artist John Constable. What, my tutor asked the students, is 'natural' about it? He waited, as we all peered at the overhead transparency. (Yes, that's how long ago it was.) I felt a little bad that I really liked it – I knew my tutor was taking us somewhere uncertain, but loving the painting was not, I guessed, the destination. It looked wonderfully peaceful to me. The air fresh and crisp. The sun warm, not hot. It was a landscape that was well managed, cared for. It looked *orderly*. But I didn't dare say anything and kept my hand down.

The geographer Ronald Rees has argued that Constable's paintings are not neutral depictions of the world, but, rather, carefully composed geographical documents. Constable's Dedham Vale and Stour Valley scenes depict intensively managed, enclosed, human-modified landscapes, but present them as if they were natural and timeless. The effect is to normalize a particular agrarian order – enclosed fields, landed estates, water-meadow systems – as the natural way an English landscape *should* look and function. This quietly affirms the power of landowners and the legitimacy of existing rural hierarchies.³ For John Barrell, Constable (and other English landscape artists) made the rural poor visually acceptable as part of elite décor: present, but small, marginal, idealized or aesthetically managed so that poverty, enclosure struggles, and class conflict are kept out of view. In this reading, Constable's landscapes help mask relations of domination – they aestheticize a landscape structured by landlord power and agrarian capitalism, while making that power appear benign and 'natural.'⁴ Constable wasn't painting for the disempowered and the poor. He was painting for the empowered and rich, depicting the *order* they wished to see.



Stour Valley and Dedham Church, John Constable, 1814

³ Rees, 1976, 1982.

⁴ Barrell, 1980.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Many years after Brian Short's lecture, I started work at an agency called the Mekong River Commission, an inter-governmental treaty organization at the time headquartered in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The MRC had a strong hydropower focus – it devoted considerable attention to what was, at the time, a modest hydropower build-out in the Mekong River Basin (another landscape manifestation). It did not even occur to me that hydropower was anything but clean and green. Fast forward several years, and my mind has been utterly changed.

Hydropower developers like to offer their own Constables of their proposed dams. Below is one for the Hatgyi Dam, a behemoth that, if it goes ahead, will be built on the Salween River in Myanmar. Well-forested slopes descend to its reservoirs. In the bottom left, smallholders cultivate close to the dam wall. The reservoir's water is placid, mirroring the immensity of the skies. In the foreground, a flock of white doves flies. The dam itself is not some concrete aberration, but sits in harmony with the landscape – it is an image that is benevolent and *ordered*. If a hydropower dam could possibly be rendered as bucolic, this is it.





PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Most renderings aim to deliver similar messages. But the Hatgyi is hugely controversial.⁵ If built, it would be located in the traditional territory of the Karen people, who have long resisted the political ambitions of Naypyidaw, the seat of the Bama-dominated Myanmar Union government. Like with many dams in the Mekong Region, proponents lead with the need for electricity (frequently a contentious claim) and the need for development (also contentious). What is not mentioned is that throughout the region, hydropower is frequently used as a strategy for state territorialization. Hydropower needs roads that lead to the site (along which the military can travel, followed by logging trucks and equipment), people have to be resettled (into *ordered* villages of ubiquitous housing, uprooting centuries of livelihood types, systems of land tenure, access to natural resources, etc.), and create ecological upheaval (fisheries destroyed, sediment loads trashed, flood regimes interrupted).

It is impossible to reconcile the image of the Hatgyi with the damage the dam will likely deliver if it is built. But the rendering above is its own form of propaganda, and even if computer-generated, sends out a message of legitimacy – one that speaks to reconciliation between concrete and nature, and to *order*. But in the same way that geographers have picked apart the nuances in Constable's paintings, these envisionings are also suggestive of the sheer domination of hydropower over its landscape. "As gigantic manifestations of state power, dams can be seen as visualizing no less than a nation's dream of centralizing and controlling its resources – and demonstrating it to the rest of the world."⁶



Three Gorges – Newly Displaced Population, Liu Xiaodong, 2005⁷

In deep contrast to this rendering of the Hatgyi is Liu Xiaodong's painting of a Three Gorges dam nearing completion. This massive painting (3 x 10 m comprising four panels) is shrouded in an air of despondency – from the macabre little boys at centre, the two jacketed men staring at the dam, a second set of men staring at the viewer, and a tawdry scene at right which appears to

⁵ See, for example, Lamb (2014) or Middleton et al, 2019.

⁶ Werner, 2014.

⁷ Kelley, 2006.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

be a negotiation for sex. And then, disconcertingly, there is the duck, shot by an unseen marksman, falling from the sky. And the whole is overwhelmed by a grey pall – the reservoir, the grey concrete of the immense dam and the grey detritus of a town that has been evacuated to make way for this technological shrine that exemplifies “the messy dialectics between creation and destruction inherent in Modernity’s Promethean project.”⁸

“The messy dialectics between creation and destruction inherent in Modernity’s Promethean project.”

About 30 km north of Tigoni is the Aberdare National Park – a remarkable place. Its vegetation is best understood as a stack of altitudinal zones: lower montane forest, a bamboo belt, then heath, moorland, and Afro-alpine vegetation higher up. In the forest zone you find trees such as cedar, camphor, olive, Podocarpus, and Hagenia; in the middle elevations bamboo becomes dominant; and near the summits the landscape shifts to giant lobelias, Senecio, tussock grasses, and heather-like shrubs. The Aberdares – like Tigoni – are high up the escarpment to the Great Rift Valley – some 2,000 m and above. What the British found in Tigoni was Aberdare Forest, for it once extended all the way along the eastern wall of the Great Rift Valley.



Cedar forest in the Aberdares



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

The Kikuyu called this range 'Nyandarua' – this derives from the Kikuyu word *rwandarua*, meaning “a drying hide”, named for the distinctive fold of its silhouette. The first European to lay eyes on the range was Joseph Thomson, who, in 1884, saw fit to name it after Henry Austin Bruce, 1st Baron Aberdare, the then president of the Royal Geographical Society, which had supported Thomson's expedition to East Africa. Meanwhile, the current Baron Aberdare (the 5th) sits in the House of Lords.

When the British had first arrived in Kenya, the Kikuyu people had been decimated. By the time the first surveyors arrived in Kiambu around 1900, perhaps 70 percent of the local population had died in the *Ng'aragu ya Ruraya*, the Famine of the Europeans, compounded by smallpox and rinderpest. To the British, the land looked empty. But it wasn't; it was bereaved.

The Kinyanjui and Njiriri pioneer generations had established the southernmost *kihingo* (fortified pioneer villages) at Limuru and Uplands in the late 1700s – about a century before the Europeans arrived. This fact made the colonial 'empty land' claim slightly more plausible than for Murang'a (where Kikuyu settlement went back at least to the sixteenth century) and partly explains why Limuru was so heavily targeted for European alienation. It was the most recently settled, most thinly populated (because of the famine), and most legally vulnerable Kikuyu territory. In British colonial law, abandoned land was *terra nullius*, available for Crown alienation. The 1898–1900 catastrophe was not just background context: it was the precondition that made the alienations possible without provoking immediate organized resistance. By the time famine survivors returned, their land had been gazetted as Crown Land and granted on 99-year (later 999-year) leases to settlers.

In the early 1900s, the British began experimenting with tea cultivation in Limuru. The first commercial farm in Tigoni was the Kiambethu Tea Estate, established in 1910. It's just up the road from where we live. Commercial expansion followed in the 1920s. But the Tigoni Kikuyu were not removed in a single act of seizure. Their dispossession was a quarter-century compression. From the early 1900s onwards, a stack of instruments was assembled around them: hut tax, then poll tax, demanding cash that could only be earned by working for Europeans; the *kipande* pass, tying men to specific employers; the 1915 Crown Lands Ordinance, which made everything outside the Native Reserves available for alienation; a sequence of squatter ordinances that progressively hollowed out the labour-tenancy arrangements on settler farms; commission after commission whose findings systematically declined to recover what had been taken. By the early 1930s, the Tigoni clans were surrounded – economically, legally, politically – and the offer that came was not a negotiation. It was the formalization of a process whose outcome had been determined 25 years earlier. They were offered 1.5 acres at Lari for every acre at Tigoni. The land at Lari is poorer, drier, on the lee side of the escarpment. Some accepted. Those who declined were forced out anyway, with no compensation. The first families arrived at Lari in 1939, the last in 1949. Lari is a little further up the road from us. It includes a southern extension of the Aberdares, the Gatamaiyu Forest. My son was up there on Friday to play paintball and go zip-lining. Eighteen years after the boundaries at Lari were drawn, Mau Mau fighters came down from the Aberdares and killed the loyalist elders who had drawn them – in an infamous moment, the Lari Massacre. The conditions for that violence were being assembled, decade by decade, along the road I now drive to work.

All around us is the sea of green. Its undulations are like swells, rising and falling. It's beautiful, no?



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

As I walk the dogs through the tea, I cross a small river onto to a neighbour's farm and look back. Our house is lost in the coppice of trees, but I can see the 'tea lines'. Most of the tea farms around here have these: rows of white-washed quarters housing tea pluckers. In the mornings, as I leave the house for work, I drive down a short, muddy, bumpy track. Off to my left, I can see the pluckers working in the drizzle. Their hands move fast as they pluck pale green, almost luminous, leaf shoots, and toss these into tea baskets suspended on their backs. Just down the track from the house is what we call the 'tea weighing tree'. There's a piece of wire hanging from one of its branches, and on tea picking day, a scale is hung from the wire. When the pluckers come in, they each dump their tea out onto a piece of awning, the corners of which are then folded together, and the whole is lifted onto the hook of the scales. The weight is then recorded, and the pluckers head back out into the green sea.

Tea picking is crappy work. Standing in the rain, or under a hard sun, they work until they have picked a quadrant. The pay is abysmal. In rural Kericho, the 'living wage' is about US\$224 per month. Average pay for tea pluckers is, however, roughly US\$108 per month, below the minimum wage.⁹ In 2023, a one-hour BBC Africa Eye/Panorama documentary called *Sex for work: the true cost of our tea*¹⁰ documented testimony from over 70 women to systematic sexual exploitation by supervisors at plantations operated by Unilever (later Lipton/Ekaterra) and James Finlay & Co. in Kericho. The Fairtrade Foundation called it a #MeToo moment for tea.¹¹

So, what is *this* landscape? As I drive home from CIFOR-ICRAF, I'll often take the road that runs through Ruaka and its *matatu* traffic insanity; turn right onto the Old Limuru Road, and make my way up the hill through Banana, and lots more traffic insanity. It's the shortest way home by distance, but arguably the longest timewise. I'll then crest a ridge and suddenly the ocean of green unfurls in front of me, and the tension of dodging *matatus* hell-bent on killing me drops away like a slough. Further to the north, great cumulonimbus clouds gather over the escarpment, ready to release torrents on our little house and all that tea. The peace this vista brings is real, but guilty. As I look at it, I can also see Brian Short with his Constable overhead transparency. The beauty of the tea masks the very social injustices – past and present – required to produce and maintain it.

Before Alexander von Humboldt, European natural science worked through Linnaean taxonomy. It saw nature as a catalogue of discrete species, classified into hierarchies – life and living was taxonomizable. Von Humboldt referred to himself as a "scientific traveller," a "physicist of the earth," and a "practitioner of the physics of the world." His central move was to insist that such taxonomizing was the wrong unit of analysis. What mattered was the web – the interconnections between climate, soils, vegetation, altitude, hydrology, animal life, and human activity that produced any given place.

It was the inbetweenness of things that mattered. He called this the Naturgemälde, "the painting of nature", and it's the conceptual ancestor of pretty much every landscape diagram since. In *Cosmos* (Vol. 1) he writes "Nature considered rationally, that is to say, submitted to the process of thought, is a unity in diversity of phenomena; a harmony, blending together all created things, however

⁹ Blackmore et al, 2022.

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wMdnCx6eUc>

¹¹ <https://www.fairtrade.org.uk/media-centre/news/fairtrade-statement-on-bbc-one-panoramas-sex-for-work-broadcast/>



Click any heading below to go directly to that section

PART 1 Introduction

- Background
- A walk through the tea
- Landscapes
- Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

- Practices
- Power
- Governance & institutions
- Leadership
- Unstated intent
- Systems & complexity
- Adaptivity
- Foments
- Opportunity points
- Integration

PART 3 Practice

- Design & implementation
- Team design
- Positionality
- Sensing
- Alternative heading
- Stakeholders
- Monitoring, learning & evaluation
- Compromise
- Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

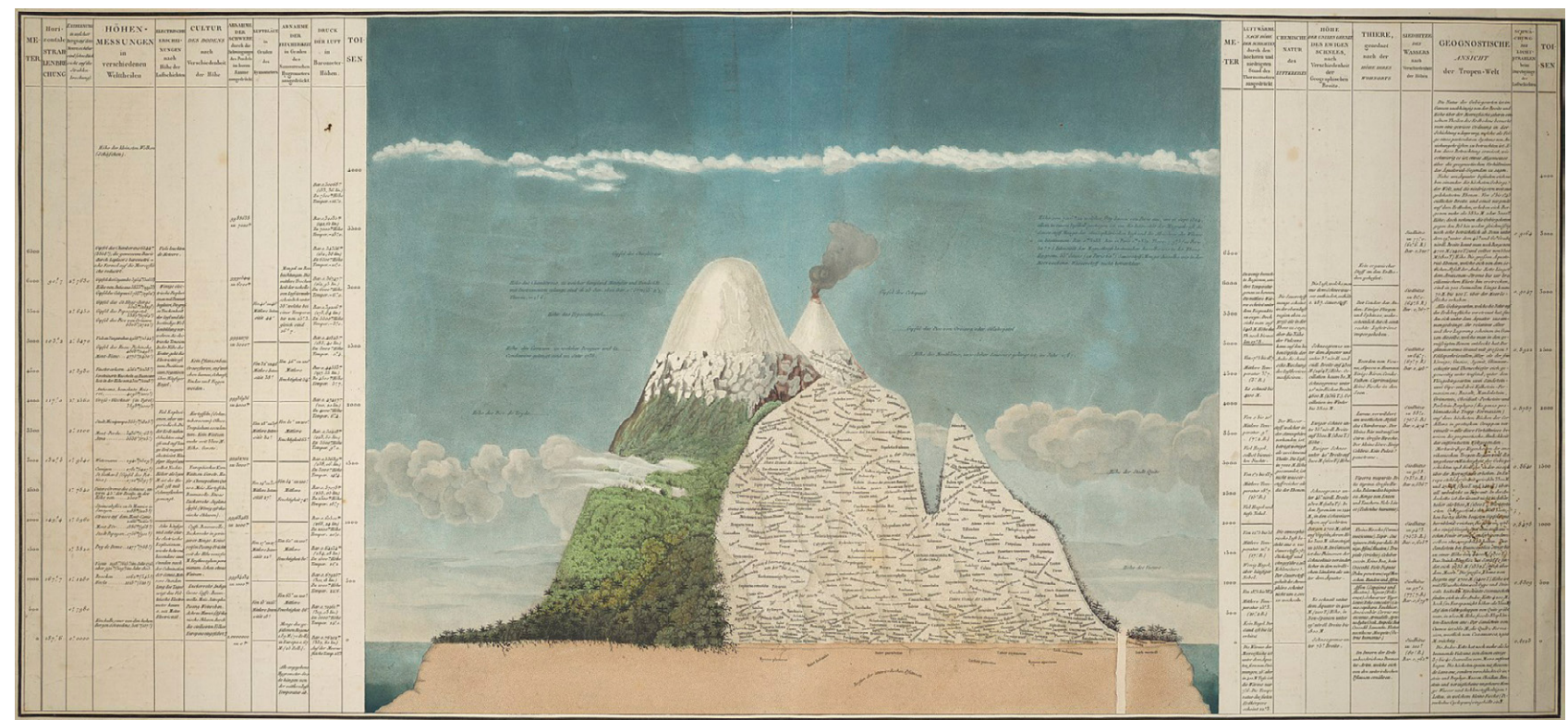
PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

dissimilar in form and attributes; one great whole animated by the breath of life.”¹² And that, my friends, sounds a lot like integration.

Von Humboldt's single most consequential image was the astonishing Chimborazo cross-section in his 1807 *Essay on the Geography of Plants* – a picture of the Chimborazo volcano (in Ecuador) showing vegetation zones stacked by altitude, with parallel columns recording temperature, pressure, humidity, and species distribution. It's the prototype of biogeographical thinking, and arguably the prototype of landscape ecology as a visual practice. If you've ever drawn a transect, or a stacked diagram with elevation against species or land use, you're working in Humboldt's direct lineage.

‘It's the prototype of biogeographical thinking, and arguably the prototype of landscape ecology as a visual practice.’



Von Humboldt's Chimborazo cross-section showing vegetation zones stacked by altitude (inside the image), with parallel columns recording temperature, pressure, humidity, and species distribution (in the columns to either side).

12 Von Humboldt, 1858 (1845).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Von Humboldt rejected the Cartesian and Linnaean tradition that placed humans outside or above nature. In *Cosmos* (Vol. 1), he describes nature as “one great whole animated by the breath of life.” Humans are part of that whole, not external to it. He argued that any physical description of the world had to include human cultures, languages, and politics as constituent elements. Von Humboldt was probably the first European scientist to articulate, on the basis of empirical observation, that human activity was a geological-scale force capable of altering climate, hydrology, and ecology at regional and potentially global scales. He’s the founding figure of what we now call Anthropocene thinking, more than 150 years before Paul Crutzen coined the term.

The reason I’m getting into Von Humboldt is because (a) he’s a really cool guy; and (b) because of that *Naturgemälde* – the nature painting. As I crest the ridge on the way home from work, I’m trying to read the landscape before me as Von Humboldt’s rendering. His Chimborazo cross-section did not include human influences or dimensions, but it inspires me. I could start the transect on the floor of the Great Rift Valley at Naivasha (semi-arid grassland, around 1,890 m) up the Kikuyu Escarpment through montane forest at Tigoni (2,100 m) up to the bamboo zone in the Aberdares (2,500-3,000 m) and on to the Afro-alpine moorland at the Aberdare summits (above 3,500 m). Textbook Humboldtian *Naturgemälde*. But how do we paint that picture to include those human influences? How do we capture, in visual form, humanity’s ecological authoritarianism?

In May 1950, the Aberdare National Park was gazetted by the Kenyan colonial government. This was in the immediate run-up to the Mau Mau Emergency (declared in October 1952). The colonial state gazetted the upper-altitude forest as a protected area at exactly the moment when Kikuyu landlessness in Kiambu had become acute, when squatter expulsions from the Rift Valley were dumping dispossessed families back into already-saturated reserves, and when the political organizing that would become Mau Mau was intensifying. The park’s establishment took the Aberdare montane forest – historically used by Kikuyu *mbari* (clans) for hunting, beekeeping, ritual sites, building materials and as a strategic land bank – out of African use entirely. Combined with the existing Crown Land status of much of the lower-altitude forest, this meant that by 1950 the Aberdare ecosystem was almost entirely closed to the Kikuyu communities who had been its closest human neighbours for centuries. It was here that the Treetops Lodge was built, and where Princess Elizabeth was watching elephants at the salt-lick below the lodge when her father, George VI, died and she became queen.

At the start of my career, I worked on a large EU-supported project called the Lake Victoria Fisheries Research Project (we provide another anecdote from this project in the [Unstated Intent](#) section). The objective of this project was to create a management plan for the fisheries of this immense lake in partnership with the fisheries research institutes in the three countries that shared it, along with their fisheries departments.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Most of the project's sizeable budget was focussed on fish stock assessment and biology. I found this a little mystifying. If the plan was supposed to manage how people fished – the gear they used, where they fished, when they fished, etc. – then why was almost all of our budget focussed on fish stocks? Fish stock conditions served to amplify human practices and were in turn caused by human practices. Fishermen (only men fished) didn't go to fishing grounds where the stock had disappeared – which their fishing intensity had in any case caused. Every tenet of the old fisheries regulations in the three countries was practice-focussed: gill-nets of under five-inch mesh-size were banned; Tilapia below a certain size had to be released. Traditional fishing methods were fine, etc. I was in charge of the “socio-economic” aspects of the project. After several years of work amongst the lake's fishing communities, we were clear: if fishing practices were to be changed, knowing the size of the fish stock wasn't particularly pertinent. Fishermen knew where fish stocks were, knew when they were low, knew that average fish sizes were decreasing, or that landings were also declining. The principle of a fish stock under serious duress did not need fish stock assessments to confirm it.

I made this argument at one of our multiple workshops to discuss the drafting of the plan. “No!” thundered the director general of one of the fisheries research institutes. “All fishermen are liars! These people cannot be trusted.” Which explained why so little of the budget was devoted to researching fishing communities. It was also an explicit recognition of something that I had noticed in all of the fisheries research institutes: in all cases, the “socio-economic” teams were tiny – everyone else was biophysical. And the supremacy of this latter knowledge type was clear. Science would establish the state of the fish stock. In turn, this would inform the fisheries management plan. In turn, this would indicate what regulations were required. And, in turn, this would furnish the three fisheries departments with the legal authority they needed to implement and police them. Small matter that every single one of our surveys catalogued how corrupt fisheries officers were and that these very regulations provided them with the discretionary powers they needed to extract bribes, seize nets and catches for resale. And in the end? The fisheries management plan we generated banned gill-nets of under five-inch mesh-size; Tilapia below a certain size had to be released. Traditional fishing methods were fine, etc. Our project coordinator was sympathetic to my grumbling. But the plan, he argued, was the only one that was politically possible.

The fishermen themselves understood this perfectly well. In the evenings, sitting on the landing sites, men told me without prompting that their own nets were too small, that a ground was being fished out, or that



Kenyan Sesse fishing canoes on Lake Victoria, 2001.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

the women at one landing were buying juvenile fish that should have been left to grow. They *knew*. Cohen and Odhiambo, in their beautiful *Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape*, describe the Luo lake-shore as a place where boats were launched like brides, where landscape and language and lineage were inseparable from the water and the fish, and where the boundaries between human and non-human, productive and ceremonial, individual and collective, were drawn quite differently from how a colonial fisheries officer or a 1990s sustainability indicator might draw them. The problem was never that fishermen lacked knowledge of the system they were embedded in. The problem was that the regulatory apparatus could not hear that knowledge, would not have known what to do with it if it had, and was institutionally committed to a story in which knowledge of the system was the regulator's preserve and the fishermen's role was to comply.

Liz Wily's argument about African community forestry was working in the same direction.¹³ She showed that a focus on granting local people use rights to forest product – fuelwood, Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), limited timber – but keeping real decision-making power in the hands of the state forest service doesn't work if what you're aiming for is forest conservation. Instead, what's needed is *devolving* power, not just recognizing use. This completely resonated with my read on Lake Victoria's fisheries. If her work was on forests, and mine on fisheries, did this not then mean that the resource in question was basically redundant? Not totally. The resource's characteristics will, of course, affect human practices – fisheries practices have little meaning to people collecting NTFPs. But the practices – whether those of small-scale communities, corrupt fisheries/forestry scouts, hydropower developers, or researchers – seemed to me to have far more relevance to how resources are managed than the resource's biophysical condition – the latter was a symptom of something else, something that – to the best of my knowledge – was rarely addressed in natural resources management. It was as if the idea of *integration* was being forgotten in the same moment that it was being spoken about.

“It was as if the idea of integration was being forgotten in the same moment that it was being spoken about.”

The painting that is Tigoni continues to change. In his rendering of Chimborazo, Von Humboldt, it seems to me, was not able to incorporate the power of human intervention into the image. But, oddly, I think Constable was. Whatever it was that he saw as rustic, bucolic, peaceful, and timeless was the manifestation of a type of power he approved of. I don't doubt that Constable poured affection into his work. “Painting,” he wrote to a friend “is but another word for feeling.” And the power that his paintings rendered was one that he loved. And you can see it.

I'm walking down a street in Brussels with my team and our colleagues from the European Commission. One of our EC colleagues and I are discussing our recent advances in thinking about Integrated Landscape Management (ILM). He comments that it makes him think of *terroir* – an idea that derives mainly from vine-growing. I'm ashamed to say, I had never heard of this concept. After dinner, I hurry back to our Airbnb and begin investigating. Our EC colleague was right to bring this up, because it's an excellent concept.

¹³ Wily, 1999.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Terroir is a contested term, I learn. The official position of France's Institut National de l'Origine et de la Qualité and the legal foundation of the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée system defines *terroir* as, basically, the unique intersection of soil + climate + topography + grape. This formulation, repeated in every introductory text on French wine, treats human practice as either irrelevant to *terroir* or as something separate that 'expresses' *terroir* without being part of it. The winemaker is the medium; *terroir* is the message.

But! Others would argue this is a contested cultural construction, a hegemonic discourse that simultaneously naturalizes and erases the human labour that produces it.¹⁴ The Organisation Internationale de la Vigne et du Vin (the international wine body) agrees. In 2010, it adopted a new official definition that explicitly incorporated the human dimension. *Terroir*, they say, is "an area in which collective knowledge of the interactions between the identifiable physical and biological environment and applied vitivinicultural practices develops, providing distinctive characteristics for the products originating from this area."¹⁵ Here, human practice is constitutive, not external. *Terroir* is no longer a *thing* (a piece of land with soils and climate) but a *site of collective knowledge-formation* about the interaction between environment and practice.

A merging, a fusion, or entanglement. Every sip of wine can impart the humanity – tradition, culture, *praxis* – that went into creating it. Liquid embodiment.

This is not a million miles from the ways in which the Chinese produce their tea. The biophysical environment is sharply differentiated and recognized as such. Specific tea cultivars are tightly associated with specific places – Longjing (Dragon Well) with the West Lake hills around Hangzhou; Bi Luo Chun with Dongting mountain on Tai Hu in Jiangsu; Pu'er with the old-growth tea forests of southern Yunnan, etc. The same cultivar grown in a different place produces a different tea, and trained Chinese tea-tasters claim to be able to identify provenance blind, much as wine tasters claim to do. The geomorphology, soils, altitude, mist regime and aspect all matter, and Chinese tea culture has names for these *terroir*-elements going back centuries.

The applied practices are extraordinarily elaborate and place-specific. Chinese tea is unique among the world's tea traditions in producing all six tea categories (green, white, yellow, oolong, black, dark/post-fermented) from the same plant species, *Camellia sinensis*, through different processing techniques. Each category has its own processing protocol – withering, bruising, oxidation, fixing, rolling, drying, roasting, ageing – and within each category there are place-specific variations of remarkable subtlety. The processing is not just transformation of raw material; it is a major determinant of what the tea *is*.

But, back in Tigoni, tea is a mass production commodity. Oh, that it embraced something similar to the Chinese! That the green ocean was a *mosaic* of smallholders, each bringing to bear their knowledge, handed down from their parents, each packet of tea signalling its origin and the creativity and tradition that went into producing it. But it is not so. Tigoni's tea was forged from colony, dispossession, enclosure – interventions that served to *disintegrate* an elaborate, functioning, *commons* system of land use and tenure.

¹⁴ Demossier, 2011.

¹⁵ <https://www.oiv.int/en/technical-standards-and-documents/resolutions-of-the-oiv/viticulture-resolutions>.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

The pre-colonial Kikuyu *gĩthaka* (pl. *ithaka*) was the *mbari* estate. It is one of the cleanest historical examples of an integrated landscape-and-practice tenure system that functioned as a commons – with bounded membership, layered access rights, redistributive obligations, deliberate forest reserves, intergenerational accountability, and elders’ council governance – and not the open-access resource that the colonial state believed it had found.¹⁶ The *gĩthaka*’s history was the *mbari*’s history, with origin narratives recounting how the founding ancestor had acquired it. The crucial principle Leakey emphasized, and Muriuki later confirmed, was that any *mbari* member with more land than they needed had a positive obligation to share with members who genuinely lacked it – at minimum through cultivation rights. The system included a strong redistributive ethic that made it function commons-like even though the underlying tenure was lineage-based.

There is a two-way infusion (to use a tea-based term) between humanity and the resources it relies on. I’ll accept that humanity does not determine tectonics. It’s what humanity does with tectonics that matters here. And I revert to my earlier point: why, if we’re trying to change the way people exploit fish, do we study fish? Why, if we’re trying to change the way people use a forest, would we send in a battery of dendrologists? Why, when we worry about how water is governed (by humans) would we task hydrologists with the responsibility of changing this? And, as arguments for the recognition of a new geological epoch acknowledge, the relationship between humans and the surface of the Earth is not an equal one. Ergo, the Anthropocene acknowledges who has the upper hand in this tense relation.

“Why, when we worry about how water is governed (by humans) would we task hydrologists with the responsibility of changing this?”

The dogs and I continue walking down the track, to where there’s access up into the tea. Just here, there’s a bank of exposed red earth. The bee-eaters burrow tunnels into it, where they nest. We stop and watch, hoping to see one of these brilliantly coloured creatures emerge. But none do. The adults are all perched on twigs from the *Eucalyptus* stands opposite. That’s another dimension, of course – vegetation as colonisation. The British brought the Aussie blue gums here; and the Aussie silver oaks – on our farm, they’re used as windbreaks. I head up the path, our Great Dane trotting ahead of me, the Dachshund shooting off under the tea bushes, looking for the source of rustles. About a hundred metres on, we come to a circular clearing. It is here that there used to be a HUGE *mũgumo* tree. The tree is a strangler fig (*Ficus thonningii* if we’re going to be Linnaean). It climbed up another tree, using it as a crutch to reach into the sky and towards the light, before strangling the life from it. Its long tendril roots reached to the ground and took root; the gaps between them gradually filled until an impressive trunk was grown. But in the centre, these trees are usually hollow – the void where the original tree stood. On the far side of this one, there was a ‘cave’ – a gap that had never filled, that allowed us to crawl in and stare up into the cavity above us. When we walked the dogs, we’d often stop here and rest amongst its roots and look up at its enormous canopy. It was truly a remarkable tree.

¹⁶ See, for example, Muriuki, 1977; Leakey, 1977; Kenyatta, 1938.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

[Systems & complexity](#)

Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

[Integration](#)

[PART 3 Practice](#)

[Design & implementation](#)

Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)



The great mūgumo tree before it fell.

The farms around here all have lots of *mūgumo* trees on them. In Tigoni, they're fairly common. And there's probably a reason for that – chopping these down to clear the way for tea was, even in the estimation of the colonists, a step too far. The *mūgumo* is the surviving architecture of a cosmology in which land, lineage, ritual and authority were a single *integrated* system.¹⁷ *Ngai*, the Kikuyu supreme deity, was understood to dwell on Mount Kenya – Kirinyaga, 'the place of brightness,' named for the snow on its peaks. The deity, the mountain and the people were not linked by relationships; they were aspects of a single complex. Homesteads were built with doors facing Kirinyaga; the dead were buried facing the peaks; the first humans had been brought together by *Ngai* beneath a *mūgumo* at *Mūkūrwe wa Nyagathanga* in Murang'a, and from their nine daughters descended the nine Kikuyu clans. The elders met under the *mūgumo*, sacrifices were offered to *Ngai* and oaths sworn. The boundaries of *gĩthaka* were marked by *mūgumo*.

To be alienated from the *gĩthaka* was therefore not just to lose economic resource. It was to be separated from one's grandparents, from the place where one's lineage was founded, from the architecture *Ngai* had provided for prayer. Even the name 'Kikuyu' derives from this fig-name root, *gīkūyū* meaning 'big fig tree' – the Kikuyu are, in this etymology, the people of the big fig. The colonial dispossession was a theological catastrophe at the same time as it was an economic one.

¹⁷ Karangi, 2005.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

The trees dotted about in Tigoni's tea are probably residual *gĩthaka* markers that predate the arrival of the British in Tigoni. Wangari Maathai wrote movingly about *mūgumo* trees in her memoir *Unbowed* – they were central to her childhood in Nyeri and to the Green Belt Movement's symbolic vocabulary.

But then we had a great storm. The roots of the *mūgumo* are radial and not tap. Its girth is so considerable that it is this wide base that keeps it upright, and not the depths to which its roots penetrate. Overnight, as winds howled, it keeled over. When we found it, I stood and looked at it, feeling the implications of this collapse across the tea fields. Smaller ones survived – in fact, across the fields that the dogs and I marched, we saw no other trees had collapsed.

When a *mūgumo* tree dies, it is said to be the end of an era. The Kikuyu seer Mugo wa Kiburu had predicted that British settlers would leave if a certain *mūgumo* tree in Thika died. His words worried the British, who feared the resultant symbolism should the tree die. They protected that tree with a reinforcement of metal bars and an iron ring packed with soil – the remains of which are still in Thika. But the tree was struck by lightning in 1963, the year of Kenya's independence.¹⁸

And so, in this sea of green, the *mūgumo* remain as cultural islands. It's beautiful, no?

With the Kikuyu under such massive pressure, the establishment of the Mau Mau really should not have been the surprise that it seemed to be to the British. The irony with the formation of the Aberdare National Park was that it became a Mau Mau redoubt. In 1954, they burned down the Treetops Lodge, just eight months after the princess had become queen there. Between 1953 and 1954, the British bombed the hell out of the Aberdares, concentrating on the 'Salient' – an eastward projecting 'arm' of the park. By 1956, the Mau Mau were broken, but one leader, Dedan Kimathi, was still on the run, hiding in the Aberdares. On his tail was a police officer, Ian Henderson, who was on an "obsessive hunt" to capture or kill his quarry.¹⁹ Henderson wrote an account of his hunt for the Mau Mau leader, "the astounding story behind the capture of the most brutal and fanatical of all Mau Mau leaders." "Long after the backbone of the uprising had been broken, he [Kimathi] remained at large, wandering through the dense forests with his formidable bodyguard of half-crazed thugs. There could be no peace while he was free to kill and pillage."²⁰

Bombing the Aberdares had not killed the man, so Henderson reverted to analysing his movements and practices through various interrogations with Mau Mau detainees. He learned that Kimathi prayed daily under a *mūgumo* tree. But which one? Henderson mapped out all of the *mūgumo* trees in the Aberdares – some 40 trees – and then selected a subset of eight particularly large ones that he judged Kimathi might approach, and then staked these out. The stakeout itself was protracted and grim: the soldiers began their stakeout for Kimathi, hoping that the freedom fighter would 'favour them with a visit.' On the forest floor, nobody moved, or talked. "In those same positions, the calls of nature would be answered by turning slowly on their backs and scraping a small hole in

¹⁸ <https://nation.africa/kenya/counties/kiambu/the-historic-mugumo-tree-that-marked-the-end-of-british-rule--237454>

¹⁹ Anderson, 2005.

²⁰ Henderson and Goodhart, 1958.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

the soft, forest soil with their fingers.”²¹

The stakeout failed. In the end, Kimathi emerged from the forest on October 21, 1956, two months after the stakeouts had collapsed. He had been forced out by hunger and the steadily shrinking circle of safe ground, and was caught at the forest edge near Ihururu in the Kikuyu Reserve, well outside the area where Henderson’s *mūgumo* operation had been concentrated. While trying to flee, a Kikuyu Tribal Police Officer, Ndirangu Mau, shot Kimathi in the leg. The British made much hay of his capture – while also trying to obscure the fact that it was Ndirangu Mau, rather than Henderson, who had caught the insurgent. Kimathi was executed at Kamiti Prison on 18 February 1957.

The colonial state recognized, accurately, that landscape and religion were intertwined for the Kikuyu – that the sacred fig was not just a tree but a node of meaning in a relational landscape. Henderson’s operation was, in its own way, a sophisticated piece of cultural intelligence work: he understood that Kimathi’s military survival depended on his ritual life, and that his ritual life depended on specific trees in specific places.

But the operation also expressed the limits of that recognition. Henderson could map the *mūgumo*, but he could not predict which one Kimathi would visit, because the choice was not random and not externally legible. Kimathi’s relation to particular trees was a relation he had with *Ngai* (God), mediated by a lifetime of Kikuyu ritual practice that no map could capture. The colonial cartographic gaze could see the trees but not the wood – their meaning. The 40 *mūgumo* on the map were not, from a Kikuyu standpoint, equivalent locations to be statistically sampled.

The *mūgumo* the British failed to find was, in some sense, the same kind of object as the *gĩthaka* the British failed to recognize in 1900 – a node of African meaning that the colonial gaze could see but could not read. Henderson’s map of 40 fig trees and the 1903 surveyors’ map of ‘empty land’ are pieces of the same colonial document, separated by half a century but executing the same misreading.

Von Humboldt’s work resonates through the centuries. Geography has long recognized that spaces (of whatever kind – including landscapes) are integrated wholes. The Humboldtian *Naturgemälde* was a first attempt; the early-twentieth-century plant-community concept was the second; assemblage theory, drawing on Deleuze, Guattari and DeLanda, has been the most recent. Assemblage thinking has done genuinely useful work – it has insisted that landscapes are heterogeneous, multi-scalar, materially- and symbolically constituted, and always partially in transition. But it has also struggled to generate operational vocabulary for practitioners trying to manage actual landscapes, and has sometimes flattened questions of power into an undifferentiated heterogeneity.

“The colonial state recognized, accurately, that landscape and religion were intertwined.”

²¹ Henderson and Goodhart, 1958.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Our *ILM Playbook* takes a different turn. Where assemblage theory describes, systems thinking – particularly systems thinking informed by complexity science – describes-in-order-to-intervene. Systems language gives us terms for states, transitions, leverage points, feedback loops, regime shifts, and emergent properties that practitioners can actually work with. It also has a longer track record of holding political-economic questions at the centre of the analysis rather than at its margins.

We adopt systems language for the Playbook not because assemblage theory is wrong, but because the work the Playbook is trying to do – supporting people who are trying to govern landscapes well, in real time, with real consequences – is better served by a vocabulary that has been tested against management practice for half a century. Humboldt's wager was that landscapes could only be understood holistically. The Playbook's wager is that complexity-science-informed systems thinking is the most operationally useful contemporary vehicle for that holistic understanding.

Importantly, systems thinking is not the property of Northern complexity science alone. Arturo Escobar's *Designs for the pluriverse* (Colombia), Vandana Shiva's *Monocultures of the mind* critique (India), Catherine Odora Hoppers's argument for cognitive justice (Uganda/South Africa), and Maturana and Varela's *Autopoiesis and Cognition* (Chile) are formulations the Playbook is in dialogue with – different vocabularies for the same project of recovering integrated ways of knowing the world against the reductionist forces that systematically dismantle them.

This choice – systems thinking over assemblage – is not just methodological. It is also political. The integrated landscape work the Playbook supports takes place, more often than not, in territories where the post-colonial state is itself a continuation of colonial dispossession under new management. The Tigoni I drive through every day was alienated by the British, and is now being re-alienated by Kenyan elites – different landlords, similar logic. The pluckers in the tea lines are paid below the minimum wage by companies that are no longer Brooke Bond but are still, in too many ways, Brooke Bond. The state that gazetted the Aberdares for conservation in 1950 and then bombed it, now fences it with 400 km of electrified perimeter – same enclosure, different equipment. Integrated landscape governance, in this context, cannot treat the state as a neutral integrator. The systems-thinking vocabulary the Playbook adopts treats the political-economy of who controls a landscape as constitutive of the analysis, not as background. Which brings me to a final stretch of road.

In Tigoni, the strands of practices – of the things that people do, and have done – reach into the present. I drive carefully between several badly parked cars on the edge of the tea. Their occupants are taking photos of each other, the tea as backdrop. "It's beautiful, no?" I hear one call to her friends. As I turn onto the track leading to the little house, kids who live in the tea lines opposite scream and wave at me. Their voices are lost as the green ocean closes in behind me. I stop the car and get out to open the gate; the dogs leap about on the other side excitedly. I look out across the tea. From where I stand, I can see the scar amongst the bushes where the great *mūgumo* once stood. We have several in our compound – big, but nowhere near as large. The conflict that created this extraordinary place was obscene. And now? New elites have taken it over, the British colonists replaced by Kenyan ones. Arguably Kenya's greatest literary figure, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, has written vividly about how post-colonial African states have continued the colonial project of cultural-linguistic suppression, with elite languages (English, French, Portuguese) and



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

lowland-state languages (Amharic in Ethiopia or Wolof in Senegal) replacing local indigenous languages as the medium of state power, education and economy.²² Frantz Fanon predicted with eerie accuracy that the post-colonial African elite would inherit the colonial state apparatus and use it to install a new oppression in continuity with the old.²³ Wa Thiong'o was himself imprisoned in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, where Kimathi had been executed – retained by the post-independence government who, like the colonial government, also imprisoned political prisoners here. Wa Thiong'o kept himself busy with a variety of projects, that included writing his first Gikuyu novel, *Caitani mũtharaba-Inĩ* (*Devil on the cross*) on prison-issued toilet paper.²⁴ The year he spent here also inspired him to write the play *The trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976). Others who have been held there include Kenneth Matiba, Koigi wa Wamwere and Jonah Anguka.

New landscapes in the making, landscapes persistently in transition, systems that never stand still. It's beautiful, no?

In the text above, I've tried to show how a landscape story can be crafted, and how sensing can work. Placing myself within it is my own positionality that must, of necessity, reflect on how I have taken a childhood impression, and, with my family, turned it into a reality, which in turn has spurred deep thought on where I am situated in the landscape.

This is what integrated landscape thinking looks like in practice. *The ILM Playbook* will make explicit the kind of thinking you've already been doing for the last few pages. What I have been doing as I write this – driving, walking, looking, listening, remembering, reading the present landscape against its history – is the sensing. It is not data collection; it is a way of paying attention that holds the biophysical, the historical, the aesthetic, the scientific and the political in the same field of attention. *The ILM Playbook* treats sensing as the foundational practice on which everything else rests, because it is the practice through which we come to know what kind of landscape we are dealing with.

The landscape I crest the ridge to see has been many landscapes. What is in front of me now is one possible ordering of this place – produced by specific historical forces, reproduced by specific contemporary practices, and in transition toward yet another ordering as the tea estates are uprooted for gated housing estates – people so desperate to submerge themselves in the ocean of green that they uproot it to obtain it. The Playbook treats landscapes as *systems* that can hold different states, and treats landscape management as the work of understanding which state you are in, how it came to be, and what the opportunity points for transition look like. Through time, a constellation of factors has coalesced into this one that begets another, and so it goes on: landscapes – like the power that determines their configurations – never stand still. How you can feed yourself and your intervention into this system is what this Playbook tries to explain.

²² wa Thiong'o 1986, 2009.

²³ Fanon, 1963.

²⁴ Introduction by Aminatta Forna to article by wa Thiong'o in *The Guardian*, 2025: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/aug/12/ngugi-wa-thiongo-aminatta-forna-decolonisation-language-conquest> Introduction by Aminatta Forna, to *The Guardian* Article by wa Thiong'o, 2025.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

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LANDSCAPES

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

- A landscape is a complex system whose elements are entangled and co-produced: its condition is the outcome of power configurations and regulatory dynamics, not an inherent property of place.
- Landscapes have heading – a composite trajectory produced by the many strands of practice running through them – and ILM is the work of shifting that heading towards integrated social-ecological directions.
- The three-layered model – system contains power contains practices – is recursive: each layer patterns the others, so intervention in any one of them inevitably reaches into the others.
- The practitioner's task is not to change what people do but to change the conditions under which they act: behaviour in a complex system is generated by context, and context is what ILM intervenes in.
- The ILM practitioner reads a landscape through its power, practices and system dynamics to identify opportunity points where influence can shift heading – a reading made possible by sensing and positionality.

Introducing landscapes

Landscapes are *mosaic vistas of entangled ecological and human activity*. They are also complex systems whose elements – social, ecological, political, economic – are entangled and co-produced. Their areas are defined depending on scope, and their condition is produced by the power configurations and regulatory dynamics operating within and upon them. Landscapes have **heading** – a trajectory produced by the many movements within the system, each driven by specific actors and their practices, and whose composite effect determines the direction the system is moving in. We call these movements **strands**. All of these various concepts will be discussed later in the Playbook.

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you're interested, check out the 'evidence page' for this section here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

When we speak of 'scope', this refers to your intent in the landscape. Frequently, 'landscapes' are characterized as ecosystems, biomes, administrative boundaries, soil type, land use, agroecosystem, etc.

Ecological and social elements within a landscape system are entangled – not two separate domains in a relationship but co-constituted aspects of the same complex system. That said, it is not ecology that is driving its own degradation. The regulatory dynamics that shape landscape condition are overwhelmingly human: it is human practices, power configurations, and institutional arrangements that determine system heading. Our focus, therefore, is on the human drivers of ecological change – the power and regulation that dominate system **patterning**. Shifting these power configurations inevitably creates winners and losers – [trade-offs](#).

Landscapes are produced. We are concerned with how specific actors and power configurations have 'made' landscapes – not 'humanity' in the abstract, but particular constellations of power accumulators and sharers whose practices shape landscape condition. **Changing who produces the landscape means changing who benefits and who bears costs – again, trade-offs.** The global discussion on the Anthropocene references the human production of the earth's surface. For centuries, across all geographic extents, people have modified, tilled, worked, and reshaped the landscapes on which they live or govern. The power vista (see [Integration](#) section) makes this concrete: a landscape's condition is produced by the overlapping regulatory effects of actors with different geographic reach and different stakes in the landscape.

It is useful to regard landscape as vista – a way of seeing how system's elements interact, how its regulatory dynamics produce patterns, and where its heading points. The vista is not a view from outside: we are embedded within the system we observe, and our observation is itself a practice that shapes what we see. Nevertheless, the landscape as vista helps us perceive how the system functions as a whole.

Our landscape model

To help you think about ILM, we propose a three-layered model of what a landscape comprises: the landscape as a complex system, with its emergent behaviour. Embedded inside of this is power, inside of which are embedded practices. These layers interact – they are not mutually independent. Thus, practices pattern, regulate and shape power and its many different articulations, while power does the same to systems. Similarly, systems produce, emerge and constitute power, which then does the same to practices. Whichever variable it is that influences the layer, it 'bleeds' into the surrounding layer.

It is important to note that, as a model, this is a representation of how reality is structured. In the landscape, *things are far more dynamic*. The landscape never stays still. But if you maintain your overview of the system vista, keeping an eye on each of these layers, you pave the way for a successful ILM intervention.

A crucial implication of this model is that the practitioner's task is not to change what people do directly, but to change the conditions under which they act. In a complex system, behaviour is generated by context – by the regulatory environment of power relations, institutional arrangements, and norms within which people operate – rather than mandated by instruction. 'Regulation' is



Click any heading below to go directly to that section

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

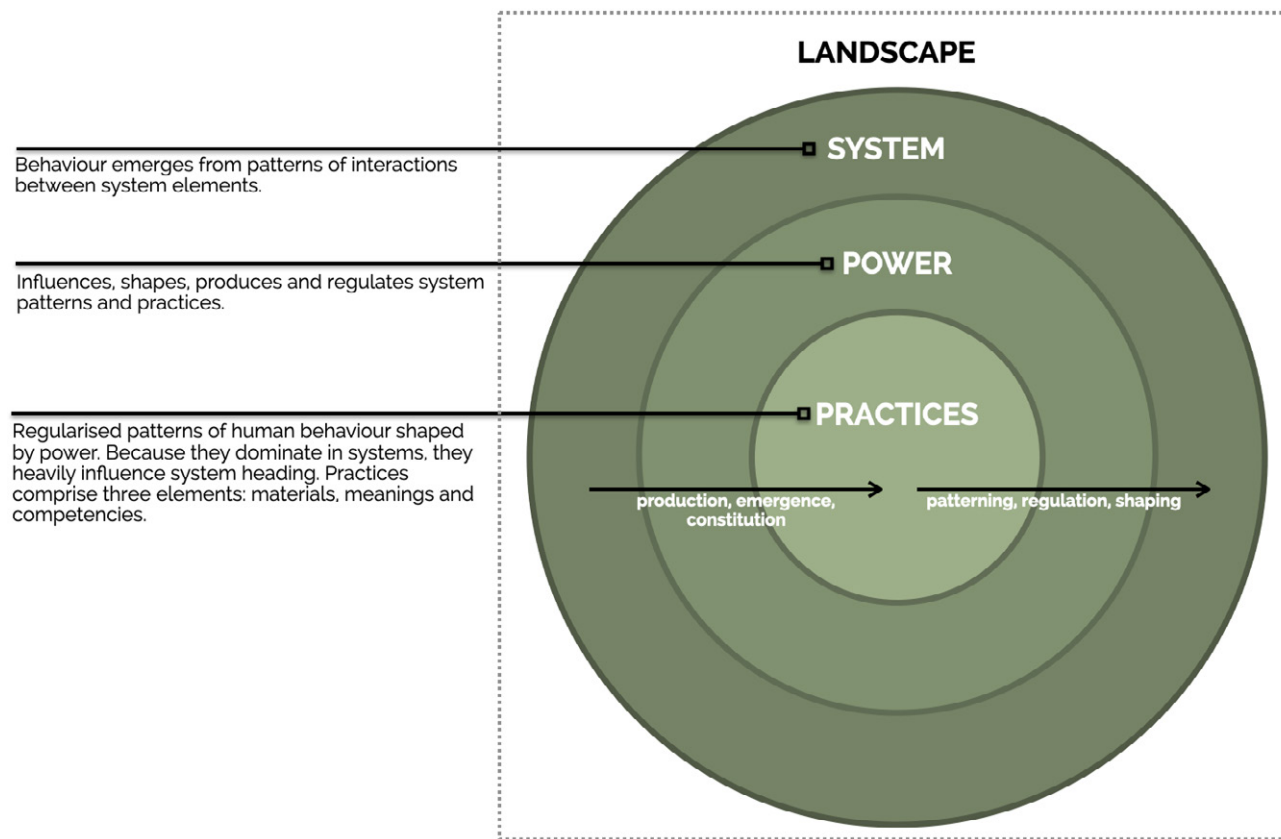
[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning & evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)



how context is constituted: it is the dense web of pressures that together determine what is possible, permissible, and rewarded in a given setting. When we speak of intervening in the regulatory architecture, we are therefore speaking of reshaping the lived context that generates people's everyday behaviour. This is what makes the landscape itself so important as a unit of analysis: the landscape is the context within which practices emerge.

Defining ILM

ILM is an intervention approach in complex landscape systems that influences power and practices to shift heading in integrated social-ecological directions.

The ILM practitioner reads the landscape through its power configurations, practices, and system dynamics to identify opportunity points where influence can shift its heading.

How this may be done is the focus of this Playbook.



OUR THEORY OF CHANGE

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

- The TOC is not “if X then Y” but *release, observe, adjust* – the only causal logic complexity permits, and the basis for everything operational that follows in the Playbook.
- System heading is the composite of *strands* – the trajectories of practices through time – and shifting system heading therefore means shifting the headings of multiple strands by reshaping the interactions between them.
- Practices and their regulatory context are mutually constitutive: foments must work both the *interaction space* (where strands meet and regulate each other) and the *MMC bundle* of the practice itself – regulatory space without practice-level foments yields an empty opening; practice-level foments without regulatory space yields effort that snaps back.
- Foments generate ripples, which are inherently dependent on the intervention’s continued presence; durable change requires escalation to *cascades*, and the foments designed for ripple are typically not the same as those designed for cascade.
- Sensing is the precondition: identifying the major strands, their weight, and the interaction spaces where their regulatory effects converge – without a strand map you cannot identify op-points, design foments or recognize the ripples your intervention generates.
- The intervention team is itself a strand entering the system; a fit-for-purpose, embedded, polymathic team – and ideally a mosaic of distributed teams – is the principal driver of change for the intervention’s duration.
- Integration and ILM are *emergent outcomes* of this process, not methodologies imposed from outside: the shift from one-way regulatory dominance ($A \rightarrow B$) to bi- and multi-directional regulatory exchange ($A \leftrightarrow B \leftrightarrow C$) is the minimum condition for a landscape system to adapt, and is what makes ILM resilient rather than brittle.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

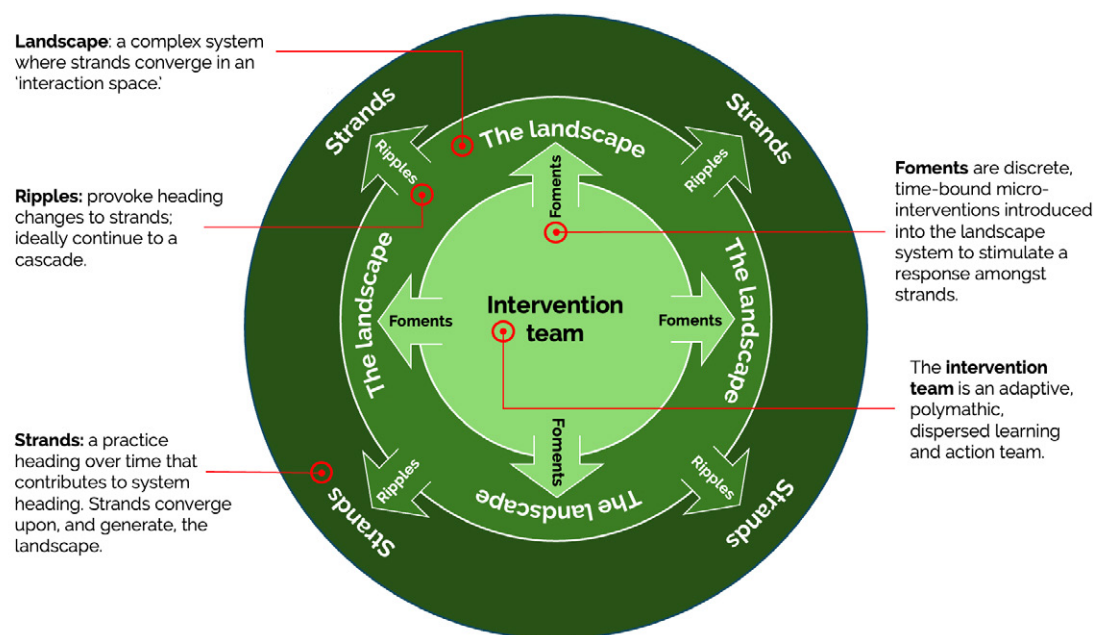
Introduction

In the [Systems and Complexity](#) section, we introduced the theoretical foundations: what complex systems are, how they behave, and why they resist conventional intervention. This section builds on that foundation to present the Playbook's Theory of Change (TOC) – our theory of how change happens in landscape systems, and how an intervention can work *with* that theory rather than against it.

Our TOC does not promise that if you do X, then Y will follow. It argues, instead, that if you sense the system well, identify where it has give, and release carefully designed provocations into those openings, the system will respond – and that response, however imperfect and partial, can be steered towards a shift in heading. The causal pathway is not *if this, then that*. It is **release, observe, adjust**. This approach is the only strategy that complexity permits.

Each concept introduced here is elaborated in its own section elsewhere in the Playbook. This section assembles them into a single narrative so that the reader can see how they fit together before encountering them in operational detail. The graphic below summarizes the TOC's constituent parts – each of which we introduce in this section.

In summary, you want to change system heading towards something that is more integrated. This is expressed as your alt-heading – the [alternative heading](#) you are working towards. As we reveal below, heading comprises strands – the heading of individual practices through time. If a shift in system heading is to occur, then strand headings must too. To achieve this, your intervention will generate ripples, which perturb interactions in the landscape. If these are to be sustained after the end of your intervention and to have broader systemic relevance, they need to be escalated to a cascade. In turn, we stimulate or provoke these perturbations using foments – each designed for a different type of interaction. Newly designed foments are released to maintain positive ripple momentum and/or to escalate ripple to cascade. At the heart of this is the intervention team, with the requisite skills and capabilities needed to be fit-for-purpose.





[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

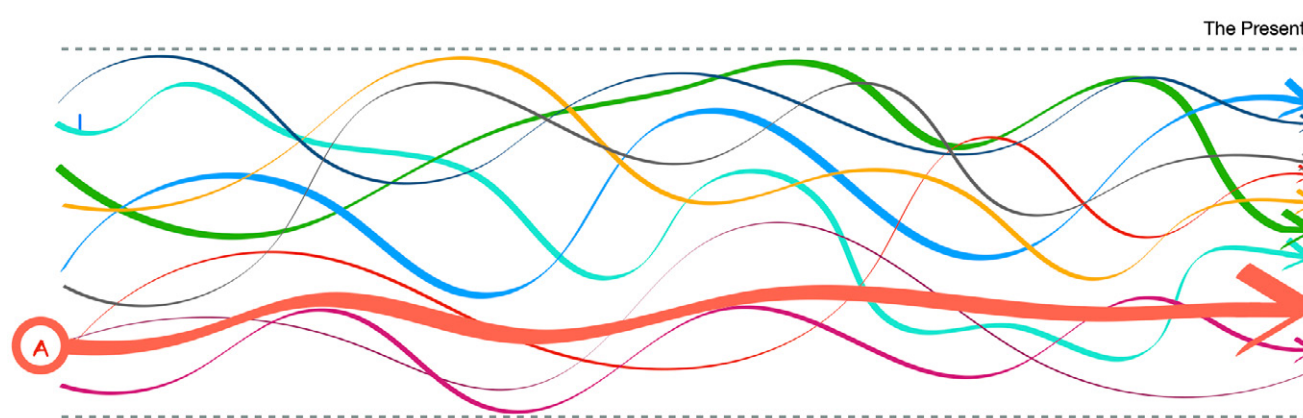
[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Strands

We describe strands in our [Practices](#) section. These are the course a practice takes through time. Strands matter because each strand in a system contributes to a system's heading to lesser (a 'light strand') or greater (a 'heavy strand') degrees. In the first graphic below, Actor A is a heavy strand. Perhaps Actor A is an influential politician, or a large open-cast mining company. The weight of Actor A's strand in the system means that it plays a disproportionate role in defining the system's heading at that moment. There are many other actors in the system, each with their own strand, and these each influence system behaviour – but to a much lesser degree than Actor A.



Look at what the graphic shows. The strands are not parallel – they cross, diverge, and cross again. Each crossing is an **interaction**: a moment where one strand's practices encounter another's, and both are altered – even if only minutely. These interactions are not incidental; they are the micro-regulatory events through which system heading is produced. Every time a farmer sells to a trader, a community petitions a district officer, a herder crosses a farmer's land – strands interact, and each exerts regulatory force on the other. A heavy strand shifts lighter ones more than they shift it: that is what regulatory weight looks like in practice. A light strand barely dents the heavy one. But interactions between light strands can shift both, because neither dominates.

Ripples

Ripples (and cascades) are described in our [Systems and Complexity](#) section. A ripple is a disturbance that travels outward from its point of origin, dissipating as it goes. Energy diminishes with distance. A ripple may be felt, but its effect fades. Many well-intentioned interventions generate ripples: a pilot project inspires a neighbouring community, which inspires another, but each iteration is weaker than the last. Without something to sustain and amplify the signal, the ripple dies out.

An intervention's intent in a landscape is to generate ripples, which it does with foments (see below). When certain foments look promising, new ones are introduced to nudge it closer to the [alt-heading](#) and/or to maintain the momentum of change.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Many donors are preoccupied with scaling up, out and maybe deep. Ripples are a precursor to scaling out – but its effect will remain contingent on the presence of the intervention. Donors are also very preoccupied with what they call ‘sustainability’ – by which they mean that the intervention’s effect should be maintained after it ends. For this to be achieved, a cascade is necessary. The design of the foments that inspired the ripple will probably differ considerably from the design of foments for a cascade.

Our cautions around cascades – primarily unintended consequences – should be borne in mind.

The landscape

As has been described on many occasions in this Playbook, landscapes are socially produced. Their condition emerges as a consequence of what people do within them, and how practices affect each other. It is this characteristic that has led us to focus on practices and strands.

In the previous section, we described an interaction as the moment that one strand encounters another. That interaction causes a mutual change to their respective headings – even if these are tiny. This does not, however, have to be a direct encounter. Strands can influence each other despite their origins being far apart through the influence they respectively shed. In this way, strands regulate each other.

A multitude of interacting strands converge on your landscape. Hence, your landscape is an **interaction space** – because it is here that the mutually shed regulation of multiple strands yields practices that you consider concerning and deleterious to its condition. In ILM terms, your landscape is defined by the density of consequential interactions between strands. It is a highly variable space. The practices that influence it are often stable because dominant strands work to maintain lesser strands on their current trajectory.

Within any landscape, there are many interaction spaces both between local actors, as well as between local actors and far-away ones. The landscape you have selected is where the regulatory effects are *felt*, but the interaction space extends to wherever the regulatory effect *originates*. This explains why landscape interventions so often fail: they treat the landscape as if it is the whole interaction space, when it is only the part of it they can see.

It is the role of foments to disturb these interaction spaces in ways that shift them, and in this way, shift system heading,

Opportunity points

Op-points are conditions in the system where the regulatory exchange between strands creates potential for change. The intervention is attracted to these because, here, the ways in which different sets of practices interact create opportunity to provoke shifts in system heading. An op-point is not a fixed location; it is a condition of regulatory exchange in an interaction space – a moment where a well-designed foment can shift the ways in which interaction occurs. Op-points are not categories of thing



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

(leaders, boundaries, institutions). They are conditions of regulatory exchange that you detect by reading the landscape. The Op-Points section elaborates what these are and introduces six categories of regulatory exchange that represent the most productive openings:

- **Asymmetric dominance** – where a heavy strand's one-way regulatory effect is holding a lighter strand in a deleterious configuration.
- **Regulatory incoherence** – where two heavy strands' regulatory fields contradict each other, creating confused signals and openings.
- **Latent reciprocity** – where a lighter strand already has some capacity to regulate back but is not exercising it.
- **Regulatory weakening** – where a crisis or disruption temporarily reduces a heavy strand's regulatory capacity.
- **Regulatory redirection** – where the most promising move is to deflect a heavy strand's regulatory effect away from the lighter strand you are concerned with.
- **Convergent light strands** – where multiple lighter strands are approaching the point where their cumulative weight could exert meaningful regulatory force.

Foments

If op-points are *where* you intervene, foments are *what* you introduce. A foment is a discrete, time-bound micro-intervention introduced into a complex landscape system to stimulate a response. It is a provocation: it calls forth a response from the system, and the response reveals things about the system that were not visible before. Foments are *both* a diagnostic tool and an instrument with which to shift system heading.

You release a ferment (the collective noun for foments) and observe what happens. The emphasis is on what the system does, not on what you predicted or what you desire the system to do. Whatever response they generate must be treated with equanimity. If even a quarter of the response is moving towards your [alt-heading](#), that is worth pursuing. You can use foments to:

- **Dampen** a strand's regulatory effect on the other strands you are concerned with.
- **Amplify** a strand that is already heading towards your alt-heading.
- **Redirect** a strand so that its regulatory effect no longer has a bearing on your system's heading.

The Foments section describes a palette of foment types: bilateral stakeholder engagement, relational brokering, convened spaces, info-bombs, stories, boundary objects, demonstration effects, endogenous innovators, institutional micro-shifts, and building on what is already there.

Foments target the groups of people who implement a practice. Depending on what your sensing discovers, a practice may have emerged because of a variety of other (regulatory) practices. Consequently, your intervention cannot just focus on the target practice alone. The other practices that influence it must also be targeted, with foments designed to stimulate the response you seek.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

The intervention team

The importance of designing a fit-for-purpose intervention team is elaborated in the relevant section. Given everything above – the complexity of the system, the need to sense strands and their interactions, the strategic design and placement of foments, the reading of interaction spaces that may extend far beyond the landscape – consider what kind of team could actually do this work.

The intervention team – how it is designed, its skills, and the way it conducts itself – has immense centrality to the intervention. This may seem obvious, but in our experience, intervention teams typically over-focus externally rather than internally – as if any team formulation is fit for purpose. This is not the case. The team, its foments and its conduct are the primary drivers of change in the landscape for the intervention's duration.

The team inserts itself into the landscape. It has its own inherent power – just its presence changes things. The team is highly reflexive – it spends considerable effort self-critiquing its work and making sure that it is persistently sensing the landscape. The learning never stops because every time the team does something, it diagnoses and analyses the surrounding landscape system's response. This learning revolves around foments which the team designs, releases, discards and pursues, learning from every experience.

The longer a team has been present in a landscape, the better the chances of success because it has established relationships and has practised the art of sensing that landscape. This is the Playbook's argument for embedded, long-term, polymathic teams – teams that are located in the landscape, that feel it daily, and that derive income from multiple sources rather than a single donor or project cycle. A parachuted team cannot read the system well enough to design good foments, cannot maintain the relationships through which foments travel, and cannot monitor the slow signals of cascading change that unfold over years.

Intervention logic

Sensing the system

Your sensing work must identify the major strands and estimate their weight – which actors' practices contribute most to current heading, and which contribute least. But sensing must also attend to interactions: where do strands come into contact? What happens when they do? Which interactions shift headings, and which leave strands unchanged? The anchoring question for sensing is: **who is doing what, when, where, why, how – and to whom?**

The 'and to whom' is critical. Without it, you are describing behaviour – what an individual does. With it, you are describing practice-as-regulation: the regulatory effect of one strand's practices on others. This is what distinguishes a practice from a behaviour. A behaviour can be changed by incentive or coercion. A practice can only be changed by reconfiguring the bundle of MMCs that constitutes it AND the regulatory context that produces it – the interaction space within which it sits.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

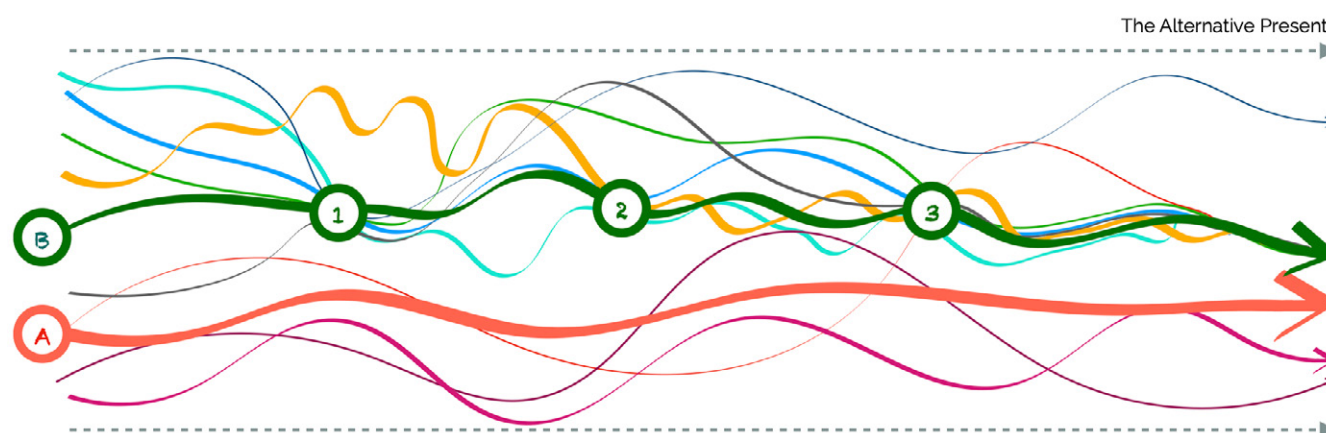
PART 6 Glossary

The **power vista** – the map of who exerts regulatory influence over whom – is, in these terms, a strand map. It shows the weight of different strands, the direction of their regulatory effect, and the interaction spaces where their fields overlap. Reading this map is the precondition for everything that follows.

Intervention intent

The graphic below shows how this works in practice. Actor B – an intervention – enters a system where Actor A's heavy strand dominates heading. Actor B releases a series of foments designed to enable greater levels of interaction and collaboration among the lighter strands. Each juncture in the graphic is a foment – a designed interaction that brings multiple strands into contact and structures the terms of that contact.

At Juncture 1, perhaps this is a convened space – a multi-stakeholder engagement that pulls many strands into the same moment. The interaction produces small shifts in several strands' headings. By Juncture 2, some actors have strayed, but many return – their strands are beginning to converge through repeated interaction. At Juncture 3, most of the actors are on board – their strands are increasingly aligned, and they are collectively influencing system dynamics.



Two things must be stressed. First, foments rarely proceed in a clean sequence. The foment at Juncture 1 may fail and have to be discarded, and only the foment at Juncture 2 gains traction. Actor B needs to be equipped with multiple foment designs and ideas to see what takes and what does not. Actor B then learns cumulatively and introduces additional foments to reinforce the initial shift. Second, ideally, Actor B is not alone. There are several teams distributed across the landscape, each targeting those responsible for a different set of practices, with their own foments. This dispersed approach is described in the [Adaptivity](#) section.

What Actor B has done, in strand terms, is changed the trajectories of many light strands by working their interactions. Combined, all of these actors now out-influence Actor A in terms of determining system behaviour – a shift in system heading has occurred. The system has been repatterned.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

All landscapes will have examples of heavy strands regulating lighter ones. It is not necessarily the case that the heavier strand will resist change to the lighter strand or to its own heading. In an ideal world, indeed, Actor A is supportive of a systemic shift and is well engaged in the intervention's deliberations. Because Actor A's strand is so influential in the system's heading, having it as a willing participant significantly increases the likelihood that a shift will happen. Your sensing must read the actual configuration, not assume the adversarial one.

Shifting strands by reshaping interaction spaces creates the conditions for practice change. It does not produce it. The lighter strand's own practices have their own internal logic – their MMC configuration (see the [Practices](#) section) – and foments must also target these directly. Regulatory space without practice-level foments yields an opening that nothing fills. Practice-level foments without regulatory space yields effort that snaps back. Both sides of the interaction space must be worked: the regulatory exchange between strands, and the practices within them.

How this yields integration and ILM

Integrated landscape management is, in the Playbook's terms, the outcome of this process – not a methodology imposed from outside, but an emergent property that the system generates when its interaction spaces are working productively. Integration is what happens when strands that were previously operating in isolation, or under one-way regulatory dominance, begin to interact bi- or multi-directionally. When the upstream irrigator and the downstream fisher are in genuine deliberative exchange about water use – not because a project convened a workshop, but because the regulatory conditions have shifted enough that both parties have voice – that is integration. When a district officer includes community livelihood data in a planning report not because the project told them to, but because the institutional micro-shift made it the sensible thing to do – that is integration.

Integration, in strand terms, is the shift from $A \rightarrow B$ (one-way regulatory dominance) towards $A \ll B \ll C$ (bi- or multi-directional regulatory exchange). It is the compromising sub-state described in the [Integration](#) section, and the deliberative equilibrium described in the [Compromise](#) section. It does not require that all strands agree. It requires that they regulate each other rather than one regulating all the rest. Played correctly, this extends into the collectivist state, where actors are less interested in 'power over' and more interested in 'power sharing.'

ILM is what a landscape looks like when this integration is sustained: when the multiple strands – ecological, economic, social, institutional – are in productive tension with each other rather than in one-way dominance. No single strand – whether it is agribusiness, conservation, or government authority – determines heading by itself. Instead, heading emerges from the deliberative interaction of multiple strands, each exerting regulatory force on the others, each adjusting in response to what the others do. [trade-offs](#) are not eliminated; they are deliberated and negotiated. Conflicts are not resolved; they are held in productive tension through institutional arrangements that give all parties voice.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

This is not utopian. It is the minimum condition for a landscape system to adapt. A system where one strand dominates – where regulatory exchange is one-way – is brittle. It can only respond to change through the heavy strand's perspective, which is necessarily partial, and societally and environmentally problematic. A system where multiple strands interact bi- or multi-directionally is resilient – it can draw on the knowledge, diversity, perspectives, and adaptive capacity of all its actors. This is why the Playbook insists that integration is not a normative luxury but a functional requirement: it is how landscape systems survive.

The honest epistemology

This theory of change is honest about what it can and cannot promise. It can promise that foments will perturb the system. It cannot promise in which direction the perturbation will move. It can promise that sensing will reveal the system's regulatory architecture. It cannot promise that your reading will be correct. It can promise that a well-designed ferment, approaching the interaction space from multiple angles, will generate learning. It cannot promise that the learning will confirm your initial proposition.

Release, observe, adjust. This is the Playbook's epistemological commitment. It is not a failure of rigour; it is the only form of rigour that complexity permits. It acknowledges that the best possible path to system change is to ripple an emergent one. It seeks to treat the roof for the leak, rather than merely placing a bucket under it. Each cycle of release-observe-adjust deepens your read of the system, sharpens your foment design, and moves – however unevenly – towards the [alt-heading](#). The outcome will almost certainly look nothing like what you initially proposed. But if the system's heading has shifted, the intervention has succeeded – regardless of whether it shifted through the causal chain you predicted.

The take-away here is that if the intent is to generate a shift in system heading, that challenge must be approached from a multitude of different directions, and that the likelihood of failure is high. What matters is whether, cumulatively, the ferment has nudged heading. Not whether any single foment worked as planned.

References and further reading

Shove E, Pantzar M and Watson M. 2012. *The dynamics of social practice: everyday life and how it changes*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.



PART 2

Concepts



PRACTICES

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

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

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

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

Key things to note about practices are:

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

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you're interested, check out the 'evidence page' for this section here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Practices, power and systems

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

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

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

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

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



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

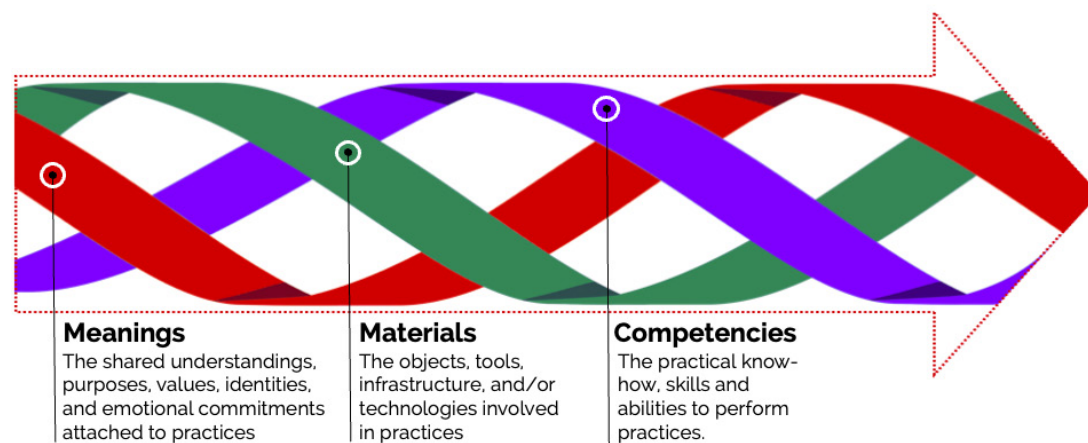
Characterizing practices

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

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

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

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



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



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

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

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

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

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

	Meanings	Materials	Competencies
Examples	Cattle have huge cultural significance, indicating status and wealth.	Land, grazing, water supply, kraals	Herding, veterinary skills, fighting skills, knowledge about grasses
Strategies for change (examples):	• Reframe what the practice signifies or why it matters. • Connect practices to different identities or values. • Change the social status or desirability attached to doing something. • Develop 'recruit interventions'¹	Introduce new materials such as technologies, or physical infrastructure.	Introduce new materials that require new competencies.
Examples	Honour the culture but focus on reducing the impact of large herds – e.g., stall feeding.	Stalls, value chains for fodder, consider costs and distribution.	Stall construction and maintenance; caring for semi-stationary cattle.

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



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Extending the MMCs

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

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

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

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

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

2 Sen, 1985 [1999]



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Capabilities

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Strands

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



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

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

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

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

Box 2: Strands and path dependency

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

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

Our strands incorporate path dependency, with three important extensions.

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



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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

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

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

Mapping practices – analysing MMCs

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

To fill the matrix in, pose the following questions:

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

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

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

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



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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POWER

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.¹ 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.

¹ “[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.

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you're interested, check out the 'evidence page' for this section here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.”² 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.³ 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.

² Dahl, 1957.

³ French, 1956.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.⁴ 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’⁵ 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.”⁶ 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.⁷ 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

Foucault⁸ defines government not as the state, but as the ‘conduct of conduct’ – which one commentator translates explicitly as “the regulation of behaviours.”⁹ 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.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Julia Black: decentred regulation

Julia Black¹⁰ 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 Peluso¹¹ 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.¹²

¹⁰ Black, 2001, 2002.

¹¹ Ribot and Peluso, 2003.

¹² Peluso and Ribot, 2020.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning
& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.”¹³ 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.

13 Quote from BBC Radio 4, 2011.



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 Birney¹⁴ 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’s¹⁵ ‘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 Bourdieu¹⁶ 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,¹⁷ and habitus reproduces the field, generating regulatory loops between power, dispositions, and system patterning.

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.’¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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

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.

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

What these thinkers share is the insight that power has a *dispositional capacity*²⁰ 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:²¹ “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

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



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

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.²² 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

²² Fuchs, 2023.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

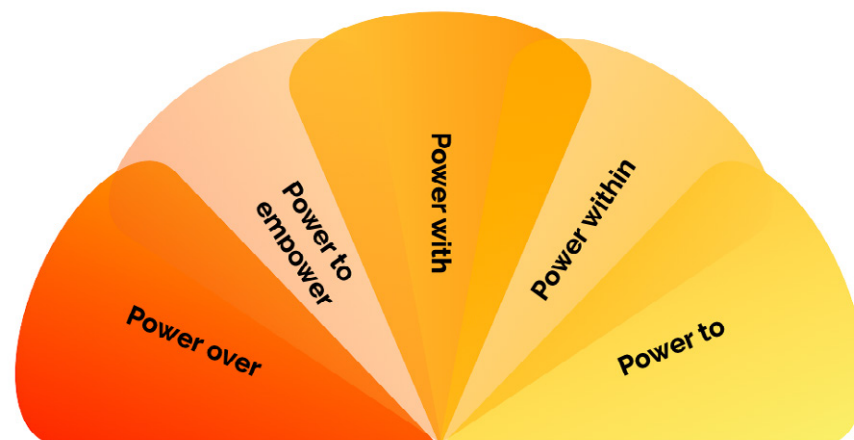
PART 6 Glossary

edges of these forests secured the transfer of management authority to elected village governments. Crucially, as Alden Wily²³ 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:²⁴

- **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.



²³ Wily, 1999.

²⁴ 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.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.²⁵ 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.

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.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

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 Scott²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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

²⁶ Scott, 1998.

²⁷ For example: de Sardan, 1999.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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 them²⁸ thereby constituting space.²⁹ 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

²⁸ Emirbayer, 1997.

²⁹ Massey, 2012.



PART 1 Introduction

- Background
- A walk through the tea
- Landscapes
- Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

- Practices
- Power
- Governance & institutions
- Leadership
- Unstated intent
- Systems & complexity
- Adaptivity
- Foments
- Opportunity points
- Integration

PART 3 Practice

- Design & implementation
- Team design
- Positionality
- Sensing
- Alternative heading
- Stakeholders
- Monitoring, learning & evaluation
- Compromise
- Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

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.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

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 rights³⁰ – 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.³¹

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.

³⁰ See, for example, Fetterman et al, 2018; Maiorano et al, 2021.

³¹ Balint and Mashinya, 2006.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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Governance and Institutions

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)



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.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

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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Leadership

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

- Leadership is a major opportunity point in any landscape because leaders distribute and redistribute power – they are the opposite of power accumulators, and their presence is often what makes collaboration possible.
- Leaders emerge rather than being appointed; they advise rather than direct, and bear disproportionate personal risk to generate group benefit – qualities distinct from the ‘position power’ of office holders.
- Leadership need not be confined to a single person: in commoning sub-states it takes the form of *leadership ecology* – distributed, emergent and embedded in networks.
- Effective leaders are foxes who know when to become hedgehogs: open and synthesising while sensing, decisive and singular when the moment to act arrives.
- Leadership capability is not optional in the intervention team: teams need members who can convene, mediate and hold deliberative space without dominating it.

Leadership is an essential ingredient in successful ILM as well as being a major opportunity point in a landscape.

Leadership is widely regarded as a multi-faceted practice centred on personal mastery, relational influence, and team orchestration.¹ Leadership suggests fostering the conditions, and providing the nurture, for people to exercise and expand their capabilities. It references the ability to motivate collective movement. It is important to note that while a ‘leader’ may be an individual, ‘leadership’ need not be confined to a single person.

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you’re interested, check out the ‘evidence page’ for this section here.

¹ Hill and Lineback, 2011.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

The corporate sector recognizes that leadership is an essential resource to have in successful corporations, and therefore provides us with many useful adages:

- Leaders *share* trust.
- Leadership without sincerity isn't.
- Leaders are people who lead with intent, not explicit instruction.
- Leadership is the art of creating greatness in other people.
- The leader who does not listen will eventually hear silence.
- Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.
- A genuine leader does not search for consensus but moulds it.

“A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves” – Lao Tzu

In our view, successful leaders *attract trust* because they are consistent and reliable under risk. In addition, leaders emerge rather than being appointed;² they advise or suggest rather than direct; they delegate and mediate. Importantly, leaders bear disproportionate risk to generate group benefits – leaders, for example, are unafraid of trialling and uncertainty, willing to be wrong (and to admit it), and self-assured in unfamiliar spaces. Above all, leaders dispense and redistribute power constantly – leadership is the opposite of power accumulation. But leaders also provide heading, derived from their jack or jill-of-all-trades-master-none-capabilities (Box 1).

In our view, most collaboration exhibits leadership – successful collaborative states may have more than one leader. Whatever the case, when you walk into the collaborative sub-state, the leaders will not be immediately obvious, and they are unlikely to announce themselves. Leaders rarely see themselves as leaders, but participants in a collective ambition. The respect that a community holds for them will gradually reveal who they are.

In commoning sub-states, there is another variant of leadership – leadership ecology. This refers to a systemic, emergent leadership. It has three core principles:³

- **Interdependence:** leadership is relational, embedded in networks that influence both internal dynamics and external ecosystems.
- **Emergence:** arises from collective actions and feedback, not top-down control, enabling responses to complexity like adaptive challenges.
- **Ethical focus:** aligns with harmony in nature, systemic ethics, and connectivity across social, environmental, and technological realms.

² This is important. People appointed to a position hold ‘position power’ – i.e., that power that comes with the position. While a person who has position power may be a leader, it is not because of their position. Good leaders and those holding position power can both be respected, although for very different reasons. Good leaders are respected because of the societal risk they carry, the wisdom they can dispense, and/or the trust they can engender. Position power holder demand respect because they hold positions of authority.

³ Wielkiewicz and Stelzner, 2005.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Fox or hedgehog?

The Ancient Greek poet Archilochus is famous for his line about how a hedgehog is good at doing just one thing, whereas a fox is good at doing many things. The idea was pretty obscure for 2,500 years until the philosopher Isaiah Berlin made it mainstream, arguing that great thinkers tend to fall into one camp or the other. Macro vs. micro. Which raises the obvious question: why not be both?

This is basically how military historian John Lewis Gaddis opens his book *On Grand Strategy*. But Gaddis flips the question. Not “why not be both?” but “If being both is the obvious play, why do people fail at it so often?” Gaddis draws on the work of the psychologist Philip E. Tetlock, who studied over 21,000 predictions on world politics from experts in universities, government, and think tanks, made between 1988 and 2003. In his book *Expert Political Judgment*, Tetlock found that who these people were made almost no difference. Background, status, job title, political leanings, optimism, pessimism. None of it mattered.

What mattered was *how they thought*. And the variable that predicted accuracy was whether they operated like foxes or hedgehogs. **And foxes won. Big time.** The hedgehogs drilled down on one framework to form their opinions. The foxes stitched together information from diverse sources. They were also more open-minded, and less defensive when challenged.

You may think that the Foxes were more popular, but interestingly the hedgehogs were far more likely to show up on TV and speak at conferences. Turns out, confidence reads well on camera. It just doesn't predict much. But Gaddis doesn't stop at 'be a fox.' Citing Sun Tzu (the famed Chinese military general, strategist, philosopher, and writer), he argues that what great leaders actually do is something harder. They stay in fox mode while they're gathering, listening, and synthesising. Then, when it's time to act, they flip. They go full hedgehog. Decisive. Singular. Committed.

For Gaddis, the conclusion is simple: the issue isn't whether you can be both, or should be both. You must be both. The real skill isn't living in one mode. It's the toggle. Knowing when to stay open and when to close the door. When to keep listening and when to move.

With every great collapse of a firm, a battle, or a country, there is a leader who got stuck in one mode and couldn't find the other.

Derived from: *GapingVoid Culture*. 2026. *Fox or hedgehog?* <https://www.gapingvoid.com/fox-or-hedgehog/>



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

References and further reading

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Unstated intent

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you’re interested, check out the ‘evidence page’ for this section here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning
& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

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.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

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.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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[LINK](#)

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SYSTEMS AND COMPLEXITY

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

- Landscape systems are complex systems – countless heterogeneous elements whose interactions generate emergent patterns; the system is never the sum of its parts but the product of their interaction.
- Our foundational analytical commitment is the *inbetweenness of things*: what passes between elements matters more than what the elements are, which is why we focus on strands, interaction spaces and regulatory architecture rather than actor catalogues.
- Complex systems generate weak signals – early indicators of emerging change that standard monitoring is calibrated to miss – and detecting them requires information architecture oriented towards surprise.
- Everything is horizontal¹: hierarchical scale thinking is a tool that power accumulators use to claim primacy; what looks vertical is in fact accumulated horizontal power, and influence travels through extending relations, not climbing scales.
- Regulation is how power operates: dampening loops constrain, amplifying loops reinforce, and the practitioner's task is to change the context that generates behaviour – not to mandate the behaviour itself.

What are systems?

A system is “a set of things—people, cells, molecules, or whatever – interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time.”¹. These ‘things’ are called **elements**, and may be people, rocks, soil, trees, air or whatever, and their associated behaviour. The elements are **interconnected** – i.e., they have relationships, and all elements are mutually influencing – each element affects other elements and *vice versa*. Thus, a farmer has a relationship with the soil, the behaviour of which s/he influences by applying fertilisers or tilling it. It is often said that a system is more than the sum of its parts – because of the interconnections between elements. A system is never the sum of its parts; it is the product of their interaction.

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you're interested, check out the 'evidence page' for this section here.

1 Meadows, 2009.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

The interactions between system elements, **patterns** will emerge – not at the level of the individual element, but collectively. For example, groups of people in one part of the system may farm in a similar way – because they learn from each other, or social pressures encourage them to do so.

Patterns may be defined as **observed regularities** within the system. They are a key focus of our approach. Depending on the size of the system we are looking at, different ‘clusters’ of patterns occur at different places in the system. These clusters affect and influence each other, and in combination, add up to the overall behaviour of the system.

If a system is disturbed by an external pressure (e.g., a drought, or an intervention, etc.) then its behaviour changes and a new set of patterns **emerge** – which in turn, will influence system behaviour. For our purposes, such emergence is very important. If we intervene in a landscape, we ideally want a new set of behaviours to emerge.

Landscapes as complex systems

Landscape systems are complex systems. These are heterogeneous collections of people, institutions, ecosystems, technologies, and meanings whose relations generate emergent patterns. Think of a complex system as all the different ingredients and interactions that make a landscape what it is: farmers and their practices, soil and its organisms, markets and their price signals, traditions and their meanings, rainfall patterns and their variability, technologies and their uses, policies and their enforcement (or lack thereof). None of these elements alone defines the landscape; it is their *relationships* and *interactions* that create the patterns we observe.

A complex system is constantly being *assembled* and *disassembled* through the practices of actors within it. It is not a fixed structure but an ongoing process – patterns stabilize for a time, then shift as conditions change or new elements enter. When we speak of ‘system boundaries,’ we are really describing where this system’s strongest relationships peter out and other relationships become more influential. These boundaries are fuzzy rather than sharp – a village system overlaps with a watershed system, which overlaps with a regional market system, and so on.

A farmer’s decision is shaped by soil moisture (immediate), market prices (regional to global), cultural norms (historical-local), and climate patterns (planetary). None of these is ‘above’ or ‘below’ the others in some hierarchy. They’re all *co-present*, all exerting influence through feedback loops that operate at different spatial and temporal ranges. This is what makes landscape systems complex: countless heterogeneous elements whose relationships **ripple** in all directions.

“Dividing a cow in half does not give you two smaller cows. You may end up with a lot of hamburger, but the essential nature of ‘cow’ – a living system capable, among other things, of turning grass into milk – then would be lost. This is what we mean when we say a system functions as a ‘whole’. Its behavior depends on its entire structure and not just on adding up the behavior of its different pieces.” – Draper Kauffman Jr.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Systems have purpose. “The purpose of a system is what it does” Stafford Beer has famously written.² System purpose does not emerge from what actors say it is, or what their ambition within the system is. Purpose arises out of millions of micro-interactions between elements in the system that culminate in its purpose. We can only deduce system purpose from its behaviour. Discovering a system’s ‘real’ purpose is important if we are going to influence it.

Complex systems also generate what the strategic foresight literature calls weak signals: early indicators of emerging patterns that are typically drowned out by dominant information flows. A new practice appearing at the margins of a landscape, a subtle shift in how people talk about their resources, a small behavioural change that has not yet compounded into a visible trend – these are weak signals. Complex systems can change both gradually and abruptly, and the gradual change can be deceptive – it may represent slow drift towards a threshold (a ‘tipping point’ which we describe below) beyond which change becomes sudden and difficult to reverse. Weak signals are often the earliest evidence that such a transition is approaching. The standard monitoring and evaluation apparatus is precisely calibrated to miss them, because it measures what the logframe says should be measured, not what is actually emerging. Detecting weak signals requires an information architecture oriented towards surprise rather than confirmation – a point we return to in our discussion of adaptivity and opportunity points.

All complex systems have several important characteristics, which are important to bear in mind:

- They comprise millions of interacting elements.
- These interactions regulate the system – each interaction modifies the system.
- At system level, they display behaviour – which is their purpose.
- Small interventions may yield big results because of the ‘rippling effect’.
- They are non-linear.
- They display high uncertainty and low predictability
- They can only be understandable in retrospect. Complexity prevents prediction.
- Rigid protocols don’t really work.
- Success once does not mean success again
- There is a high risk of unanticipated consequences.

Understanding system conditions

All landscapes are complex systems – they exhibit self-organizing behaviour where patterns emerge from the interactions of many actors without central control. But not all complex systems behave the same way. To understand how landscapes pattern themselves and how we might influence those patterns, we need to examine the conditions that shape system behaviour.

2 Beer, 2002.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Glenda Eoyang offers a practical approach to this challenge. She argues that there are three fundamental conditions that determine the speed, path, and outcomes of how complex systems self-organise: Containers, Differences and Exchanges (CDE).³ This CDE framework provides a sufficient way to analyse and diagnose landscape systems. Eoyang characterizes these conditions by deploying extremes (as you will see). In reality, most of these conditions exist somewhere in between.

Containers (C): what bounds the system?

The container defines who or what is included in a complex system and constrains the probability of contact among actors. Containers have *edges* rather than rigid boundaries – think of them as zones where relationships strengthen or weaken rather than hard lines. For landscape work, the landscape itself is the container: the system in which our intervention operates. But the container is porous. Influences, materials, people and meanings flow across its edges constantly – a landscape's practices are shaped by global commodity prices, national policies, regional migration patterns and neighbouring land uses that originate well beyond whatever edges we draw. Recognizing this porosity is essential: it means that containing change within neat boundaries is impossible, and that we must attend to what crosses the edges as much as to what happens within them. Eoyang identifies between 'tight' and 'loose' containers.

Tight containers have relatively clear edges and well-defined membership. There is a high probability that actors within the system will interact – in part because system actors have shared identity or commitment. Examples could be a cohesive community organization, a formal multi-stakeholder platform, or a members' club.

Loose containers have fuzzy or ambiguous edges. There is a low probability that actors will interact, and shared identity is weak. For example, an administrative district that does not match ecological boundaries, informal networks, or actors who happen to share a landscape but don't see themselves as connected. The assemblage exists but barely coheres – relationships are sparse and weak.

When you select a landscape to work in you will be tempted to see and sense your system in terms of where you perceive your landscape's edge to run. Perhaps this is where an ecosystem tapers off, or an administrative boundary. It is essential, however, that for your sensing work the landscape is understood as embedded – the container that is your landscape is located within other, potentially broader, containers. Eoyang defines containers as constraining contact among actors. We agree – although by 'contact' we understand that this may not be physical. The strands that regulate practices in your landscape may issue from places outside your landscape; will involve people who have never met each other; and who are practising things that may be very different from the practice that concerns you. This is why seeing a landscape as an interaction space makes sense.

³ Eoyang, 2001.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Difference (D): what significant distinctions exist?

Difference establishes the potential for change within the system. Significant differences are those that matter to actors and create tensions or opportunities for new patterns to emerge.

In a complex system with **high difference**, there are many significant distinctions between actors in terms of power, resources, interests, knowledge, values, or goals. High potential for change exists here. High differences can drive either innovation or conflict. Examples might be large power asymmetries between elites and communities, conflicting land-use visions, competing resource claims, or vast differences in education and access to information.

With **low difference**, there are few significant distinctions. There is high conformity and homogeneity. This brings stability but limited capacity for adaptation. For example, societies of a single culture, farming communities with similar practices, or groups with aligned political interests. When one element fails, all may fail similarly.

Power asymmetries are a difference and attract much attention in this Playbook because shifting these can – and will – result in a system heading shift. In this sense, Eoyang sees difference as an opportunity point. If you have a technical background, you will be tempted to see difference in terms of contrast: people with power, people without; inside the system, outside the system. Eoyang encourages this kind of differential by defining high and low difference. It is, however, essential that you do not bifurcate your system into contrasts – most life is not black or white but, rather, different shades of grey. It is these that should be sensed, rather than exceptional, highly contrasting, outlier trends.

Human life tends to be highly routinized – comprising practices. In this sense, strands can also be understood as a set of routinized activities through time. Routines confer stability to a system, and humans will tolerate high levels of injustice in order to achieve it. Modulated by regulations, humans will still craft practices through the complexity – strands – in order to introduce shades of grey to the black and white contrasts that regulation imposes.

Exchange (E): how do actors connect?

Exchange refers to the connections that transfer information, energy, or resources across differences within a container. This is how relationships actually operate – through flows of communication, goods, coercion, knowledge, or influence.

Where there are **tight exchanges**, changes are fast and predictable. Dense connections exist between actors who have frequent interaction and feedback. For example, daily market interactions, close social networks, or dense communication channels. Changes *ripple* quickly through the system – when one actor shifts practice, others notice and respond rapidly.

In contrast, where there are **loose exchanges**, changes are slow and unpredictable. Connections are weak and infrequent, and information flow is limited. For example, occasional meetings, weak ties between distant actors, poor communication infrastructure. Changes remain localized – innovations in one part of the system do not spread because the connections are not there to carry them.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

We see exchanges as similar to what happens in our interaction spaces. What is exchanged here is regulation, which, in turn, refers back to power. In our [Power](#) section, we distinguish between power accumulators and sharers. This is a *distributional* system – how power is distributed in a systemic state or sub-state (explored in our [Integration](#) section). In our Trade-offs section, we appeal to you to understand power as – to some extent – material: if you give power to one group, you are taking it away from another. These concepts are important because when it comes to power, the regulatory force it delivers determines which practices emerge in a system, and retains them in place.

How system conditions create landscape patterns

The CDE conditions interact to shape landscape system behaviour. When exchanges are tight (actors frequently connected), information, resources, and influence flow rapidly. Changes cascade quickly through the system, and predictable patterns emerge. In Norway, for example, communities are highly connected and social pressure creates conformity. Dense feedback loops enforce social norms without central control, creating high predictability through emergent self-organization.

When exchanges are loose (actors weakly connected), information and influence flow slowly. Changes tend to be localized and do not *ripple*. Pattern formation is unpredictable. Farmers making independent decisions with minimal interaction create unpredictable system-wide outcomes – each doing their own thing without the connections that would align behaviours.

If differences are suppressed (homogeneity is enforced), there is limited capacity for adaptation. Patterns may be stable, but 'brittle'. Such complex systems are vulnerable to shocks – when one element fails, all fail similarly. Monoculture agriculture or hierarchical coordination that eliminates diversity reveal suppressed difference and highly brittle systemics.

When difference is engaged productively (diversity is welcomed or encouraged), adaptive capacities are high. **Resilience** occurs due to 'redundancy' – the system becomes more robust and able to withstand shocks when it has multiple, overlapping ways of performing essential functions rather than relying on a single element or pathway. Innovation emerges because of difference. Diversified farming systems with multiple livelihood strategies are far more capable of absorbing shocks.

Diagnosing landscape conditions

For each set of CDE conditions, we can assess the *condition* of a landscape system by posing the following questions:

Containers

- What bounds this landscape system?
- Who is included or excluded?
- How strong are its edges?
- Are edges imposed externally or self-maintained?



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Differences

- What significant distinctions exist between actors?
- Power? Resources? Knowledge? Values? Goals?
- Are differences engaged productively, suppressed, or driving conflict?
- Is homogeneity being enforced?

Exchanges

- How frequently do actors interact?
- What flows between them? (Information? Resources? Coercion?)
- Are exchanges tight (dense, frequent) or loose (sparse, occasional)?
- Are exchanges unidirectional (from powerful to weak) or mutual?

The patterns we observe emerge from how these conditions interact. Understanding CDE helps us identify 'opportunity points' (op-points) for intervention.

System states and tipping points

To understand how complex systems behave over time, we need to distinguish between three related but distinct concepts:

Patterns are the observed regularities in how system elements interact and behave. Patterns emerge from the interactions of system elements. As you will see, we are particularly interested in practices – what people in the landscape do to affect its condition. Patterns of practices can be observed in the system – like farmers in one area adopting similar practices because they learn from each other. Patterns can shift and change without the system fundamentally reorganizing. Patterns are fundamental to system behaviour.

System 'state' refers to when a system's dynamics are similar across time – a relatively stable configuration of patterns. A system maintains the same state even as individual patterns fluctuate, as long as the overall configuration remains similar. For example, a landscape might remain dominated by monoculture, even if there are small 'islands' of diversified organic farming.

When a system moves from one state to another, it is said to '**tip**'. A good example of a (very sudden) tip is when an ice cube turns to water. You can reduce the temperature by a degree, and nothing happens; then another degree, and again, nothing happens. But then, suddenly, we observe a puddle forming underneath it, and after that, the ice cube melts pretty quickly. There are things going on in the ice cube that we don't observe – in fact, systems may have tipped before we even know about it.⁴ Tipping represents a fundamental reorganization – a qualitative change in how the system operates, not just a shift in direction.

“Systems don't get solved. At best, we hope to shift systems to a healthier state.”

“Systems don't just need things fixed. They need healing – healing of relationships, historic inequities, destructive patterns, and the environment.”

“Systems are infinite. There is no finish line that can be crossed in days or even a few years. Maintaining healthy systems is an ongoing task.”

– Rob Ricigliano



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

System heading

System heading (or trajectory) refers to the direction and trajectory the system is moving. Like a ship or an aeroplane has a heading relative to its position now. We judge this heading based on the system's history and where we are in the present moment. Therefore, it seems plausible that it will continue on its present heading in the absence of some pressure to move it. A system can change its heading – shifting direction gradually – while remaining in the same state. Heading is determined by which patterns are strengthening or weakening, which feedback loops are dominant, and how power is flowing through the system. Shifting a system's heading inevitably redistributes power, costs and benefits among agents – these are trade-offs.

When we intervene in a landscape system, we are attempting to change its heading – to shift its course so it inclines towards more sustainable, just, or resilient configurations. This [alternative heading](#) ('alt-heading'). As we noted above, practices are one, dominant, set of patterns. What people are doing in the landscape drives its condition. It follows, then, that by focusing on influencing practices, we may be able to shift system heading.

In our [Practices](#) section, we discuss how the passage of a practice through time is called a 'strand'. Every actor in a landscape has a strand, although some will be much more influential than others. It is important to note that strands influence – or regulate – each other. One strand may ensure that another is retained in place – for example, a set of deleterious practices in a landscape is retained and does not change because a dominant strand prevents alternatives from emerging. It is also important to note that a strand typically comprises practices that are unlike the practice in another strand. Thus, you may be focused on a set of farming practices in your landscape, but these are regulated by the political practices of people in a far-away government. Where this political activity encounters local farming practice is called an 'interaction space' – a space where multitudes of strands converge and – in combination, generate an effect (on landscape condition) and determine a trajectory (of your system's heading).

We influence patterns by strengthening some (by amplifying feedback), weakening others (by dampening feedback), and introducing new patterns through our interventions. Over time, sustained heading changes can move a system towards thresholds where state changes become possible.

It is important to note that we cannot know where a system will end up. This is a key characteristic of complex systems. We can detect its heading, however, as the system stands right now, in this moment.

Resilience and diversity

Resilience is a much-used systems concept. This refers to a system's ability to withstand shocks and stresses. It might get knocked off course for a bit, but given time, it returns to its former state.

Resilience, however, depends critically on **diversity**. In systems where all of the elements are more or less the same, they can display properties that suggest they are impervious to contextual changes. The relationships between them all continue humming



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

along in much the same way. Until they don't. Because of homogeneity, when one element collapses, they all collapse in much the same way. The 2008 financial crisis, for example, revealed high levels of homogeneity among the banks, all super connected, and the collapse was sudden and severe.

Homogeneity is not good for system resilience. Diversity, on the other hand, is good for it – this is because internal risks are contained. If one element and its surrounding connections fails, then because of dissimilar elements and connections, the failure ends there and doesn't *ripple*.⁴

Diversity is not merely beneficial for resilience; it is a functional requirement of working in complex systems. A system's regulatory capacity must match the variety of challenges it faces. A landscape system that lacks diversity – of people, perspectives, knowledge systems, and cognitive styles – lacks the variety needed to generate novel responses to novel challenges. This includes neurodiversity: the non-linear pattern recognition and lateral thinking that institutions tend to filter out are precisely the cognitive capacities that complex situations most demand. Stimulating a system with diversity – introducing perspectives that do not fit the prevailing frame – is itself a form of intervention, because it increases the system's capacity to adapt.

System interconnections

We have stressed that complex systems are characterized by their interconnections – the relationships between elements. These interconnections operate through **feedback loops** because they are circular: information about outcomes feeds back to influence future actions.

A crucial implication: when we seek to understand a system, we should focus not on cataloguing its elements but *on reading the space between them*. What matters is not what each actor, institution, or resource is in isolation, but how they *relate* to each other – what flows between them, what is blocked, what is amplified, what is dampened. It is in these inter-relations that we find both the regulatory structure that holds the current pattern in place and the opportunity points where it might be shifted.

“This orientation – towards what happens between elements rather than what elements are – is what we call the *inbetweenness of things*. It is the Playbook's foundational analytical commitment. Integration references the inbetweenness: the interactions between landscape elements, encompassing social, institutional, and epistemic connections as much as biophysical ones. A strand is not an actor; it is the passage of an actor's practices through time as those practices regulate and are regulated by other actors' practices – the inbetweenness made temporal. An interaction space is not a place; it is the relational field where regulatory forces overlap – the inbetweenness made spatial. A foment does not target an actor; it targets the exchange between actors – the inbetweenness made operational. Sensing does not catalogue who is present; it reads what passes between them – the inbetweenness made diagnostic. When we say 'everything is horizontal,' we are saying that the landscape is constituted by what happens between its elements, not by the elements themselves arranged in a hierarchy.

4 Marghetis, 2022.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Imagine a bicycle. Together, you can do things that you and the bicycle cannot do separately. Your actions influence what the bicycle does and how the bicycle behaves influences your actions: if it wobbles, you adjust.⁵



By cycling the bicycle, you create stability (a ‘state’) from a situation that would normally be very unstable. If you climb on the bike and do nothing, neither you nor the bike will stay upright. Your brain receives ‘input’ – signals from the environment that you use to decide what you’re going to do – start pedalling, turn, use the brakes, etc. The ‘output’ is the motion of you and the bicycle together. The output, however, creates new information that your brain receives as new ‘input’ – your bike is in a new location, and perhaps you need to turn or stop.

So, information about the system’s output is fed back to the input side. Information that is used this way is called ‘feedback’, and because information about the output feeds back to its input, it is a ‘**feedback loop**’.

Dampening feedback loops

This feedback provides stability in a system that would otherwise be unstable. This kind of system acts to cancel out or dampen any changes in the system – it is a **dampening feedback loop**.

Examples of dampening loops:

- A thermostat maintaining temperature (heat rises → thermostat turns off → temperature drops → thermostat turns on).
- Social conformity pressures (someone deviates → others disapprove → person conforms → approval restored).
- Predator-prey balance (prey increases → predators increase → prey decreases → predators decrease).

Dampening loops create stability and resistance to change. They **regulate** by constraining variation-keeping systems within bounds.

Amplifying feedback loops

But there is another kind of feedback loop. Imagine that you are speaking into a microphone at a workshop, and you get too close to the loudspeaker. The sound from the speaker goes into your microphone and produces a loud shriek. It only stops when you walk quickly away. Here, a change *ripples* through the system, affecting one element’s behaviour, which in turn affects the

⁵ Kauffman, 1980.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

behaviour of other elements, and so on. This is called an **amplifying feedback loop** because it amplifies or adds to any disturbance in the system.⁶

The spread of a fire, a viral social media post, an epidemic, chemical and nuclear chain reactions – all of these emerge from amplifying feedback. What they have in common is an explosive quality – a tiny initial spark can quickly cause enormous results.

Examples of amplifying loops:

- Population growth (more rabbits → more babies → more rabbits).
- Erosion (bare soil → runoff increases → more soil removed → more bare soil).
- Elite capture (power attracts resources → resources increase power → more power).
- Social movements (one person protests → others join → movement grows → more join).

Amplifying loops create change and instability. They **regulate** by reinforcing patterns – driving systems towards particular outcomes. In the CDE model, it is differences that generate feedback loops, one difference serving to dampen or amplify others, and yielding a particular systemic state.

All complex systems have both amplifying and dampening feedback loops. The actual behaviour of the system depends on which loop is 'stronger'. The balance between these loops determines how the system is **regulated** – which patterns persist, which fade, and where the system heads.

For example, imagine a population of rabbits. Rabbits breed fast, in an amplifying feedback loop: the more rabbits there are, the more babies they make. But, as the rabbit population increases, the number of rabbits that die each year also increases. This is a dampening feedback loop.⁷

If the birth rate (amplifying) is higher, the population will grow; if the death rate (dampening) is higher, the population will decline. The same basic logic applies to many other systems. For example, the growth of knowledge in a society depends on the rate of discovery (amplifying) being greater than the rate of forgetting (dampening). When events happen that cause mass loss of knowledge, knowledge accumulation is knocked back until the amplifying loop regains strength.

⁶ Kauffman, 1980.

⁷ Kauffman, 1980.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Interconnections as regulation

Regulation, as a body of theory, asks how the dense web of institutions, norms, and social compromises produces a workable pattern of economic life for a time – and how that pattern is reproduced or disrupted.⁸ Regulation theory spotlights the multiplicity of pressures that can influence peoples' behaviour – what they choose to do, and what they don't. These modulations operate through the feedback loops we have just described: dampening loops that constrain certain behaviours (e.g., social sanctions discouraging norm violations) and amplifying loops that reinforce others (e.g., success breeding more success). *Regulation, then, is the emergent effect of feedback loops operating across the system* – shaping which patterns persist and which fade, which behaviours are encouraged and which suppressed.

In a complex landscape system, consider how resource access is regulated:

Dampening loop: community monitoring detects overfishing → sanctions applied → fishing effort reduced → stocks recover → monitoring continues.

Amplifying loop: elites capture market access → accumulate wealth → buy more land → control more markets → further wealth accumulation.

Both are regulatory – they pattern behaviour over time. Which loop dominates determines system heading. This is what we mean when we say regulation operates through feedback loops. Regulation emerges from the dense web of power relations, norms, incentive structures, and institutional arrangements within which actors operate.

This regulatory patterning has a practical corollary that is easy to state but difficult to internalize: if you want to change what people do, change the context in which they do it. You want *processes that generate the behaviour rather than mandating it*. In a complex system, practices are not freely chosen; they are produced by the regulatory environment. An intervention that targets behaviour directly (awareness-raising, training, technology transfer) without altering the regulatory context that produces the behaviour will, at best, achieve temporary compliance. The behaviour will snap back once the intervention's direct pressure is removed, because the context that generated it remains unchanged.

Regulation is how power operates – power patterns behaviour through regulatory feedback loops. We explore this relationship further in our section on power.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Ripples and cascades

‘Opportunity points’ are points in a system where the likelihood of an intervention generating significant systemic change is high – to trigger change that the intervention itself could never achieve directly. Two related but distinct dynamics are at work here.

A **ripple** is a disturbance that travels outward from its point of origin, dissipating as it goes. Energy diminishes with distance. A ripple may be felt, but its effect fades. Many well-intentioned interventions generate ripples: a pilot project inspires a neighbouring community, which inspires another, but each iteration is weaker than the last. Without something to sustain and amplify the signal, the ripple dies out.⁹

A **cascade** is different. Each step triggers the next with potentially growing effect. A cascade occurs when the initial disturbance activates amplifying feedback loops already present in the system, or disrupts dampening loops that were suppressing change. The disturbance does not dissipate; it propagates and intensifies. In complex systems work, cascades are associated with tipping points and regime shifts: once certain thresholds or ‘enabling conditions’ are met, the change runs through much of the system rather than fading out.

You introduce a perturbation and watch its effects propagate through connected practices, actors, and institutions. Some ripples travel far; most fizzle. This is expected and useful: fizzled ripples tell you where the system is actively dampening change, which is valuable diagnostic information.

Ripples may be necessary precursors to cascades – local experiments, norm shifts, or prototypes that prepare conditions for later cascades. It is on generating ripples that an intervention should focus. These are smaller perturbations that are easier to monitor and to detect and address unintended consequences when they arise. Escalating this to a cascade must be done with great care for the risk of large unintended consequences is high.

But ripples alone do not shift system heading. Durable change requires cascading – the point at which the system’s own feedback architecture begins *to amplify rather than absorb the perturbation*. You do not choose ‘to cascade.’ Cascading happens when ripples encounter conditions where amplifying loops are activated: when a practice change in one group shifts the conditions facing neighbouring groups, when an institutional adjustment opens space for further adjustments, when a story travels and shifts meanings beyond its original audience.

The question for your intervention is not ‘how do we cascade?’ but ‘how do we prepare the ground so that the system’s own dynamics carry change towards our alt-heading?’ This means: weaken the dampening loops that absorb ripples (institutional micro-

⁹ The formal literature sometimes describes ripples as ordered effects. Thus, an intervention happens, and the first order effect is its immediate, direct results within existing rules or feedbacks. It is here that many interventions focus because the relation between cause and effect is clear and simple. Second order effects arise as a consequence of the first order ones, and are considered ‘indirect’ or delayed consequences, usually due to feedback loops and behaviour adoption. Third order effects, obviously, arise as a consequence of second order ones and are seen as longer-term or more structural. Third order effects cannot be predicted – only observed, which is why foments must be held lightly. For a simple explanation, see the Farnham Street Blog here: <https://fs.blog/second-order-thinking/>.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

shifts can do this); activate latent amplifying loops (relational brokering and convened spaces can do this); work across all three MMC elements rather than targeting one in isolation (so that change is mutually reinforcing rather than easily absorbed); and monitor ripple zones for weak signals of amplification.

Whether an intervention generates a ripple that fades or a cascade that transforms depends not on the size of the intervention, but on what it encounters: the system's regulatory landscape – its feedback architecture and power dynamics – determines whether your small perturbation is absorbed or amplified.

This is why understanding the regulatory structure of the system is a precondition for identifying genuine opportunity points. You need to know where the amplifying loops are. You need to know which dampening loops are holding unwelcome patterns in place. And you need to know who controls those loops – because that is where your op-point sits.

Unintended consequences

In complex systems, it is not possible to know what the effects of *rippling* will be. Each element in the complex system will be influenced and will react in different ways. Such effects are known as **unintended consequences**. These can have very serious effects.

For example, if we cut a road through a forest to improve trade, it might also make the forest more accessible to loggers. The road triggers amplifying loops (easier access → more logging → more profit → more access), potentially overwhelming dampening loops (forest authority enforcement, community resistance) that might have maintained forest cover. The system is *repatterned* in ways we didn't intend.

Understanding which feedback loops dominate – and how interventions might strengthen dampening loops or weaken amplifying ones – is crucial for landscape management. The risk of unintended consequences is very high in complex systems.

Emergence

'**Emergence**' is when interactions between elements generate patterns that did not exist before – patterns that cannot be predicted from the properties of individual elements alone.; Emergence is self-organizing behaviour. While system elements might be doing things for themselves, without conscious thought for the system as a whole, behaviour nevertheless emerges. "It is not," writes the physicist Doyne Farmer "magic...but it feels like magic".¹⁰ Life, for example, is an emergent property of chemistry and physics. A termite mound emerges through the interactions and activities of millions of individual termites.

Emergence occurs when a system is *repatterned* – when new patterns of interaction create new system behaviours. When it occurs, it may signal that system heading has changed, or in more dramatic cases, that a systemic tip has occurred into a new state.

¹⁰ Quoted in Waldrop, 1992.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

System patterns and behaviour

A starling murmuration is a particularly powerful way of thinking about complex system behaviour. An individual starling flying shows none of the characteristic behaviour that its murmuration shows. It is only when we zoom out to look at the murmuration as a whole that we discern this remarkable behaviour.

Each starling is making decisions about what direction to fly in, whether or not to swoop or to soar. These decisions, it turns out, are based on the behaviour of each bird's six to seven neighbours. A bird responds to the distance of its neighbour, cohesion (close but not too close!) and speed.¹¹ The individual starling's decisions don't replicate the exact behaviour of a single neighbour but are based on the behaviour of six to seven. This introduces small adjustments to its flight, the effect of which *ripple* out through the murmuration. As each bird does this, those waves and undulations appear in the overall behaviour of the murmuration.¹²

This example shows how decisions made at individual levels, despite being independent, can still yield systemic patterns of behaviour. These patterns, in aggregate, determine the murmuration's heading – its direction and speed. Similarly, in landscape systems, individual actor decisions create patterns that determine system heading – the trajectory of the landscape over time. How, in society, we can change these systemic behaviours has profound implications for how we derive positive, resilient landscape outcomes.

These emergent patterns arise from countless micro-level interactions between actors in the system – no single one of which is individually decisive, but which collectively shift the system's disposition. In ecological systems, optimization occurs through precisely these micro-interactions, because there is no single directing force. The same is true in landscape systems: the patterns we observe are not designed but generated through the accumulation of innumerable small exchanges, negotiations, and accommodations between actors. This has direct implications for how we think about intervention: rather than attempting to mandate change through a single decisive act, the practitioner works to shift the conditions under which these micro-interactions occur, trusting that different conditions will generate different patterns. We explore this logic in the sections on foments and opportunity points.

Real world social examples of patterns are:

- Institutional routines: workdays, school timetables, or bureaucratic procedures. These are regular sequences of roles, decisions, and information flows that repeat daily or yearly, structuring who interacts with whom and how.
- Inequality loops ('success to the successful'): those with more resources gain better opportunities, which increase their resources further, while others are locked out. This is a classic systems archetype seen in education, careers and markets.
- Cultural norms: stable expectations about behaviour (e.g., gendered division of care work, deference to certain professions) that pattern interaction across many contexts; social scientists often talk about these patterns as institutions, rules, or norms.

¹¹ Reynolds, 1987.

¹² Cavagna and Giardina, 2008.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

- Real world examples of ecological and socio-ecological patterns are:
- Predator – prey cycles: oscillating populations of wolves and deer: more deer → more wolves → fewer deer → fewer wolves → more deer, and so on; a balancing feedback pattern that produces repeating boom – bust behaviour.
- Reinforcing degradation: overgrazing or deforestation that reduces vegetation, increasing erosion and further reducing vegetation – locking a landscape into a degraded state via reinforcing feedback.
- Spatial patterns: patchy vegetation, animal migration routes, or urban sprawl patterns that persist over time due to underlying resource distributions and movement rules.

Systems and scale

In development work, we often speak of ‘scaling up’. This language suggests a hierarchy: local at the bottom, regional above, national higher still, global at the top. But thinking in hierarchical scales deludes us – it forces us to take our eye off the ball. The problem with hierarchical scale thinking is that it suggests:

- Some actors are inherently ‘above’ others (governments over communities, global over local).
- Power flows vertically (down from higher levels, up through advocacy).
- Influence requires ‘jumping scales’ (reaching higher levels to have impact).
- Local work is less important than national or global work.

But complex landscape systems do not work this way. As we have discussed, systems are constituted through **relations** of different geographic extent operating simultaneously. A farmer’s decision is shaped by soil moisture (immediate), market prices (regional to global), cultural norms (historical-local), and climate patterns (planetary) – none of these is ‘above’ or ‘below’ the others. They are all *co-present*, all exerting influence through feedback loops.

Everything is horizontal. The hierarchical ladder is a *conceptual instrument* that power accumulators use to establish their primacy. When a government claims to be ‘above’ communities, it is *performing* hierarchy – enacting it through practices (issuing commands, building towers, sitting on elevated platforms) that make the hierarchy seem natural. But the actual relations are horizontal: the government depends on communities for legitimacy, tax revenue, compliance; communities depend on government for services, recognition, protection.

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



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

If we abandon hierarchical scale thinking, how should we think about extending influence? Instead of 'scaling up/out/deep,' we should talk about:

- **Extending relations:** creating connections with more distant elements in the system (not moving 'up' but reaching 'out' to elements at different geographic extents).
- **Replicating systems:** supporting emergence of similar systems elsewhere, learning from your experience but adapted to their specific relations (not spreading 'horizontally' at same level but helping new systems form)
- **Stabilizing systems:** strengthening internal relations, coding practices into norms, building trust and shared identity (not 'deepening' within a level but making the system more robust).
- **Rippling:** triggering cascades through existing relations, creating feedback loops that amplify desired patterns (not 'scaling' but letting influence flow through the network).

The whole intent behind an intervention is to trigger this cascade in positive ways. What we say in the [Power](#) section is that power is a key op-point to initiate this. When we shift how power is distributed in a system – from concentrated to shared, from accumulation to circulation – the effects *ripple*.

Our systems thinking

Our systems thinking builds on the logic presented above, and extends it – sometimes considerably. We have presented this as a Theory of Change separate section, and you will need to read this carefully for it underpins everything that happens subsequently.

The programme's cross-portfolio analysis confirmed that the operationalization of ILM depends not on any single condition but on configurations of conditions, and that political economy constraints are qualitatively different from technical or institutional ones. These findings inform the Playbook throughout.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Unintended: examples of trying to use simple solutions (and interpretations) to solving complex problems

Parachuting cats

In the early 1950s, the Dayak people in Borneo suffered from malaria. The World Health Organization (WHO) had a solution: they sprayed large amounts of DDT to kill the mosquitoes that carried the malaria. DDT is a powerful, and long-lasting, insecticide, that is also poisonous to other animals. The mosquitoes died, the malaria declined; so far, so good. But the impact of the DDT rippled.

First, the roofs of people's houses began to fall in. It seemed that the DDT was killing a parasitic wasp that had previously controlled thatch-eating caterpillars. Worse, the DDT-poisoned insects were eaten by geckoes, which were themselves eaten by cats. The cats died, the rats flourished, and people were threatened by outbreaks of sylvatic plague and typhus.

To cope with these problems, which it had itself created, the World Health Organization was obliged to parachute 14,000 live cats into Borneo.

From: Lovins LH and Lovins AB. 1995. How not to parachute more cats. The Rocky Mountain Institute. [LINK](#)

Fish for pastoralists

In 1967, Kenya made a request for Norwegian assistance to develop the fisheries of Lake Turkana. A project was formulated and agreed and its first phase started in 1970. The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) provided financial and technical assistance, initially focusing on building the Turkana Fishermen's Cooperative Society, providing fishing boats, gear and advisory personnel.

A Norwegian delegation visited the area in March 1970 to assess the prospective of a Norwegian assisted fishery project. In their report they concluded that: "The only alternative to nomadic pastoralism is the fishery in Lake Turkana... and this again is the only possibility for the Turkana to achieve settlement, sufficient nourishment and access to money. Settlement is a condition for schooling, health services and other social welfare" (quoted in Kolding, 1989).

In 1975 the Government of Kenya submitted a request to Norway for assistance in building such a plant. In 1976 and 1977, NORAD carried out feasibility studies of a fish processing plant including evaluations of marketing conditions for the economics of frozen fish production.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Given the remoteness of the lake from potentially lucrative markets, it was further decided that a fish freezing plant was needed, which cost US\$2 million (Harden, 1986). A further \$20 million was spent on a road that would connect the plant to Kisumu in western Kenya.

The freezing plant would need to reduce fish temperatures from 38°C (the average day time temperature around Lake Turkana) to zero, which in turn required immense quantities of power – more than was available in Turkana District. For a while, it was able to run on generators, but whatever the case, this made for extremely expensive fish. The plant operated for a few days, but before long the electricity was turned off, converting it “into Africa’s most handsome dried-fish warehouse” (Harden, 1986).

Then there were *regular* cycles of drought which occurred every 30 years or so. When the plan was constructed, close to the main fishing areas in Lake Turkana’s Ferguson’s Gulf, the lake was high. Shortly after the fish plant was completed, virtually the whole of the gulf disappeared as a result of drought, and the plant was left kilometres from the lake shore. The research vessel *Iji*, also provided by the Norwegians, was left stranded and abandoned in the mud of what had been Ferguson’s Gulf (Harden, 1986).

The Turkana are not traditionally a fishing people. “If you fish, it means you are poor because you have no livestock.... Mostly, it is people who have lost everything to drought who go fishing, when there’s no other choice” (Nandapal resident, quoted in Cocks, 2006). Many of the 20,000 Turkana whom the Norwegians had brought to the lake shore, given boats and nets and taught to fish were soon were stuck without a fishery. Destitute and without their livestock – which had died due to overcrowding and disease on the lake shores – many Turkana turned to food aid (Harden, 1986).

From: Harden B. 1986. How not to aid African nomads: foreign-funded high-tech programs increase a Kenyan tribe’s problems. The Washington Post 4 April 1986.

Kolding J. 1989. Appendix A: The history of the Lake Turkana fisheries and the role of TFCS and NORAD. In: The fish resources of Lake Turkana and their environment. M.Phil Thesis, University of Bergen.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Smashing sparrows

China's Great Leap Forward had resulted in the imposition of huge agricultural reforms, which had, in turn, resulted in significant declines to food production. The Chinese Communist Party chose to blame pests – flies, mosquitos, rodents and sparrows – for the declines. Each sparrow, they computed, ate 2 kg of grain per bird per year.

The campaign was launched in 1958. As one former school pupil remembered, “the whole school went to kill sparrows. We made ladders to knock down their nests, and beat gongs in the evenings, when they were coming home to roost.” By 1958, an estimated 2 billion sparrows had been killed. In Beijing, the Polish Embassy refused to participate in the targeting of the species and became a refuge for any remaining sparrows. The Polish diplomats declined to let the public into the embassy to kill the birds. Instead, people surrounded the embassy and banged pots and pans for two days, until the sparrows inside the embassy dropped dead from exhaustion. Polish personnel recounted how they had to use shovels to clear out thousands of dead birds.

In April 1960, an ornithologist pointed out that sparrows ate a large number of insects besides grains. The ecological balance had been upset, and bed bugs flourished along with other insect populations. With no sparrows to eat them, locust populations ballooned, swarming the country and compounding the ecological problems already caused by the Great Leap Forward, including widespread deforestation and the misuse of poisons and pesticides. Ecological imbalance is credited with exacerbating the Great Chinese Famine during which 15-55 million people died.

From: Wikipedia, 2025, The four pests campaign. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Pests_campaign



Adaptivity

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you're interested, check out the 'evidence page' for this section here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.

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

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



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

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

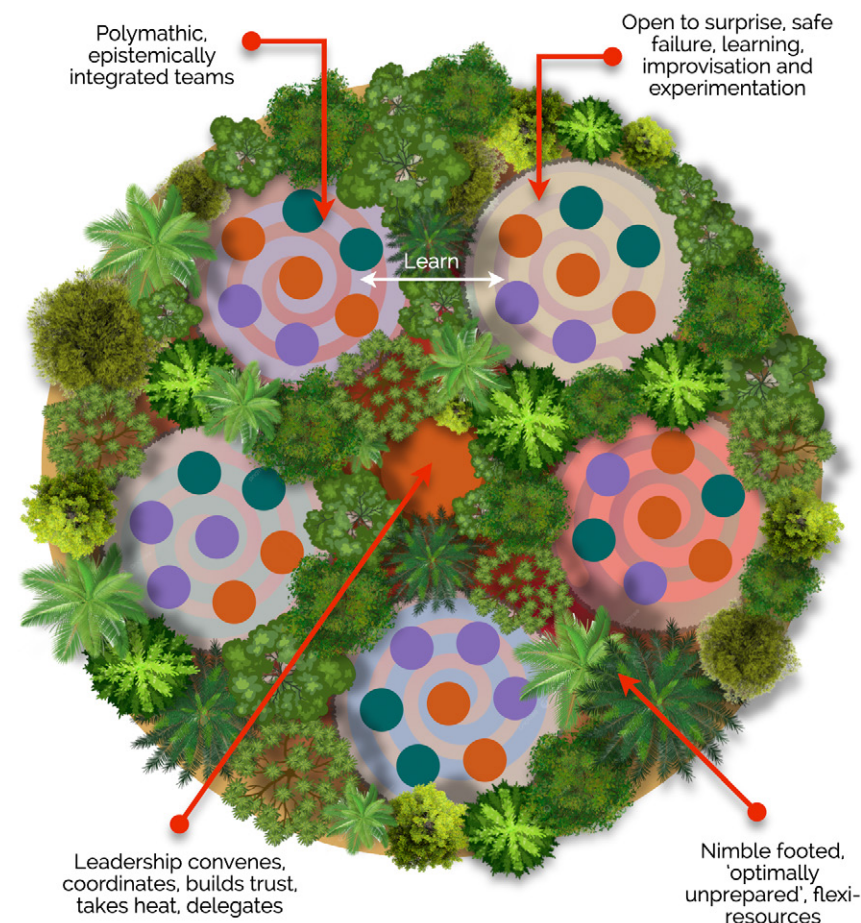
We call this a '**mosaic approach**.' Picture the landscape as a series of interconnected sites, each targeting different strands within its part of the landscape, each learning from the others.

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.





[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.



PART 1 Introduction

- Background
- A walk through the tea
- Landscapes
- Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

- Practices
- Power
- Governance & institutions
- Leadership
- Unstated intent
- Systems & complexity
- Adaptivity
- Foments
- Opportunity points
- Integration

PART 3 Practice

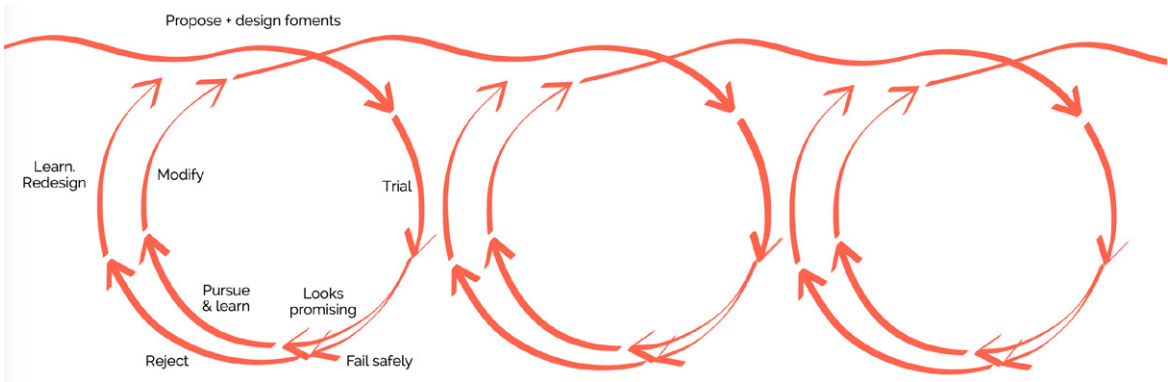
- Design & implementation
- Team design
- Positionality
- Sensing
- Alternative heading
- Stakeholders
- Monitoring, learning & evaluation
- Compromise
- Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

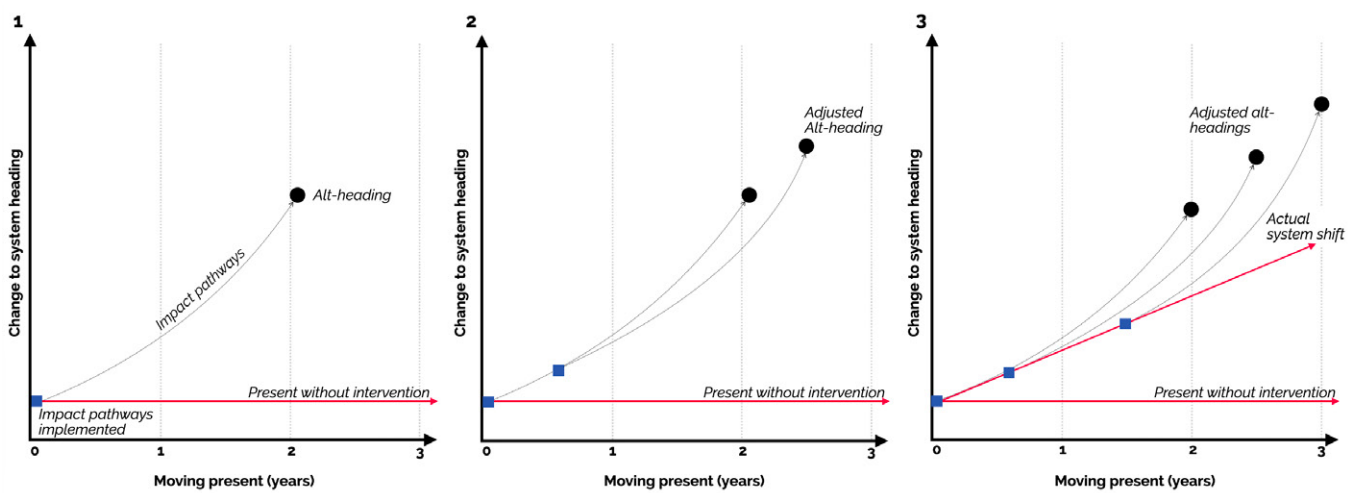
PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

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.





[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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Foments

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

- Foments are discrete, time-bound micro-interventions released into the system to stimulate a response – they are diagnostic (revealing the system) and provocative (revealing avenues to the alt-heading); they are not experiments.
- A ferment of foments is the operationalization of the deliberative system: each foment performs a different deliberative function – bilateral engagement builds trust, info-bombs shift what is thought possible, convened spaces structure confrontation with trade-offs.
- Foments target primary practices and adjacent ones, because the meanings, materials and competencies that hold a practice in place are reproduced through everything around it – temple attendance, school engagement, market routines.
- Foments must be held lightly: they embody propositions, not commitments; if the response heads nowhere positive, abandon and learn rather than defend the foment as a sunk cost.
- The team itself is the first foment: simply by being present, your positionality has already perturbed the system – design that arrival deliberately rather than discover it after the fact

Introducing foments

The intent of your intervention is to shift system heading. Recollect that we argued (in [Systems and Complexity](#)) that a system's heading is a composite of individual strands. Foments are intended to provoke or stimulate a strand off its current trajectory. With foments, you aim to generate ripples in order to achieve this.

In the Compromise section, we introduced the concept of a deliberative system – deliberation should be understood not as a single forum but as an interconnected constellation of arenas, each performing specific functions, whose collective effect is genuine deliberation even though no single arena achieves it alone. The foment palette described in this section is the Playbook's operationalization of that concept. Each foment type performs a different deliberative function:

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you're interested, check out the 'evidence page' for this section here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

bilateral engagement builds the trust and competency that allow marginalized actors to participate (democratic function); information-sharing shifts what people think is possible (epistemic function); storytelling creates spaces where different experiences are heard and valued (ethical function); relational brokering creates the connections between arenas. And convened spaces – workshops, fora, assemblies – are where these threads come together in structured confrontation with trade-offs. The ferment is the deliberative system. No single foment carries the whole weight.

But designing a ferment requires a read of the system as a *whole* – and this is where [sensing](#) becomes indispensable. It is only when you have that conceptual vista of the system – its actors, their practices, the power configurations that regulate them, and the feedback loops that maintain current heading – that you can detect the interactions where multiple dynamics converge, design foments appropriate to specific target groups and moments and place them strategically to maximize the opportunities these represent (see Opportunity Points). The ferment is designed against this read. It is always provisional, because the system will change as your intervention proceeds and as unanticipated regulations come into play. But without that initial read, your foments are shots in the dark.

The word ‘foment’ suggests stirring something up, provoking response – and that is exactly the intent. A foment is *a discrete, time-bound micro-intervention introduced into a complex landscape system to stimulate a response*. It serves two key functions: (a) a diagnostic one, revealing new information about the system and how it responds to a stimulus; and (b) to reveal plausible avenues towards the [alt-heading](#). An intervention into a complex landscape system releases a multitude of foments – a ferment¹ – to diagnose and detect the system’s dynamics.

Opportunity points are *where* in the system you intervene; foments are your micro-interventions.

Foments are not the same as experiments, which the systems literature often calls for. ‘Experiment’ carries specific connotations: controlled conditions, hypothesis testing, impartial observers, isolated variables, and repeatability. Intervening in a complex system does not allow for any of these. With foments, you do not (and cannot) control what happens – the system’s response to a foment is what matters, and the response reveals things about the system that were not visible before. A foment is a provocation: it calls forth a response. The emphasis is on what the system does, not on what you predicted.

Foments are neither failure nor success. Whatever response they generate must be treated with equanimity – an evenness of mind. *You release the foment, and then watch what happens*. The response will almost never head entirely in the direction you want. Nor will it head entirely in the wrong direction. If even a quarter of the response is moving towards your alt-heading, that is worth pursuing. In all likelihood, you will be working with partial, imperfect directionality – and that is enough.

¹ We use ‘ferment’ as the collective noun for foments. Fermentation is a slow, biological, transformative process in which many small organisms collectively produce change that none could produce individually. You do not control fermentation; you create conditions for it. And the result is qualitatively different from the inputs – something new has emerged. That is precisely what a collection of foments is designed to do.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

When we release foments into the system, we can plausibly expect three types of response. These responses will relate to the foment's design, and our understanding of the system's dampening or amplification loops:

- No response: such foments should be discarded but, in so doing, analyse why the foment failed – was it designed incorrectly? What dampening loops have we overlooked that caused our foment design to fail?
- Responses misaligned with the alt-heading: can the foment be repurposed? What does the response tell us about the amplification loops that enabled it, and the dampening loops that caused it to head away from the alt-heading?
- Promising responses that suggest movement towards the alt-heading: learn from the experience, retain and design new foments to maintain momentum.

Multiple foments will need to be designed to address different target groups at different depths in the system. Our thinking about foments derives, in part, from two important ideas:

Seeding² – planting something that may grow. Seeding is a medium- to long-term approach which captures the generative quality in foments. A foment carries this potential, but whether it takes root depends on conditions you do not fully control.

Trojan mice³ – interventions deliberately small enough to slip past resistance. Trojan mice capture the strategic quality of foments. They are designed to avoid triggering the dampening loops that larger, more visible change efforts provoke.

Designing effective foments

A well-designed foment meets four criteria:

Small: modest enough to be safe-to-fail, unobtrusive enough not to trigger disproportionate resistance.

Provocative: while being small, foments are not benign. They create productive disturbance in the system, calling forth a response that reveals dynamics and misaligns existing practice configurations – disturbing the relations between meanings, materials, and competencies that hold current practices in place.

Diagnostic: designed to reveal where the system has give, where it resists, and where potentials lie.

Generative: foments will generate ripples and, potentially, cascades if conditions are right – to be picked up by stakeholders and carried further than the intervention directly initiated.

Held lightly: a foment is not a commitment to defend. It is not a binary either/or, a null/hypothesis or a stated objective or goal. If it is not taking you anywhere positive, abandon it.

² Burkett et al, 2023.

³ Taylor, 2020.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

These criteria are not a checklist to satisfy mechanically. They describe a disposition: foments are micro-interventions held lightly, designed to learn from the system's response, whether that response is uptake, resistance, or indifference.

What foments target

Imagine that our intervention targets a land-degrading practice. Let us call this the '**primary practice**'. This is the practice that your sensing work has identified as deleterious to the landscape – of which there may, of course, be many. Most traditional interventions will target the primary practice. This is, *in part*, the correct approach. Where it weakens, however, is that doing so denies the practice's position within a broader system. Nevertheless, interventions should target the primary practice – although not in the absence of targeting adjacent practices.

Target groups implementing the primary practice also have what we can call '**adjacent practices**' – these are not adjacent to the target group, but to us. Besides being busy with the primary practice every day, let us imagine that the target group also attends a temple daily. Their children – for those who have them – all go to the same local school. While these practices may not seem to have much in common with the primary practice, they do. In fact, they are intimately connected, because the target group's members move between these, all the time. The values and world views they bring with them as they degrade the land are the same ones they bring to their households. These are also very proximate practices – intimately tied to our actors, their daily lives, community relations, livelihoods and well-being.

Thus, foments are designed for both the primary and adjacent practices because, for your target groups, there is no separation between them. One set of practices influences others – there is two-way, mutual regulation between them. So, you might design one or two foments that directly target the land-degrading practice itself. Meanwhile, another foment sees you speaking with the local abbot and obtaining agreement that in his sermons, he will refer to these land practices as a cost to their community. Another foment sees your team visiting the local school and speaking several times to several classes about the land degradation and the practices that create it. These messages, and gentle pressures, feed back to your target group's members. This is how we can use foments to provoke a systemic response – by 'nudging' or perturbing the context that surrounds the primary practice.

If you recollect our layered model, you will remember that we had three embedded elements. Practices are embedded in power, while power is embedded in the system. In our [Integration](#) section, we presented a graphic of a 'power vista' showing different domains, or spheres, of influence that different actor groups have that shape the landscape and each other's practices. These intermingle, overlap and influence each other – they regulate each other. Your intervention needs to be clear-eyed about the actors lying beyond the landscape in centres of power whose exercise may profoundly shape the accomplishment of your intervention. Above, and in much of this Playbook, we use rural examples because these are typically the focus of many of the Playbook's users. But influential communities outside of the landscape – of politicians, of corporate actors, of middle-men and women, of warlords and ladies – all of these actors exert different levels and degrees of regulation on what happens in your landscape and require their own foments if they are to be influenced. This means your interaction space – the space where the strands that regulate



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

your target groups originate – may extend far beyond the landscape itself (see the Opportunity Points section). Foments can reveal the character of the feedback loops these actors issue. In many cases, these will not only be dampening feedback loops, but destructive ones – and must be addressed.

Why do people adopt new practices?

Here, we revert back to our [Practices](#) section. Shove et al.⁴ argue that people do not adopt ‘new practices’ because of individual attitudes alone; practices *recruit* people when changing configurations of meanings, materials and competences (MMCs) make participation possible, attractive and woven into daily life. Douthwaite⁵ refers to this as ‘meshing in’ an innovation. Here, the most successful technologies (in terms of adoption) are those most modified by local users and manufacturers, gaining ‘fitness’ by interlocking with existing systems.

Recruitment occurs when people become ‘carriers’ of a practice – when they are drawn into performing it, often through existing social networks, communities of practice and shared settings where the new way of doing things is already happening. First encounters with the new practice typically happen because a person’s daily paths intersect with sites where a practice is performed (workplaces, households, fields), and because others can demonstrate and legitimate the practice as normal, desirable or necessary.

New practices take hold when the MMCs line up. Thus, new materials (technologies, infrastructures), new or reconfigured competences (skills, know-how), and new meanings (ideas of what is normal, good, modern, responsible) become available together. Each element here is *mutually reinforcing* – introducing one without attending to the others will not result in a practice change. But not all three contribute equally. Meanings lead. A practice change that carries desirable associations – that signals modernity, success, independence, or community standing – will be adopted far more readily than one that does not, regardless of its material or technical merits. Conversely, a practice change that carries meanings of backwardness, dependency, or social decline will be resisted even where the material and competency case is strong. Meanings carry normative weight that materials and competencies do not: they tell people what kind of person does this, what it says about you, whether it aligns with your identity and social position.

Traditional development interventions have frequently focused on introducing a new technology – an irrigation canal, for example – and then wondered why practices did not also change. A new irrigation canal is meaningless in the absence of accompanying practice changes – people need to use it, after all. Perhaps construction of the new canal was accompanied by a suite of training interventions, but still, practices did not change. This is because meanings were not also addressed. We stress that simply introducing a new technology maintains an intervention at instrument level – and does not plumb the depths of systemic structure. Your ferment of foments must account for this: some need to target practices directly, but others need to target the regulatory structure – the power configurations, institutional arrangements, and market relations – that holds those practices in place.

⁴ Shove et al, 2012.

⁵ Douthwaite, 2002.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

This is the dual task described in the Opportunity Points section: reshaping the interaction space creates the conditions for practice change, but foments must also target the practice itself. One without the other yields either an opening that nothing fills, or effort that snaps back.

People are recruited when they have (or can easily acquire) the competences, can access the necessary materials, and find the associated meanings compelling in relation to their existing practices. The adoption of a new practice is more durable when it offers internally rewarding experiences, clear symbolic significance and strong embedding in wider networks (institutions, infrastructures, regulations, markets) that stabilize them and make alternatives harder. Over time, people develop 'careers' in practices, deepening their skills and identities as *practitioners*. This strengthens commitment but also enables them to innovate or defect, contributing to further change in what the practice is and who it recruits next.

The foment palette

Foments are not a single type of activity. As we mentioned in the introduction to this section, they should be strategically deployed to where, in your system sensing, they are most likely to perturb the system. In the Opportunity Points section, we describe how to identify the interaction spaces where foments are most likely to produce movement – the spaces where strands' regulatory fields overlap and where the quality of regulatory exchange can be shifted. They encompass a range of possible actions, each targeting different elements of practice configurations, ranges and depths of the system. What follows is a palette – a set of foment types that your intervention can draw on, combine, and adapt. Not every intervention will use every type. Some will fail, others will look promising. The choice depends on what sensing has revealed about your landscape: which practices need shifting, where power concentrates, where the system already has give. Once the ferment has been released, you will analyse, diagnose and re-assess as inputs into the design of a subsequent ferment.

Each foment in the palette works through one or more elements of the MMC configuration described in the Practices section. Stories and info-bombs target meanings. Boundary objects and demonstration effects target materials and meanings simultaneously. Bilateral engagement and institutional micro-shifts build competencies. The most effective foments, however, target all three elements in concert – which is why a ferment (multiple foments working different MMC elements within the same interaction space) is more likely to shift a practice than any single foment. The practitioner should be conscious of which MMC element each foment primarily targets, and design the ferment to address all three – because targeting a single element while leaving the others untouched guarantees unintended consequences (see Practices).

The team itself

Your first foment is already present before you have done anything at all. As the [Positionality](#) section makes clear, simply by being present you have changed the system. Your embodied positionality – race, gender, nationality, comportment – sends signals. Your enacted positionality – who you meet first, what questions you ask, what language you use, whether you accept hospitality



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

– perturbs existing relational patterns. Your existential positionality – the sheer fact of an intervention’s presence – shifts what stakeholders think is possible, who they think is watching, and what they think might change.

The question is not whether your team perturbs the system – it does, inevitably – but whether you design for this deliberately and take advantage of it. Rather than generating no response, how will your team and its presence generate a promising one? Team composition signals what knowledge the intervention values: if your team is entirely biophysical scientists, that is a statement about what matters. If it includes social scientists, community development specialists, or people from the landscape itself, the signal shifts. How team members conduct themselves in early interactions – whether they listen more than they speak, whether they go where they are not expected, whether they spend time with people who are not on the official itinerary – these are foments, whether or not you name them as such. The challenge is to recognize them as such, get ahead of them, and design them for intent.

In our view, the only teams worth fielding for ILM interventions are those with long-term investment in a landscape – teams that are located in it, that feel it daily, and that derive income for their work from multiple sources rather than a single donor and/or a single project cycle. A parachuted team cannot read the system well enough to design good foments, cannot maintain the relationships through which foments travel, and cannot monitor the slow signals of cascading change that unfold over years. Douthwaite’s finding that the most successful innovation processes were those where researchers worked with the same networks of partners for twenty-five years is telling. The parachuting typical of traditional project approaches is, from an ILM perspective, already dead in the water. And multiple income streams are not just financial resilience – they are epistemic independence. They free a team to pursue what the landscape needs rather than what a single logframe demands.

Be deliberate. Design your team’s early presence as a foment: what do you want your arrival to signal, to whom, and what response do you hope to provoke? Then watch carefully for the response you actually get.

Bilateral stakeholder engagement

Initially, your team will probably work bilaterally – directly with a few stakeholder groups before bringing multiple groups into shared space. This is foundational work, and is itself a foment. Your interactions serve to impart meaning: to build trust between you and the target group, signal how you practise, and to manage expectations. These interactions shift the meanings, competencies, or material conditions within that stakeholder’s practice world. A farmer who has spent time with your team discussing market access is not the same farmer who walks into a multi-stakeholder forum six months later. Something has already shifted.

Bilateral work is particularly important where power asymmetries are severe. Bringing a marginalized group directly into a multi-stakeholder forum without preparation can reproduce exactly the power dynamics your intervention seeks to change – the powerful speak, the marginalized perform deference, and the forum legitimizes existing arrangements under the banner of ‘participation.’ Bilateral engagement can build the competencies and confidence that allow less powerful actors to participate meaningfully when inter-stakeholder spaces are eventually convened. We call this ‘borrowed power’ – here, a target group is



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

emboldened because they trust you, even if there are other groups in the space that they consider adversarial. It is also an example of using your positionality effectively.

But note the limits. The bilateral relationship – intervention working with a single stakeholder group – is barely a ripple. It shifts something within one group's practice world. The cascade potential lies in inter-stakeholder relations – when stakeholders start exchanging directly with each other, outside your mediation. The purpose of bilateral work is not to create change in itself, but to prepare stakeholders for the inter-stakeholder exchanges where cascading becomes possible.

The Landscapes For Our Future programme learned this in practice. Several country teams found that breaking stakeholder engagement into sequential bilateral work – spending time with individual groups before convening multi-stakeholder interactions – produced more honest and productive exchanges when those interactions eventually happened.

Relational brokering

Deliberately connecting actors who do not currently interact – creating new exchanges in CDE terms (see the [Systems and Complexity](#) section) – is the next step beyond bilateral engagement. It is more targeted than a convened space: introduce the downstream fishers to the upstream irrigators. Introduce the women's savings group to the district agricultural officer. Connect the community forestry group to the legal aid organization.

The foment is not the meeting itself. It is the connection and whatever flows through it afterward. A well-brokered relationship creates a new channel through which information, trust, and eventually collaborative action can travel. The intervention's role is catalytic: make the introduction, support the initial exchange, then step back. If the relationship becomes self-sustaining, the foment has taken root.

Relational brokering draws on your positionality as a resource. You move in circles of influence that your target groups do not. You can open doors, confer legitimacy, and connect people who would not otherwise meet. This is not something to be embarrassed about; it is a capacity to be deployed strategically towards your [alt-heading](#).

In a Zambian fisheries case,⁶ the narrow technical challenge was fish spoilage. But working on that technical problem built relationships between stakeholders – fishers, government agencies, traders, researchers – who had not previously been collaborating. Those relationships then enabled them to tackle the much bigger challenge: overfishing. If they had tried to convene these groups around overfishing from the start, it would have failed because of the mistrust between communities. The technical foment built the relational infrastructure for the institutional cascade. This illustrates the sequencing logic: bilateral foments prepare the ground, relational brokering creates the inter-stakeholder connections, and cascading happens when those connections activate amplifying loops in the wider system.

⁶ Douthwaite and Hoffecker, 2017.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Convened spaces

One of the major powers that an intervention brings to a landscape is convening power – the power to assemble. Multi-stakeholder fora are a staple of landscape work. They are not, however, a neutral container for dialogue, but rather, for deliberation. They are foments. They perturb existing relational patterns by creating exchanges that would not otherwise happen. The moment you put a downstream fisher and an upstream irrigator in the same room, you have introduced a perturbation into the system. Whether that perturbation generates anything useful depends on how the space is designed, how you capitalize upon it and your ability to detect it.

A workshop that simply brings people into a room and asks them to ‘discuss’ is a weak foment. A space that is deliberately designed – who is invited (and who is not), how the room is arranged, what information is presented, what questions are posed, who sits next to whom, what activities structure the interaction – is a much stronger one. This draws on nudge architecture: the design of the space itself shapes what people think, say, and do within it, working through the material and meaning elements of the space itself.

A convened space that is held too early – before bilateral work has built sufficient trust and before relational brokering has established some inter-stakeholder connections – will reproduce rather than challenge existing power configurations.

The info-bomb

New information is a powerful foment. *Knowledge is information practised*.⁷ The trick, of course – and which lies at the heart of this foment’s potency – is how do you package information in ways that mean it transitions into knowledge, and thereafter into practice? Many traditional interventions imagine that exposing target groups to information will yield practice change. ‘Awareness-raising’ or ‘dissemination’ are, in our estimation, inadequate ways of eliciting systemic response from this foment.

Information can be transmitted: data, maps, and monitoring results can be packaged and delivered. Knowledge cannot. Knowledge requires shared context and can only be volunteered, never conscripted.⁸ You can give a farmer a soil map, but whether that map becomes knowledge – something that changes how they understand and work their land – depends on whether it connects to their existing understanding, whether the context of sharing allows genuine engagement, and whether they retain interpretive authority over what the information means for them.

The design of this foment, therefore, lies not in the data itself but in the packaging – translating across epistemic boundaries without patronising, presenting information in ways that invite interpretation rather than dictating conclusions. The packaging is what you design carefully before release. But once released, you do not control what people do with the information – that is the system’s response, not yours. If you are a scientist, the information you are sharing may seem very important to you but not to your

⁷ See, for example, Cook and Brown, 1999; Orlikowski, 2002.

⁸ Snowden and Boone, 2007.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

target groups. The intervention's focus must be on how to convey the information's importance without just insisting upon it. For this to happen, it must resonate: target groups must be able to see how the information relates to them and their everyday lives. To achieve this requires an important competency in the intervention team: the ability to make technical information genuinely accessible without dumbing it down, and the humility to recognize that stakeholders may interpret the information in ways you did not expect and would not choose.

Stories

Stories are potent foments for both diagnostic and provocation reasons. In all societies, stories are used to structure, entertain, legitimate and to explain. They are fundamental to culture, providing identity, conveying history and origin. They educate, warning children of danger, illustrating wisdom, or folly.⁹

But stories are also profoundly political. They can convey difference: why we are better than them; why men are better than women; why this is beautiful and that is not; why failure is unacceptable and success is necessary; why this is ours and not theirs; why we belong and they do not; what progress is and is not; why we are civilized and they are not. Such themes can permeate societies, deeply informing their choices, what they are willing to put up with, and how they make the distinction between 'good' and 'bad'. They can underpin what is considered acceptable behaviour over what is not. The power of stories is formidable, and we have provided two in Boxes 1 and 2 to illustrate this.

“No one ever made a decision because of a number. They need a story.”
– Daniel Kahneman

On identity and stolen camels

Many years ago, one of us¹⁰ was doing fieldwork in Ethiopia. He was exploring the relationship between the Karayu and Afar peoples, which was not good. Conflict was frequent. People were being killed. So, he assembled a large group of Afar men, separate from another large group of male Karayu (neither group would allow their women to attend). He first asked both groups how they differed from each other, for they look very similar to the untrained outsider. Their men both wore white loincloths and cloaks. They all wore sandals made from tyre treads. They both shaved their hair well back from their foreheads. They all carried guns, and all wore a short sword on a leather belt. The Karayu said that they just knew. It was something in how the Afar walked, or in the way they carried their rifles across their shoulders, draping their arms over the stock and barrel. The Afar group huddled for a 20-minute conversation, after which an answer emerged: the Karayu, they said, wore their swords to the left, while the Afar wore theirs on the right. Our colleague then asked both groups why they were fighting each other. The Afar group responded that they had always fought the Karayu. It was just what they did.

⁹ Here, we conflate 'stories' with 'narratives.' There is a rich literature on the use of narratives in power and political strategies (e.g., Hajer, 1995; Roe, 1994).

¹⁰ Kim Geheb.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

The Karayu said that it was because the Afar had stolen some of their camels. Our colleague sensed that this was indeed a serious affront – for the Karayu, camels are common property. They wander around the landscape and, when a Karayu household needs some milk, they wait for the herd to pass by and select one to milk. When was this? He asked. This time, the Karayu huddled, and half-an-hour later, an answer emerged: five generations ago.

Did you get sucked into the story? Consider its two sides – it has been maintained for generations. Whether it is the version in which the Afar have always fought the Karayu, or a crime committed against the Karayu five generations ago. The stories legitimize the action and create identity. The fact that both groups felt the need to huddle and discuss their responses to our colleague's questions is positive – but also relevant. It suggests that the original stories had been lost to time; the stories had become reconfigured – for the Afar, fighting the Karayu was just something that they did; for the Karayu, fighting the Afar was about the camels – maybe.

In politics, they serve to rationalise and legitimate. 'Swidden agriculture is slash-and-burn which is bad.' 'Infrastructure is progress and is good.' 'The private sector will solve everything.' Typically, such stories are presented as unimpeachable fact. Very often they are very short – bordering on slogans. This compression strips out the argumentative scaffolding, so there is nothing to grab onto and refute. There is frequently considerable symbolism included, loading the story with affect (pride, identity, progress) that bypasses rational evaluation. Usually, they include a moral framing, thereby embedding a normative claim so it appears descriptive. And finally, such stories regularly play an obscuring function so that what becomes important is what the story silences (corruption, displacement, ecological loss) – trends and traits that may be as politically consequential as what the story asserts.

Identifying which stories your target groups tell, and how these influence your other target groups, is an important initial aspect of sensing. Particularly important are stories that power accumulators use to legitimize the things that they do. There will be a multitude of power accumulators influencing your landscape, and located in, near and beyond it. A key part of your initial sensing is to identify which stories they tell, and what these may obscure. This provides significant insight into the power vista.

This initial pass yields a series of interpretations, which can then be verified, enhanced, or discarded through a series of 'narrative collection' exercises with your target groups. Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) is a form of participatory action research in which people collectively gather and work with everyday stories of experience to make sense of complex situations and support better decisions. PNI treats stories as data for sensemaking, not just as illustrations or testimonials. People who live the experience both tell the stories and help interpret patterns in them, so inquiry is done with, not on, communities.¹¹ PNI is a method for sensing – it is diagnostic. What you do with the findings is where the foment lies.

¹¹ See Kurtz, 2026.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

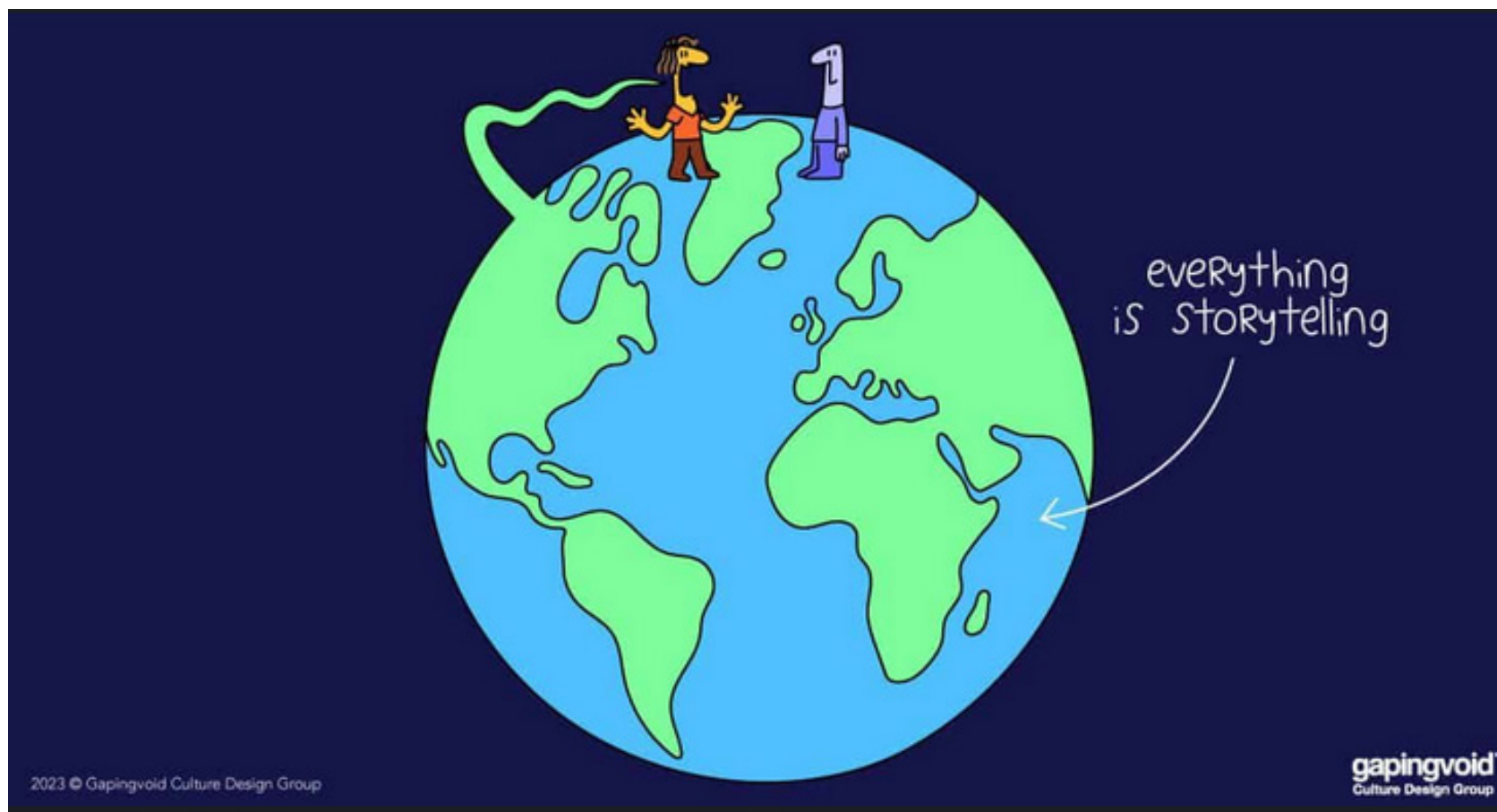
[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

What emerges from these analyses should reveal the stories that permeate the target groups you are working with – and which structure, influence and potentially even determine their practices. A foment in this case could (a) aim to amplify an ongoing story that may at present be weak or subservient to more dominant stories, and which is relevant to the [alt-heading](#); and/or (b) to dampen a story that may be contributing to the current system heading.

The final benefit of storytelling is how it can contribute to the ways in which you engage with target groups. Packaging data, ideas, research and other types of ‘alien’ information as narrative, with beginnings, middles and ends, with characters and, hopefully, a moral, brings the intervention into play within the system. People respond to stories and paying close attention to the best ways in which to convey them – a narrative, a play, creative social media, role-playing or all of these – is itself a foment design choice.





[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Where chivalry can go horribly wrong¹²

In 1346, the English and French armies squared off near Crécy-en-Ponthieu in northern France. The English, led by King Edward III, were outnumbered several times over by the French army led by King Philip VI. The French fielded thousands of heavily armoured knights – terrifying shock troops, rich and powerful men whose expensive equipment and devastating charges had delivered military success for 500 years. They also employed Genoese mercenary crossbowmen. The English had their longbowmen: men armed with immensely powerful bows, capable of firing ten arrows a minute at ranges over 300 metres.

The French had been marching all day. Although King Philip ordered a rest halt, many troops continued onto the battlefield, eager to impress their superiors. A summer shower passed over the armies. The English longbowmen disassembled their bows, keeping the strings dry under their hats. The Genoese crossbows were far more complex and could not be protected; their strings got wet, reducing range. Their *pavises* – large shields behind which they could hide while reloading – had not yet arrived, caught up at the baggage end of the still-marching army.

The Genoese fired first. Their bolts fell short. The English archers took a step forward and loosed their arrows so thickly that they fell, in one chronicler's words, like snow. The Genoese broke and fell back. King Philip, enraged, ordered the cavalry charge. Hundreds of the most eager French knights charged uphill through the retreating crossbowmen, hacking through them as they went. Their charge was slowed by the chaos, the rain-sodden ground, the uphill slope, and deep potholes that the English had been digging all day. The horses – unprotected, unlike their riders – fell to the arrows. The charge disintegrated. The French charged many more times. Each time the same result. As darkness fell, King Philip left the battlefield defeated.

Three stories matter here. First, King Philip did not take his crossbowmen seriously. He sent them into battle without their shields, then sent cavalry over them. Second – and this explains the first – the French chivalric code of honour bound the entire military culture. Knights would literally rather die than lose their reputation. For 500 years, that culture and the reliance on heavily armoured cavalry had delivered success. Until it did not.

That code of honour was not absent on the English side. Archers had been disparaged – it was felt dishonourable that they did not come close to their foes. But King Edward had long seen the longbowmen as his best chance. To embrace the longbow meant reshaping the story. He forgave the debts of the crafters who made the bows and arrows – symbolically far more important than just paying them a bonus. And he commanded that all men over the age of 12 should practise archery for two hours after church each Sunday, on pain of death. He created this law nine years before Crécy. English respect for the longbowmen had been carefully cultivated by the King.

¹² Derived from Harford, 2022 and Ellis, 2007.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Boundary objects

Boundary objects are things (including conceptual things) that can serve as a locus for engagement and, possibly, integration among groups from different cultures, locations or professions.¹³ The ‘boundary’ references that these objects sit at the intersection between different social groups. They are things that all your target groups know what they are, but may see, understand, or interpret differently.¹⁴ A map, for example. To groups in central government, district administration or local communities it is a map, but each group interprets it differently, sees things that others overlook, highlights things that others consider unimportant. As foments, boundary objects are clear provocations – they surface perspective, meaning, identity and values – and, critically, points of similarity without interfering with difference. They can also surface power differences and conflicts, not just ‘bridge’ them, so attention to who participates, who controls the artefact, and whose categories it encodes is critical – particularly in unequal, post-colonial contexts.¹⁵

A boundary object becomes a foment when it is deployed deliberately to provoke exchange. A map sitting in an office is not a foment. A map placed in front of three stakeholder groups who are asked to mark what matters to them – that is a foment. One practical approach is to use progressive layering on a shared base: a facilitator puts a simple scaffold in the middle (e.g., a blank map, river cross-section, basic theory-of-change, timeline), and different groups successively add their own elements (uses, conflicts, indicators, institutions, seasons, risks) with colours, symbols or layers. A Participatory Three-Dimensional Model (P3DM) of a landscape, built jointly by diverse stakeholders, is a powerful example – the process of building it generates shared understanding without requiring shared interpretation.¹⁶ Alternatively, each group first draws or designs its own version (its ‘view’ of the landscape or problem), and then participants compare these side-by-side, extracting overlapping features and prominent differences into a new, composite object.

Whatever the approach, check that everyone agrees that the result is the ‘same thing’ yet can use or interpret it differently; that it supports information sharing, learning and coordination of specific tasks. Then use the artefact in interactions, meetings, participatory workshops, or joint planning exercises. Watch where it enables dialogue or exposes conflict, then revise it accordingly. If it works, stabilize it (e.g., standard template, routine tool in planning cycles) while allowing local tailoring, so it can travel across sites without becoming rigid or exclusionary.

Boundary objects work because they target materials and meanings simultaneously. They introduce a new material element (the map, the model, the dashboard) that carries meaning across epistemic boundaries.

¹³ Star and Griesemer, 1989.

¹⁴ Hawkins et al, 2017; Caccamo et al, 2023.

¹⁵ Hawkins et al, 2017.

¹⁶ If you're interested in this approach, see Rambadli, 2010.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Demonstration effects

A common strategy in many agricultural sciences is the ‘demonstration plot’. Here, a plot is used to demonstrate the benefits of some alternative farming system, the yield of an unused crop variety, or unpractised soil preparation methods. The plot may be located in a recipient community, or perhaps farmers are brought to an agricultural research facility to view it themselves.

Such plots are materials. They emerge from the logic that if farmers can only see how beneficial these novel approaches are then they will adopt them. It implies that, if they do not, there is some kind of resistance in play. The latter may well be true – because farmers will know that if they adopt these novel approaches, some form of regulation – not government regulation necessarily, but the feedback loops that maintain the current practice configuration – will snap them back into the previous farming configuration that is held in place by the same regulations that caused its emergence in the first place. The science presented in the demonstration plot is almost certainly robust and of high standard, but it does not speak for itself, and it is not persuasive given the broader circumstances in which farmers find themselves.

A recent study¹⁷ in Tanzania found that distributing ‘trial packs’ alongside demonstration plots had no significant overall effect on technology adoption. The trial packs were small free packages of the inputs being promoted – in this case, seeds and a seed treatment. A broader review of forty-one randomised evaluations of agricultural extension¹⁸ concludes that extension recommendations based on controlled test plots often fail to translate to real farming conditions – the optimal approach for the experimental plot is not the optimal approach for the farmer’s field, where soil varies, labour is constrained, markets are uncertain, and land tenure may be insecure. Demonstration plots also fail on meanings: a plot on a research station does not tell a farmer what it means, socially, to be the kind of person who adopts this practice.

A demonstration *effect* is different. It is the visible consequence of a practice change that shifts what neighbouring actors think is possible. When a community that has adopted new governance arrangements for a shared water source visibly prospers – not because someone showed them a plot, but because their institutional change produced tangible benefits – that is a demonstration effect. This foment takes advantage of the human propensity to copy others in their decision-making (Box 3). It works because it targets all three MMC elements simultaneously: the materials are visibly different (the water source is better managed, the harvests are better), the meanings shift (other communities see that change is possible and desirable), and the competencies become legible (neighbouring actors can see what the community did and begin to imagine how they might do something similar). Crucially, the meaning element leads: what makes a demonstration effect powerful is not the material improvement by itself, but that it becomes desirable, aspirational, and something that signals a kind of community that others want to be.

¹⁷ Maredia et al, 2025.

¹⁸ Kondylis and Mueller, 2020.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Mimetic theory

Mimetic theory was developed by the French historian, literary critic and philosopher René Girard. The theory seeks to explain human desire, conflict and culture through imitation: we learn what to want by imitating others' desires, which can generate rivalry and violence, managed historically through scapegoating and sacrificial mechanisms. Desire is not purely individual or spontaneous; it is triangular – a subject desires an object because a 'model' (another person or group) already desires it, which can turn the model into a rival. As people imitate one another's desires, competition intensifies, spreading contagiously and threatening social order (a 'mimetic crisis'). Communities historically restore order by converging their hostility on a single victim or minority, blaming them for the crisis, expelling or killing them, and afterwards remembering them ambivalently as both guilty and peace-bringing; this underpins myths, ritual sacrifice, and aspects of law and religion.¹⁹

The American economist Thomas Schelling argues that large-scale social patterns often emerge from many individually reasonable choices, and the aggregate outcome can be unintended, surprising, and even undesirable for the very individuals whose choices produced it – classic complexity. When he speaks of 'reasonable choices', these are deemed reasonable by the individual making them, and depend on how many similar or different neighbours they currently see, or how many people are already doing X versus Y. People do not just imitate; they calibrate – adjusting their choices based on what they see others doing. Even without conscious 'imitation of desire' (as Girard describes it), the mechanism is one of conditional alignment: my behaviour adjusts based on what I observe in yours.²⁰

These are but two thinkers on the extent to which humans, as a species, key off others' actions – there are many others. Taken together, these lines of work support the view that humans are deeply, perhaps constitutively, social: our perception, judgement and behaviour are continuously calibrated to what others do, which makes 'herd' effects the rule rather than the exception, especially under uncertainty or strong norms.

Demonstration effects are powerful because they activate social learning loops – amplifying feedback driven by observation and emulation rather than instruction. But they carry risks. They can be captured: the 'model farmer' is the village chief's relative; the 'successful community' had pre-existing advantages that are not replicable. And they can be misread: observers may attribute success to the wrong causes, adopting superficial features while missing the institutional or relational changes that actually produced the result.

¹⁹ Girard, 1987 [1978].

²⁰ Schelling, 2006 [1978].



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

If our foments do their work and we see institutional change²¹ in one community, will neighbouring communities respond by adopting similar changes? The evidence is cautiously encouraging but demands realism.

The most thoroughly studied case is Nepal's community forestry programme, where Community Forest User Groups spread from a handful of donor-assisted experiments in the late 1970s to over 22,000 groups managing some 2.3 million hectares. The neighbouring-community effect was real: communities saw what was happening nearby and demanded similar rights. But this was not spontaneous diffusion. It required an enabling legal framework (the Forest Act 1993), a supportive bureaucratic infrastructure (district forest officers actively facilitating handover), federation-building (a national network connecting community groups and amplifying their collective voice), and decades of policy iteration. The institutional infrastructure had to exist for community demand to be met. And even this widely celebrated success story is now showing strain, with recent research documenting declining participation as livelihood diversification and out-migration alter the forest – people relationship.

A cross-initiative study,²² examining scaling out across five community-based conservation programmes in Chile, Nepal, Namibia, Madagascar, and Fiji, found that diffusion was more rapid where innovations were flexible enough to be adapted locally, where adopters could see tangible benefits, and where external support and facilitation were present. The most frequently identified bottlenecks were unfair benefit-sharing, unequal decision-making, inflexible rules, and top-down leadership – precisely the power configurations that the Playbook's approach to sensing is designed to diagnose.

What this tells us is that institutional change can propagate, but it does not travel by demonstration alone. It requires what we might call an enabling ecology: legal space for communities to act, facilitation infrastructure that supports adoption without prescribing it, flexibility for local adaptation, and – critically – visible, tangible benefits that neighbouring communities can observe and aspire to. Your foments can contribute to building this ecology: institutional micro-shifts create legal space; relational brokering builds facilitation infrastructure; building on what's already there provides flexibility by amplifying local adaptations rather than imposing blueprints; and demonstration effects create the visible benefits.

Endogenous innovators

All communities (whether rural farmers, small-scale traders, or a group of politicians) have among them someone keen to develop and/or embrace novel ideas and innovation. There is always someone willing to take a risk – usually tiny, and structured to be incremental – in order to see if something works. Think of this as foments at an individual, personal, level.

Identifying and working with these people can be a powerful entry point to motivating a demonstration effect. Everett Rogers'²³ diffusion of innovation theory found that if such people (he called them 'early adopters') are also credible, respected opinion leaders, their use of a new practice signals to the majority that an innovation is worth trying. Once enough innovators have moved,

²¹ As denoted by Ostrom (e.g., 1990).

²² Pienkowski et al, 2024.

²³ Rogers, 2003.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

a threshold is reached and diffusion accelerates. In your sensing work, identifying innovators or risk-takers among your target groups is important.

In landscape contexts, however, great care must be taken when working with endogenous innovators. Innovators may often be regarded as deviants by their own communities and are ‘cut down’ because they stand out – what is sometimes called tall poppy syndrome.²⁴ The threat of such community action can stifle innovation, risk-taking and excellence because people fear peer retaliation more than they value marginal gains. Communities police the boundaries of acceptable differentiation, and where material scarcity and fragile trust prevail, conspicuous local success can trigger fear, envy and accusations of betrayal. Innovators sometimes have to leave their communities to succeed, then re-embed once they can redistribute benefits. This shows just how intensely human livelihoods are entangled in relational expectations: success must be narratable as *for us*, not *over us*.

In the LFF project in Zimbabwe, several early adopters were identified – people who were already doing innovative things, and whom the project sought to support. Their social standing was not explored, even if it was already understood that these individuals were regarded as eccentric. One fenced off their crop and started agroforestry practices. To the rest of the villagers, the contrast was stark between his green field while the surrounding land was bare, baked and dusty. Just down the road, another early adopter had installed solar panels with the project’s help. Other community members crept in while this individual was away and destroyed the panels, and subsequently, tried to poison him.

The implication for foment design is that you cannot simply identify endogenous innovators and work with them in the hope that others will follow. You need to understand local dynamics, and the tolerance of these societies towards their more innovative, risk-taking members. The innovators you choose to work with (and who agree to work with you) must have their political ducks in a row. Endogenous innovators and leaders are both opportunity points, but they require different foments and serve different functions. Innovators demonstrate possibility; leaders enable propagation. Your sensing must identify both – and understand their relationship to each other. An innovator who is also a trusted leader is the most powerful combination, but it is rare. More often, you need foments that connect innovators to leaders: relational brokering that allows the innovator’s proof of concept to travel through the leader’s trusted network.

Institutional micro-shifts

Small procedural changes within existing institutions – changing who is invited to a planning meeting, what data are presented in a routine report, how a decision is documented, which communities are consulted before a permit is issued – are foments aimed directly at the regulatory structure. They target the dampening loops that hold unwelcome patterns in place.

These foments are often invisible to external observers. They do not look like ‘interventions.’ But a planning meeting that now includes community representatives is a different planning meeting. A monitoring report that now includes livelihood data

²⁴ See Feather, 1989; and for the development context, Scott, 1985.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

alongside biophysical indicators frames decisions differently. These are Trojan mice in the purest sense: small enough to pass through institutional defences, consequential enough to shift how decisions are made.

Institutional micro-shifts require allies within the institution – individuals who see the value of the change and have enough positional authority to enact it. Identifying and supporting these allies is itself a foment (one that overlaps with relational brokering). The intervention does not impose institutional change from outside; it nurtures conditions under which insiders choose to make changes that align with the alt-heading.

Build on what's already there

Sensing will reveal places where the system already has give – practices that are already shifting, actors who are already doing things differently, collaborations that are already nascent, institutions that are already adapting. These are the opportunity points described elsewhere in the Playbook. Opportunity points are nascent foments – perturbations that the system has already generated from within, which your intervention can amplify.

Rather than designing foments from scratch and imposing them on the landscape, look first for what is already happening that moves in the direction of your alt-heading. A women's savings group that is already experimenting with collective marketing is a nascent foment. A junior district officer who is already including community data in their reports is a nascent foment. A neighbouring community that is already managing a shared resource through informal agreements is a nascent foment.

But note, also, the points made above on adjacent practices. It is important to look at practices that may not immediately appear to have anything to do with your alt-heading. These adjacent practices – the temple attendance, the school engagement, the market routines – can themselves contain opportunity points. Focusing on these can, once again, help to perturb the context surrounding your primary practices.

Your intervention's role is to recognize these, connect them, resource them modestly, and protect them from the dampening loops that would otherwise absorb them. This is not passive. It requires active sensing, deliberate choices about where to invest attention, and the judgement to distinguish genuine opportunity from wishful thinking. Not everything that looks promising is an opportunity point; some apparent shifts are temporary, superficial, or driven by incentives that will disappear when the project leaves.

Opportunity points are not the same as foments. With opportunity points, you learn to identify them, and to use them as launchpads for designed foments. A foment that builds on an existing opportunity point – amplifying something that stakeholders are already inclined towards – is far more likely to take root than one that introduces something entirely novel.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

What releasing a foment looks like

The language of 'releasing' a foment is deliberate. You do not implement a foment the way you implement a programme component. You release it into the system and observe what happens. The metaphor is ecological, not mechanical: you are introducing something into a living system and watching how the system responds.

It is also very like the sport called curling. Here, a player releases a stone across a sheet of ice towards a target area. The player tries to slide the stone – through their skill and experience – to get the stone into the bull's eye. The stone has its own momentum, its own interaction with the surface. The player does not control its trajectory. But the teammates run ahead of it, sweeping the ice in front of the stone to reduce friction where they want it to travel and leaving friction where they do not. They are not steering the stone; they are shaping the conditions through which it passes. A foment works the same way. You release the perturbation, watch which direction it actually moves, and then deploy your other foments – your bilateral engagements, your knowledge-sharing, your relational brokering – to smooth the path towards your alt-heading and leave the dampening loops intact where the perturbation is heading somewhere unhelpful. The ferment of foments is not a set of independent provocations; it is a coordinated surface-preparation exercise around perturbations that are already in motion.

Consider how this works in practice. Sensing has revealed that smallholder farmers in the upper catchment are locked into a practice configuration where monoculture maize dominates: the materials (seed supply chains, fertiliser subsidies) favour it; the meanings (for example, maize as 'real farming', diversification as 'backward') reinforce it; the competencies (agronomic knowledge, market navigation) are oriented around it. Your intervention proposes that shifting towards diversified agroforestry would improve both livelihoods and watershed function. But you also know – from sensing – that several farmers on the catchment's margins are already trialling fruit trees and nitrogen-fixing species, and that a women's group has been quietly developing skills in processing and marketing non-maize products.

These are your opportunity points. Your ferment might include: bilateral engagement with the women's group to understand and support their marketing initiative (building on what is already there); relational brokering to connect the experimenting farmers with each other and with the women's group (creating new exchanges); knowledge-sharing to present watershed data showing how upper-catchment practices affect downstream water availability (meaning-targeting); a convened space bringing these actors together with a district agricultural officer who is sympathetic to diversification (institutional micro-shift potential); and storytelling – supporting the experimenting farmers to tell their own stories of why they diversified, what happened, and what it means to them. Meanwhile, you are also targeting adjacent practices – perhaps engaging the agricultural college that trains the next generation of extension officers or working with the cooperative board that currently only markets maize.

None of these is large. None commits the intervention to a particular outcome. Each embodies a proposition – but remember the honest epistemology: you are confident that each will perturb the system, and you are betting that the perturbation will move broadly towards your alt-heading. You are not confident of the second part. And each generates learning: did the women's group



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

engage? Did the connection between farmers produce anything? Did the watershed data shift how the district officer frames agricultural planning? Did the stories travel?

Crucially, you are not running these foments in isolation. They are a ferment, designed to interact. The bilateral work feeds into the convened space; the knowledge-sharing reframes what is discussed there; the relational brokering creates channels through which the stories can travel afterward. The ferment is itself a designed perturbation – a set of small provocations whose collective effect is greater than the sum of its parts, because each one shifts the conditions facing the others.

Notice that these foments approach the same interaction space from multiple angles – each targeting a different strand or a different element of the practice configuration. A ferment that works only one angle is unlikely to shift heading.

And then you watch. You monitor for ripples: is the women's group's marketing initiative attracting interest from other farmers? Is the district officer's framing shifting? Are the stories being retold? And you watch for the signals of potential cascading: are farmers who were not directly involved beginning to ask questions? Is the cooperative beginning to stock diversified products? Is the meaning of 'good farming' beginning to shift? If these signals appear, you sweep the ice – carefully, deploying further foments to smooth the path – without trying to control the process. If they do not appear, you ask why, and you redesign.

In all likelihood, the success that emerges will look nothing like what you initially imagined. Perhaps the women's group's marketing initiative takes off in ways you did not anticipate, becoming the platform for a broader shift in how the district approaches agricultural extension – while the watershed data lands with a thud and changes nothing. The outcome is real, and it is valuable, but it is not what the proposal promised. This is not a failure of the approach; it is how complex systems actually work. What matters is whether the system's heading has shifted, not whether it shifted through the specific causal chain you predicted.

What foments do for your intervention

Thinking in foments changes how you plan and how you implement. You are not rolling out a programme; you are releasing a ferment of provocations, *each one a question posed to the landscape*. The answers will reshape your landscape ambitions, your priorities, and sometimes your alt-heading itself. This is not a loss of control – you still control yourself and your intervention – it is how you work skilfully within complexity.

Foments serve your intervention in several ways. They probe the system, testing where change is possible. They perturb existing arrangements, creating openings for new practices. They plant ideas, relationships, and possibilities that may flourish. They generate learning – from both success and failure. And because they are held lightly, they can be abandoned when they are not working, freeing resources for more promising directions.

The utility of a foment, at its simplest, is to knock a strand off its current trajectory (see the [Systems and Complexity](#) section). A ferment is what shifts heading by deflecting many strands through many designed interactions simultaneously.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Each foment in your ferment targets a strand in the interaction space, seeking to dampen its regulatory effect on the lighter strand you are concerned with, amplify a lighter strand that is already heading towards your alt-heading, or redirect a heavy strand so that its regulatory effect no longer bears on your lighter strand (see the Opportunity Points section for how these three logics map onto opportunity point categories).

This logic reflects a fundamental principle of complex systems: change is generated through the accumulation of micro-level interactions, not through singular decisive acts. In nature, systems optimize through precisely these small exchanges – because there is no single directing force, adaptation emerges from countless local adjustments. A foment operates at this micro-level: it introduces a small perturbation, observes how the system responds, and amplifies or dampens accordingly. The cumulative effect of multiple foments, running in parallel across a landscape, can shift the system's disposition in ways that a single large intervention cannot – precisely because each foment is too small to trigger the defensive response that larger, more visible change efforts provoke.

The Playbook rejects the language of 'scaling up.' What we describe is scaling deep – multiple foments probing the same practice configurations from different directions, targeting both primary and adjacent practices – and scaling out – the cascade process through which practice change propagates beyond your direct intervention, through demonstration effects, social learning, and institutional diffusion. Scaling deep is what your ferment does; scaling out is what cascading does. Multiple semi-autonomous teams could, of course, address the same set of practices in different communities, each developing their own foments – this is the mosaic approach described in the [Adaptivity](#) section.

A final note. Foments resist conventional monitoring, evaluation, and learning frameworks, for reasons that are structural rather than technical. Conventional MEL demands attribution: the ability to demonstrate that an observed change was caused by a specific intervention. But in complex systems, change is emergent, collaborative, and often unintended. The pursuit of attribution selects for interventions that are attributable over interventions that are effective – it is itself a dampening loop. If we are sincere about the desire to shift complex systems, attempting this in partnership or network with others is the only way it can be achieved. This raises profound questions about how we account for what we do and what we accomplish, which are addressed in the Playbook's MEL section.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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Opportunity points

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

- Op-points are conditions in the system's regulatory architecture, not places – moments where the interactions between strands create potential for practice change and where a well-designed foment can amplify what that interaction produces.
- Interventions can target four depths – instruments (politically safe but trivial), information, regulation, and intent – and most development work stays at instrument level for structural reasons we name openly.
- Six categories of regulatory exchange make the most productive op-points: asymmetric dominance, regulatory incoherence, latent reciprocity, regulatory weakening, regulatory redirection, and convergent light strands.
- Opportunities range from obvious to occluded, and the deepest are visible only through sustained relational presence in the landscape, because the dominant information systems are structurally blind to them.
- Your interaction space is not where your target groups are – it is wherever the strands that regulate them originate, which may be a national capital 600 km away or an export market on another continent.

Introduction

Every complex system has points where it is more susceptible to influence than others – places where a modest intervention might generate ripples. They are *where* you intervene in the system. We call these *opportunity points* (op-points).¹ These are not fixed locations in the landscape. They are openings in the system's regulatory architecture: moments, relationships, or configurations where the patterns that hold the system on its current heading might be disrupted, redirected, or reinforced. An op-point is a condition: a moment where the interactions between strands create potential for practice change, and where a well-designed foment can amplify what that interaction produces.

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you're interested, check out the 'evidence page' for this section here.

¹ Note that the traditional systems literature identifies 'levers' – which are similar in many respects to our 'opportunity points'. We prefer the latter term because we do not see these as mechanistic, and taking advantage of opportunities does not imply the application of pressure or force.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Elsewhere, we have described how system heading is produced by the interactions between strands – actor-specific trajectories constituted by practices. Opportunity points are where those interactions are most promising: where strands come into contact under conditions that create potential for practice change.

To change a system's heading, we have to change the interactions that maintain its current heading. We are, in effect, intervening in the system's foundational relationships. It makes little sense, after all, to put a bucket under a leak instead of fixing the roof; or treating only the symptoms rather than the disease. These underlying drivers are the power dynamics, institutional arrangements, regulations, and paradigms that dominate system heading (Actor A in Our Theory of Change). The question for any intervention is: are you putting a bucket under the leak (trivial) or repairing the roof (profound)? Trivial interventions are easier, more visible, and less threatening to existing power structures.

Changing a system's regulatory architecture is, in practical terms, changing the context within which actors operate. Context and regulation are two descriptions of the same phenomenon: regulation is how context is constituted – the dense web of norms, power relations, institutional arrangements, and incentive structures that together determine what is possible, permissible, and rewarded in a given setting. The practitioner who intervenes in the regulatory architecture is not adjusting an abstract governance mechanism; they are reshaping the lived context that generates people's everyday behaviour. This is what distinguishes regulatory-level intervention from instrument-level tinkering: instruments operate on behaviour from outside the context, whereas regulatory change alters the context itself, so that different behaviour emerges without being mandated.

Interaction spaces

But where, concretely, does the practitioner look for opportunity points? Here, we can be more precise. A strand – an actor group's set of practices sustained over time – does not merely follow its own trajectory. It radiates regulatory influence outward. A power accumulator's practices do not only constitute their own strand; they exert a regulatory field that shapes what other actors can do, how they do it, and what they think is possible. The upstream irrigator's water extraction regulates the downstream fisher's livelihood – not through a single encounter, but continuously, through the river. The district officer's enforcement practice regulates the community's resource use – not only when the officer visits, but through the standing threat (or promise) of what the officer might do. Or a far-away government exerts regulatory pressures on a local practice.

Where two or more strands' regulatory fields overlap, we have an **interaction space**: the space where practices exert mutual regulation. This will not usually be a place. It is, rather, the conceptual space where the regulation exerted by one strand modulates another. For example, let us imagine that you are concerned with the practices of a group of farmers. These degrade the landscape, and you would rather that they were using a different farming system that integrated a variety of ecosystem- and biodiversity-supporting effects, while also improving the livelihoods of the farmers. The trouble is, the practices the farmers are deploying are government sanctioned. There is an extension officer from the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) looking over your shoulder every step of the way. Chances are, then, that if you want your alternative farming system to be practised, your focus should not be here, with



Click any
heading below
to go directly
to that section

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

the farmers, but in the MOA in the capital city 600 kilometres away. This would suggest that foments need to be released among the farmers, as well as at the MOA. In most cases, it is more nuanced than this – but the moment a farmer tells you that they are practicing a deleterious farming system “because there is no alternative” you can bet they are working in a clear interaction space where their strand is far lighter than others that are in play.

When the interaction space shifts beneath you

One of our LFF interventions was being implemented in two provinces in a highland area of mainland Southeast Asia. This is a major coffee-growing zone, and the international organization implementing the project saw a clear opportunity to build on previous successes in one of the provinces. There, they had managed to connect coffee farmers with major international roasters who had, in turn, organized the farmers – and changed their practices – to deliver the grade and quality of coffee they needed. Market inducements can be a powerful foment. The implementing organization had established multi-stakeholder platforms at the district level, bringing together government, the private sector, farmer cooperatives, and civil society organizations around a shared interest in sustainable coffee value chains. International coffee companies had committed significant resources. Farmers were intercropping shade trees in their coffee plantations. A near real-time deforestation monitoring tool was in use. On paper, the interaction space between the coffee sector, government, and farming communities was productive and heading in a promising direction.

But the environmental problems associated with growing coffee in this part of the world remained significant. Native forest had been cut back to make way for intensive coffee farming. Coffee is a thirsty plant, and groundwater tables had been significantly lowered – farmers were accustomed to using far more water than was needed. Biodiversity loss in a globally famous biodiversity area was continuing. And, culturally, there were unaddressed tensions: most of the coffee farmers were lowland migrants, while the highlands were traditionally ethnic minority areas. The government had actively encouraged in-migration because the land was available and the population sparse. The migrants tended to do better economically, buying more land as they prospered. The ethnic minorities farmed more sustainably but were economically marginalized. Could the foments already in play be built upon – and tweaked – to yield stronger environmental dividends? And could the whole approach be replicated in a neighbouring province?

Then the interaction space shifted. A massive anti-corruption drive was being employed by the country’s president to eliminate political rivals. The campaign came to dominate the ruling party’s deliberations. It was being spoken about everywhere. Up and down government hierarchies, bureaucrats and administrators wondered if, at some time in their past, they had done something that might be construed as corrupt – such as criticizing the party leadership. The provincial governor who had championed the landscape approach lost his position – narrowly avoiding prosecution.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

This paranoia filtered into the provincial governments, and down through the departments responsible for coffee development. The result was administrative gridlock. No one dared to do anything without first gaining approval. What was said became guarded and careful. New ideas would have to be debated in the commune councils, then the provincial committee, and potentially passed up to central government. The project's design document became a millstone rather than a guide – no one was willing to deviate from it, and changing it was out of the question. Even corrections to typographical errors were resisted. Overseas development funds could only be authorised by the Ministry of Finance, so even funding streams froze. The intervention could not move.

Simultaneously, the government announced a sweeping administrative restructuring. Provinces were being merged – five highland provinces reduced to three, combined with coastal provinces. Districts were being dissolved. Hundreds of thousands of public servants were being laid off. Everyone was fighting for their positions and forgetting about projects. The multi-stakeholder platforms that the intervention had painstakingly built at district level suddenly had no administrative home.

One set of practices – the ruling party's exercise of power – heavily overshadowed all others, existing or potential. The interaction space had shifted. Central government had previously been distant, exerting regulatory influence at wide geographic range but with relatively loose grip on daily practice in the provinces. It was now intensely present. As the project leader told us: "We do what we are allowed to do and nothing beyond that. You don't come to the house of the owner and say you want to change the rules." Communities understood that they were "subject to support" – recipients, not participants. Local authorities could not propose new approaches. Decision-making had to follow the ways it had always been done.

In strand terms, the party's strand – always the heaviest in this system – had massively increased its regulatory weight. Its regulatory effect now bore down on every lighter strand in the landscape: the provincial bureaucrats, the district officers, the farmer cooperatives, the ethnic minority communities. The one-way regulatory exchange (A→B) that had always characterized this system intensified to the point where even the modest B→A capacity that the intervention had been building (through market connections, through multi-stakeholder platforms, through technical tools) was overwhelmed. The interaction space between the coffee sector, the farming communities, and government was not eliminated – but it was frozen. The conditions for productive interaction no longer existed.

A critical lesson here concerns the definition of the interaction space itself. The implementing organization had assumed that its interaction space was the Central Highlands – the two provinces where coffee was grown, where farmers and cooperatives and district officials interacted daily. But the anti-corruption campaign revealed that the interaction space had extended to the capital, 600 kilometres away. The party's strand had always been the heaviest in the system;



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

the implementing organization had simply not been reading it because its regulatory effect had previously been diffuse enough to ignore. When that effect intensified, the 'local' interaction space turned out to be governed from elsewhere. The lesson: your interaction space is not where your target groups are. It is wherever the strands that regulate your target groups originate.

With such an overbearing regulatory force, the only option really available to the project was to take this story to the party itself, and to explore which newly designed foments could be released – to provoke some new debate or trigger concessions. This, however, did not happen. The intervention's institutional form – a donor-funded project operating through government channels – made it structurally incapable of confronting the regulatory architecture that was paralysing it. As the project leader reflected: "The Party wants to be seen as having done everything by itself. External support taints things. They can change, but the motivation must be internal."

This case illustrates several things in strand terms. First, interaction spaces are not stable – and their boundaries are not what you think they are. The regulatory conditions that make productive interaction possible can shift abruptly when a heavy strand intensifies its weight, and the space itself may extend far beyond your landscape. Second, an intervention must approach the interaction space from multiple angles: foments aimed at the farming communities (lighter strands), at the provincial bureaucracy (medium strands), and at the party itself (the heaviest strand). This project worked only the first two. Third, the project's own institutional constraints (a rigid project document, donor bureaucracy, sovereignty obligations) prevented the adaptivity that might have allowed it to navigate the new conditions – the intervention's strand was itself too light to exert regulatory force in the reconfigured space. And finally, the case shows why this Playbook insists that sensing the system must include reading the heavy strands – however distant they may seem – because their regulatory effect can transform your interaction space without warning.

A key thing to note is that the practices you may be concerned with are unlike the practices that influence them. The variable in play here is power and its regulatory effect. We are, therefore, concerned with the *quality of regulatory exchange* in the interaction space. When you're focused on an ecologically harmful fishing practice, it is a set of corrupt government practices that keep it in place. When you worry about localized logging, it is the breakdown of community structures that keep these in place.

If you can accept that power wielded by one actor (usually for completely different reasons) regulates the strand that you are concerned with, and whose heading you wish to shift, then, in the interaction space, you are concerned with:

- Dampening the heavy strand's regulatory effect on the lighter strand you're concerned with.
- Amplifying the lighter strand (if it's already heading towards your alt-heading).
- Redirecting the heavy strand so its regulatory effect no longer bears on your lighter strand.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

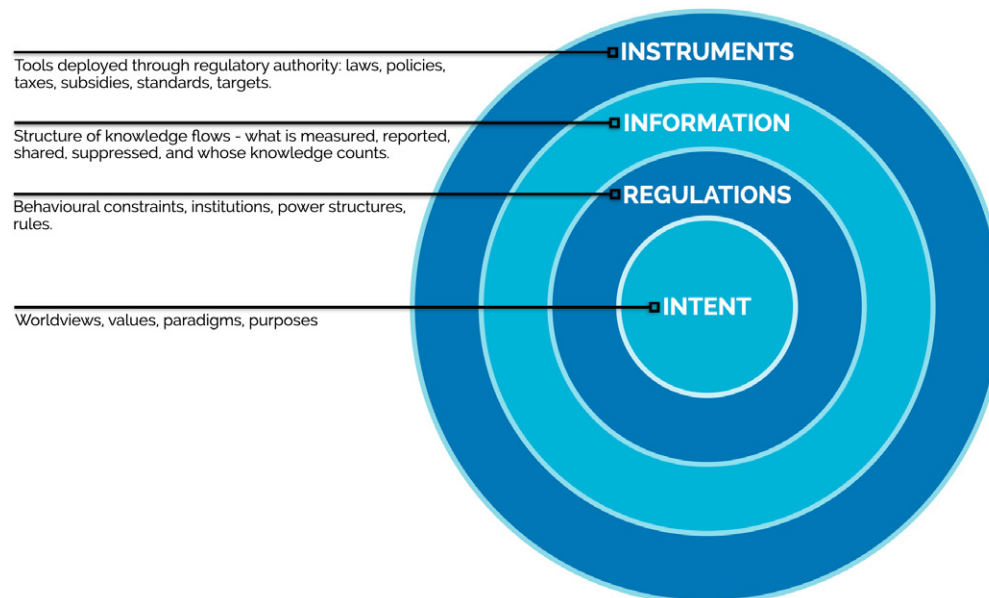
PART 6 Glossary

In most landscape contexts, the exchange in these interaction spaces is overwhelmingly one-way. One or more heavy strands –power accumulators’ practices – radiate regulatory force that shapes lighter strands, but the lighter strands exert little regulatory force back. The community receives regulation; it has minimal capacity to regulate in return. In our notation: A@B. The intervention’s task is to reshape these interaction spaces: first, to introduce some B@A capacity (the lighter strand begins to exert regulatory force back – through collective organization, market alternatives, institutional voice), and eventually to move towards A◻B (a stable, bidirectional regulatory exchange). This is what we mean by *shifting* an interaction – not merely provoking a response but reconfiguring the directionality of regulatory exchange between strands.

Not all interaction spaces are equally consequential for system heading, and you cannot attend to all of them. You need to select those where the regulatory exchange is most consequential for heading and most amenable to being shifted by a foment. Discerning this requires exactly the systemic thinking and power analysis that this Playbook advocates: sensing who’s doing what, when, where, why, how – and to whom.

Where to look: depths of intervention

Drawing on the systems thinking tradition – particularly Donella Meadows² – we can identify four broad depths at which interventions might target a complex system. Think of these as concentric circles, with the deepest – and most transformative – at the centre, and the most trivial on the outside.



² Meadows, 2009. Meadows originally identified twelve leverage points, arranged from shallowest (constants, parameters, numbers) to deepest (the power to transcend paradigms).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Intent

At the centre sit the worldviews and values that drive the system. These are the deepest patterns: the taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world works and whose interests it should serve. Shifting intent is the most challenging form of intervention, but also the most transformative. If the prevailing worldview holds that landscapes exist primarily to generate private profit, then every regulation, every information flow, and every instrument will tend to serve that worldview. Change the worldview – to one where landscapes are understood as shared commons requiring collective stewardship – and the downstream effects cascade outward through every other layer.

Regulations

The next ring comprises the regulatory architecture of the system: the rules, institutions, power relations, and governance mechanisms that pattern behaviour. Nobody sat down and designed these structures; they emerged from the interplay of power, interests, and historical contingency. But they regulate – they constrain some behaviours and enable others through the actual exercise of power via institutional and normative structures. We consider the regulatory architecture to be the most promising focus for ILM interventions, because it sits at a productive intersection: changes here can generate outward ripples (altering information flows and the instruments deployed) while simultaneously generating inward influence (gradually shifting the worldviews that actors hold). Restructuring institutions to be more inclusive, transparent, or adaptive does not merely change how decisions are made; over time, it changes how people think about what decisions are for.

Again, the power question is inescapable. *Whose regulations prevail?* In any landscape, the regulatory architecture reflects the interests of those who shaped it – typically government, donors, or powerful private sector actors. The rules of the game serve whoever wrote them. An ILM intervention that targets regulatory structures must therefore attend carefully to *whose interests the restructuring serves*, and to whether the change process itself redistributes or further concentrates regulatory power.³

Information

Moving outward, we encounter the structure of information flows within the system: who has access to what knowledge, in what form, and with what consequences for action. Information here refers to the political economy of knowledge: what is measured, what is reported, what is suppressed, and whose knowledge counts. Modifying information structures – making previously invisible dynamics visible or restoring suppressed signals – can shift a system's behaviour. Meadows' examples are instructive: identical houses consumed 30 per cent less electricity when the meter was in the hallway rather than the basement; US factory emissions fell 40 per cent after a public reporting requirement, with no fines or regulations attached. In neither case did a feedback loop change. A new visibility was created.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Yet information, too, is politically constituted. Whose knowledge counts? In many landscapes, the information that matters most – market prices, government reporting, donor metrics – reflect the interests of powerful actors while suppressing signals from marginalized communities. A fishery might be collapsing, but if the dominant information systems measure GDP rather than community food security, the collapse remains invisible to decision-makers until it becomes catastrophic. Many governments and development interventions focus on ‘awareness-raising’ reflecting an information-deficit model: the assumption that if people only knew, they would act. But information interventions that do not address the regulatory architecture determining why certain knowledge is suppressed will generate the tiniest of ripples at best, never cascades.

Instruments

On the outside sit the instruments wielded by those who hold regulatory power: the laws, policies, taxes, subsidies, standards, targets, and quantitative settings that constitute the visible toolkit of governing. These may ease particular symptoms of systemic failure, but they do not address the underlying disease. Adjusting a subsidy rate does not change who controls the institution that sets the rate, which information flows justify the rate, or what worldview determines that subsidies are the appropriate response.

Instrument-level interventions are politically safe: they redistribute resources at the margins without disturbing the power structures that determine the overall distribution. They suggest that something is being done without addressing underlying structures and drivers. Much of what development interventions do – supporting new legislation, strengthening policy frameworks, building institutional capacity – is instrument-level work that looks deeper than it is. A new law is still an instrument wielded by the same power accumulators if the regulatory architecture remains unchanged.

An ILM approach worth the name must be willing to work at depth. That does not mean ignoring instruments; sometimes the symptoms demand immediate remedial attention. But it means recognizing that instrument-level interventions are necessary but not sufficient, and that the deeper work – confronting power dynamics, redesigning institutions, shifting paradigms – is where the intervention’s real contribution will be made or not. Where you choose to aim on the target above reveals what you believe is possible, and what you are willing to risk.

Why most interventions stay trivial

This is perhaps the most uncomfortable observation the Playbook has to offer: the overwhelming majority of development interventions in landscape contexts operate at the instrument level. They pass laws, provide financial incentives, establish standards, and measure outputs – hectares protected, tonnes sequestered, livelihoods supported. These yield outputs, but rarely outcomes.

This is not primarily a failure of imagination or technical capacity. It is a structural feature of the institutional arrangements through which development is conducted. Bilateral and multilateral donors operate within frameworks that require them to respect the



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

sovereignty and legitimacy of partner governments – even when those governments are embedded in the very power structures that generate the problems the intervention claims to address. An intervention that explicitly challenges existing governance arrangements, land tenure systems, or market structures risks its own institutional survival. The result is a systematic bias towards instrument-level tinkering: visible, measurable, politically safe, and ultimately trivial.

There is a deeper structural reason why interventions stay trivial. The hierarchical architecture through which development is conducted – donor to government to implementer to community – replaces relational proximity with bureaucratic abstraction at every level. It is structurally incapable of building the relational substrate that regulatory-level change requires. An intervention that genuinely aims to shift the regulatory architecture of a landscape needs the relational density of collaborative governance to succeed – but the institutional form through which it is delivered systematically prevents this. The noble goal is espoused at every level of the hierarchy; the mechanism that would deliver it is foreclosed by the hierarchy itself. This is the insincerity we diagnose in the section on Unstated Intent: the gap between what interventions say they want and what their institutional form allows them to achieve.

The recent pivot towards private sector engagement in development landscapes represents a variation on this theme, not a departure from it.⁴ When donor frameworks encourage or require private sector partnership, the effect is often to introduce new power accumulators – corporate actors, frequently from donor countries – into landscape systems where they insist on the coordinative logic of monopoly control over supply chains, market access, and intellectual property. Power is reconfigured, structures reinforced, and power not redistributed.

An ILM approach that is sincere about systemic change has to be willing to work at regulation and intent level. This means confronting power. It means accepting that the intervention will face resistance from precisely the actors who benefit from keeping things superficial. And it means shaping the intervention itself for the kind of adaptivity that allows it to persist and manoeuvre in a politically contested space.⁵

Detecting opportunity points

As you ‘read’ the landscape, you will be looking for opportunity points. This is a proposition about where the system has ‘give’ – i.e., not only can you deliver influence to this point, but the system is amenable to receiving it. Your strand map – the read of who is driving the system where, with what weight – tells you which interactions between strands are most likely to produce movement towards your alt-heading. As a proposition, your interpretation may well be incorrect. But you have to focus somewhere in the system, and if you are adaptive in your trialling, you should be able to take this in stride.

⁴ The increasing emphasis on private sector engagement in development represents a reconfiguration of who accumulates power, not a redistribution of it. Corporate actors, typically insist on monopoly or near-monopoly control over supply chains, market access, and intellectual property. This is coordinative logic: ordination of things in space and time, centralised and intolerant of diversity.

⁵ See section on Positionality.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Identifying where to intervene in a complex system requires good landscape ‘reading skills’ and plenty of lateral thinking. A key question in this respect is *where* in the system will you apply your intervention? For example, perhaps you want to ensure that marginalized groups in a conflictual landscape are stabilized, and able to pursue their livelihoods. But the threat of violence is too high. It does not make sense to embark on such an intervention until the context has been dealt with. This may mean you need to focus your attention first on peace-building in the nation’s capital city or at the UN General Assembly. Perhaps your first port of call will be belligerent warlords. Under other landscape sub-states, interventions will typically focus on both long range and local actors.

Types of opportunity

Not all opportunity points are equally visible. Some can be identified from your desk; others reveal themselves only through sustained presence in the landscape. The depth of engagement required to see an opportunity reflects the relational proximity needed to understand it. We distinguish four types, arranged by the depth of engagement they demand.

Obvious opportunities are initiatives in your landscape already doing more or less what you hope to do. Perhaps you want to amplify their work, extend its range, or build upon it. Taking advantage of their experience, relationships, and networks makes considerable sense. These are the easiest opportunities to find – but also the most likely to be crowded with other actors seeking the same thing.

Opaque opportunities are groups whose work aligns with your ambitions but is not an exact fit – at least not initially. If you are a research initiative, perhaps these are community development CSOs who could take your research results and push them from output to outcome. There is complementarity, a dovetailing, between what they do and what you seek. Bringing these groups on board may require working together so that their activities become better aligned with your intentions – and yours with theirs. The alignment is latent; it needs to be made visible through interaction.

Obscure opportunities are initiatives that, at first glance, seem to have no relevance to your ambitions. But look again. Perhaps it is a religious organization whose values resonate with your alt-heading, and who wield considerable influence in your landscape. Perhaps it is a private firm with outstanding distribution networks that you could take advantage of. Perhaps it is a politician who commands significant influence and whose support could open doors. Perhaps it is a dormant initiative with complementarity on paper but little current activity – an infusion of support and resources might revitalise it. These opportunities require creativity to see: the connection is not self-evident but must be constructed.

Occluded opportunities are invisible at the early stages of your process and only become apparent as you deepen your engagement. They require adaptation to accommodate. A good example are local institutions – the rules, norms, and shared strategies that communities have developed over time to organize collective action. These may govern how resources are shared, how conflicts are resolved, how decisions are made. Unless you spend time with your target groups, listening and observing, these institutions remain hidden. Similarly, cultural practices and meanings may not seem relevant until you understand why people do



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

what they do. An ethnographer or anthropologist may have documented these, but often you will need to discover them yourself. The opportunity here is to work with the grain of existing social organization rather than against it.

Occluded opportunities are, in effect, weak signals rendered visible through relational proximity. The local institutions described above – the regulatory architecture that communities have built for themselves – are precisely what the Playbook argues is the most productive focus for intervention. They are occluded not because they are hidden in any mysterious sense, but because the dominant information systems (logframes, baseline studies, remote sensing) are structurally blind to them. The most important knowledge about a landscape is frequently tacit: held in the connections between people, expressed through stories and practices, and invisible to formal reporting. Seeing occluded opportunities requires investing in the relational presence that makes tacit knowledge accessible.

The progression from obvious to occluded reflects the depth of engagement required to see them. An intervention that focuses only on obvious opportunities misses the richness of what already exists in the landscape. One that can see occluded opportunities has a much richer palette to work with – and is far less likely to inadvertently work against existing social arrangements that it never knew were there.

Key opportunity areas

Based on our experience, some of the most important opportunity points are outlined below. Each focuses on interactions – between present and future, between interests, between ideas, and between people and their context. It is important to note that to generate a shift, you will need to come at these from both sides. It is insufficient to, for example, focus only on a group of farmers practicing a land-degrading farming system. There are reasons why their strand has arrived here, and you'll need to discover why that is. Perhaps their own internal community structures have been captured by central government, or market pressures leave no viable alternative, or the meanings associated with the current practice are too deeply embedded to shift without addressing the adjacent practices that reinforce them. In any case, you must approach the interaction space from multiple angles – different foments for different strands converging on the same space. A ferment that works only one side of the interaction is unlikely to shift heading.

Reshaping the interaction space – reducing the heavy strand's regulatory dominance, building the lighter strand's capacity to regulate back – creates the conditions under which practice change becomes possible. It does not, by itself, produce practice change. The lighter strand's own practices have their own internal logic (see the [Practices](#) section on MMCs), and foments must also target these directly. Regulatory space without practice-level foments yields an opening that nothing fills. Practice-level foments without regulatory space yields effort that snaps back.

We have framed what follows in terms of asymmetric dominance – a heavy strand overwhelming a lighter one – because this is the configuration most likely to be missed by conventional landscape analysis and most consequential for system heading. But



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

it is not the only one. In some landscapes, the heavy strand is amenable, and the task is to work with it rather than against it: local authorities open to new approaches, willing to redirect their regulatory effect if shown a credible alternative. In others, the lighter strand's own practices are the primary problem, and the regulatory context is absent rather than oppressive. In others still, multiple strands of similar weight are in productive tension, and the task is to deepen their interaction towards deliberation and compromise (see the Compromise section). And in many cases, the goal is not to overcome the heavy strand but to assemble enough lighter strands that their cumulative weight offsets the heavy one – shifting system heading not through confrontation but through collective contra-regulation. Your sensing must read the actual configuration, not assume the adversarial one.

Do not assume that the lighter strand you are concerned with is heading in the right direction. A lighter strand may be practising a deleterious farming system not because a heavy strand is forcing it, but because its own MMC configuration – its meanings, materials, and competencies – produces that practice. In such cases, there is a sequencing issue: you may first need to work the lighter strand's own practices before – or alongside – working the interaction space. The two are not the same task, and confusing them will lead to frustration.

Asymmetric dominance – where a heavy strand's one-way regulatory effect is holding a lighter strand in a deleterious configuration. The opportunity is to build B→A capacity on the lighter side while simultaneously working to dampen the heavy strand's regulatory effect. This is probably the most common opportunity point in landscape work. Example: a mining company's extraction practice (heavy strand) regulates a downstream community's water access (lighter strand) unidirectionally. Your foments work both sides: bilateral engagement to build the community's collective capacity to regulate back, and institutional micro-shifts to introduce environmental monitoring requirements that constrain the mining practice.

Regulatory incoherence – where a heavy strand is trying to go in two directions at once, or where two heavy strands' regulatory fields contradict each other. The opportunity is that the regulatory pressure on the lighter strand is confused – it is receiving contradictory signals, which means neither heavy strand's dampening loop is operating cleanly. A foment placed here can exploit the confusion. Example: a government simultaneously promoting conservation and agribusiness expansion. The lighter strand (smallholder community) receives contradictory regulation – conserve and intensify. A foment can surface this incoherence and use it as leverage.

Latent reciprocity – where a lighter strand already has some capacity to regulate back but is not exercising it, or where two strands of similar weight are interacting but have not recognized their mutual regulatory potential. This means B→A capacity exists but is dormant or suppressed. Your foment amplifies it.

Regulatory weakening – where a heavy strand's regulatory effect is temporarily reduced, creating a window – such as when there are crises and disruptions. A drought, a political transition, a market collapse – these don't just destabilise the regulatory architecture in the abstract. They specifically weaken the heavy strand's capacity to maintain one-way regulatory exchange in particular interaction spaces. The dampening loops that normally absorb your foments are temporarily disabled. The window may be brief.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Regulatory redirection – where the most promising move is not to resist the heavy strand or build B→A capacity, but to deflect the heavy strand's regulatory effect away from the lighter strand you're concerned with. Example: a power accumulator whose land-grabbing practice is degrading a community's agricultural land. Rather than confronting the accumulator directly (risky, likely to fail), you work to redirect their interest towards a different area or a different form of investment – perhaps connecting them with opportunities that are more profitable and less destructive. The heavy strand continues but its effect no longer falls on your lighter strand. This is politically realistic in ways that direct confrontation often is not, especially where the power asymmetry is extreme.

Convergent light strands – where multiple lighter strands are already interacting and their cumulative weight is approaching the point where they could exert meaningful regulatory force back against a heavy strand. This captures the insight from the Systems section: the most promising interactions may be between light strands, whose alignment can generate collective contra-regulation. The opportunity is that the light strands are already in contact – your foment does not need to create the interaction, it needs to deepen and align it. Example: several smallholder communities along a river, each individually powerless against upstream extraction, but whose shared interest in water quality creates a natural convergence. Your foment connects them, supports their collective voice, and amplifies their combined regulatory capacity.

Testing opportunity points: foments

If opportunity points are where the system is susceptible to influence, foments are how you test that susceptibility. An opportunity point is a reading of the system – a judgement, based on sensing, that this interaction between strands, this moment of institutional give, this convergence of practices, represents an opening. A foment is what you release into that opening: a discrete, time-bound provocation designed to stimulate a response. The opportunity point tells you where to aim. The foment is what you toss at it. See the [Foments](#) section for the full palette of foment types and how they are designed, released, and monitored.

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INTEGRATION

The emphasis here is **ILM**

PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Key take-aways

- Integration is about the inbetweenness of things – the quality and character of what passes between landscape elements – not a property of the elements themselves; fragmentation occurs in the connections, not in the parts.
- We characterize integration as a spectrum of system states (Conflict → Coordination → Cooperation → Collectivism) in which what flows between actors changes from threat, to command, to transaction, to mutual regulation.
- The critical threshold is Compromising → Collaboration: a paradigm shift from power accumulation to power sharing, and the leap that intensive convening work has to enable.
- Integration also involves a shift in governance geometry from monocentric to polycentric: distributed regulatory capacity is more resilient because failure is localized and many centres detect what one centre would miss.
- Geographic extent matters more than 'scale': Actor A's regulatory reach may originate far from the landscape, so integration may need to address wide-extent regulation before cross-sector connection.

Integration – why does it matter?

Natural systems are integrated. The interconnections between system elements mean that when we do one thing in one spot, the impact ripples outwards, often giving rise to serious unintended consequences. Clear-logging a patch of forest may trigger downstream erosion, affecting sediment loads, delta formation, and aquatic life.

The opposite of integration is fragmentation. The problem lies not with natural systems but with how we approach them. Through training and specialization, we create fragmented vistas of systems that permeate our management and institutional structures – universities splitting natural from social sciences, governments separating finance from environment. With fragmentation, difference rather than similarity becomes the organizing force. We focus on elements rather than interconnections. This structural problem gives rise to silos frequently blamed for intervention failure.

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you're interested, check out the 'evidence page' for this section here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

When we speak of integration, we refer to how we approach the system. The emphasis in ILM is on the ‘I’—as it is in Integrated Water Resources Management or Integrated Natural Resource Management. These approaches appeal to the need for us to focus on the system as a whole and the interconnections between its elements, which generate its behaviour. Integration, in this sense, is about the *inbetweenness of things* – the quality and character of what passes between landscape elements. It is not the elements that are fragmented or integrated; it is the connections between them.

The key fragmentation problems we are concerned with are institutional fragmentation (specializations that cannot see the whole), perceptual disintegration (inability to observe interconnections), and regulatory incapacity (no or few capabilities to monitor or regulate inter-relations that we do not detect or even look for).

The problems with integration are well recognized and have been levelled at the Sustainable Development Goals and efforts to address climate change (Box 1).

Fragmentation concerns with the SDGs and climate change mitigation

James Lovelock’s ‘Gaia Thesis’ vividly demonstrated the tight interconnections between the globe’s natural elements and systems. The latter was first published in 1979¹ and has been reissued three times since then. More recently, arguments about the ‘anthropocene’ have tried to simplify these arguments, in ways that might better be understood by policy makers and national elites.

Implementation targets in the SDGs are largely silent about interlinkages and interdependencies among goals, leaving open the possibility of perverse outcomes and unrealized synergies.² This has prompted growing concern with the isolated approaches often used for achieving SDGs, prompting calls for more integrated approaches.³

The scientific community generally recommends integrated approaches since there are many synergies among the SDGs, and Agenda 2030 explicitly promotes integrated approaches.⁴ The structural persistence of strong policy silos in most governments, however, makes it difficult to implement integrated approaches, and the scientific community has not been able to provide clear guidance on how integrated approaches might be implemented concretely.

¹ Lovelock, 2000 (1979).

² Stafford-Smith et al, 2016.

³ E.g., Stafford-Smith et al, 2017; Malekpour et al, 2023; Weitz et al, 2023.

⁴ Elder, 2024.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

“Fragmentation is the hallmark of international environmental law,” writes Piñon Carlarne. “[I]t is both the key to its success and the pathway to its unravelling.”⁵ Institutional fragmentation impedes efforts to develop effective systems of supranational climate governance whether this is in international law, the resistance of national elites to evidence of climate change, or the differences between national agendas. While addressing climate change insists on a unified global approach, the issue has instead served to polarize the global community.

Fragmented governance settings, where different levels of governance, institutions and policy sectors are not moving in the same direction, can hamper progress, with ambitious climate mitigation or adaptation goals frequently being undermined by actions in cognate sectors.⁶

⁵ Piñon Carlarne, 2008.

⁶ Jensen et al, 2020.

Understanding integration

Fragmentation manifests as broken or absent connections between actors in the system. We can observe it across sectors and social groups (what is often called ‘horizontal fragmentation’ – sectors, interest groups, cultures operating in silos), across geographic extent (what is conventionally called vertical fragmentation – but which we understand as disconnection between actors whose regulatory reach extends across different geographic ranges, from immediate neighbours to distant capitals and global markets), and across time (disconnection between present action and future consequence, driven by ambiguity and discounting).

When we try to integrate, we tend to focus on connecting across sectors and social groups. But the actors with the greatest regulatory reach – those whose accumulated power extends across wide geographic extent – are of high strategic relevance. In Our Theory of Change, we identify Actor A – who wields disproportionate influence in the landscape system. Actor A need not be located in the landscape. If Actor A is a national government, its regulatory effects reach into the landscape through local representation, police and armed forces, legislation, administration, and resource flows – relations that are no less horizontal for operating at wider geographic extent. Actor A’s influence may result in disunity, complicate integration, and demand loyalty to objectives located far from the landscape. Hence, integration may need to address these wider-extent regulatory relations first, and cross-sector connections later.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
 Governance & institutions
 Leadership
 Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
 Adaptivity
 Foments
 Opportunity points
Integration

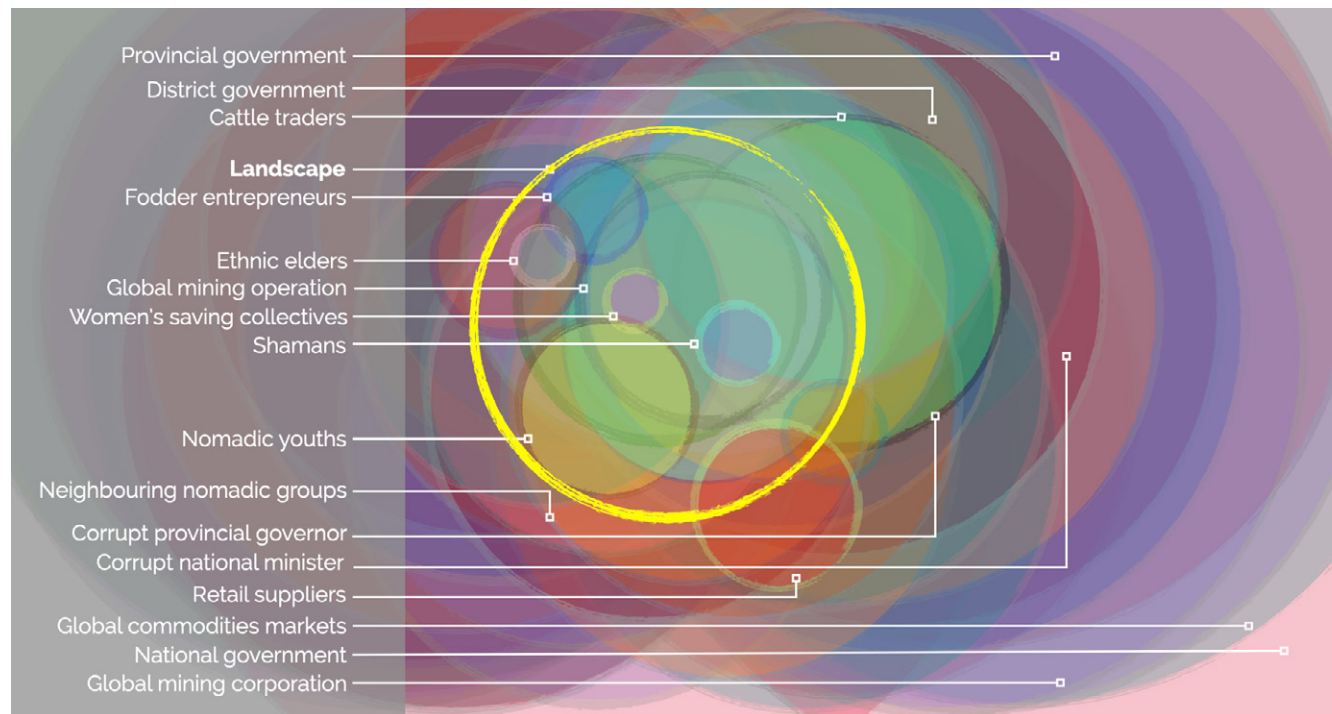
[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
 Team design
 Positionality
 Sensing
 Alternative heading
 Stakeholders
 Monitoring, learning
 & evaluation
 Compromise
 Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)



In the graphic above, we display a ‘power vista.’ Here, fictional landscape (the yellow circle) has been selected for biophysical reasons (an ecosystem, for example). Within it, there are a variety of empowered actors – shamans, nomadic youth, women’s savings collectives etc – overlap and converge in ways that affect the landscape’s condition. The nomadic youth are responsible for the communities’ livestock, and trek across the landscape in search of pasture. Their power – and regulatory effect – on the landscape is substantial. Another key actor is a mine operating in the landscape, that answers to the global headquarters located far away, in another country. Its regulatory reach extends across the entire field, but this landscape is instrumentally relevant to it – it contains ore. The corrupt national minister’s reach also similarly wide, but this landscape is one among hundreds that contribute to patronage networks. The global commodities market does not even know this landscape exists – it registers only as a price signal. Meanwhile, the ethnic elders, the women’s saving collectives, the shamans – their regulatory capacity is geographically tight, but their stake in this particular landscape is existential.

Each of these actors represents a strand in the system – a set of practices sustained over time that contributes to system heading. Some strands are heavy: the mining company and the corrupt minister exert disproportionate regulatory force on the landscape. Others are light: the ethnic elders, the women’s savings collectives, the shamans. Their regulatory capacity is geographically tight, but their stake in this particular landscape is existential. The power vista above shows how the things they do – the practices they employ – exert influence geographically across space, and how the strands inter-relate, regulating each other.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

One key source of disintegration is temporal. The future is not a distant horizon to which we must connect the present. It is embedded in the present – produced by the practices, feedback loops, and power configurations operating now. Soil depletion, groundwater decline, biodiversity loss – these are not future problems but present practices whose future consequences are already contained within them. Temporal fragmentation occurs when we cannot perceive the futures already being assembled by present action. We tend to over-emphasise the present – consuming resources now rather than later – in part because the future is ambiguous, so we discount it. As Gandhi observed, “The future depends on what we do in the present.”

Characterizing integration

Integration as system states

We characterize integration as a spectrum. At one end sits fragmentation; at the other, integration where actors function collectively while maintaining productive diversity. Between these extremes lie various integration states, each characterized by distinct patterns of power distribution, regulatory dynamics, and collaborative capacity.¹ Each state describes a different quality of inbetweenness – a different character of what flows between actors in the system. In conflict, what flows between actors is threat and coercion. In coordination, what flows is command. In cooperation, what flows is transaction. In collectivism, what flows is mutual regulation. The states are not properties of actors; they are properties of the relations between them.

We identify four dominant integration states: Conflict, Coordination, Cooperation, and Collectivism. Each contains two sub-states capturing gradations in how power regulates behaviour and how collective action emerges. In the dartboard diagram below, integration increases clockwise; fragmentation increases counter-clockwise. It is important to note that none of the states is ever pristine or static. A landscape in a collaborative state will still exhibit pockets of conflict – especially slow violence variants (Box 2) – but collaboration dominates.

These states reflect how power generates regulatory effects. Power operates in each. ‘Regulation’ is the effect generated by feedback loops that dampen some behaviours while amplifying others, determining system heading. Who controls these regulatory dynamics, and whether regulation serves power accumulation or power sharing, fundamentally shapes landscape trajectories.

Movement from one state to another is generally incremental except at one critical threshold: the transition from Cooperation (Compromising) to Collectivism (Collaboration). This represents a paradigm shift from power accumulation to power sharing, from transactional to transformational relationships, from external to internal generation of governance capacity. Crossing this threshold requires intensive convening work—practices that build trust, model power-sharing, and develop collective regulatory capacity.

¹ This section draws on Galtung’s (1968) structural theory of integration, public administration literature on coordination-cooperation-collaboration (Keast et al, 2007; Castañer, 2020), commons governance theory (Ostrom, 1990; Bollier, 2014), and regulation theory from political economy.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Slow violence as cross-cutting structural condition

Rob Nixon defines slow violence as “a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”¹ This encompasses what Galtung calls structural violence (harm embedded in social hierarchies, economic inequality, unequal resource access)² and Bourdieu’s symbolic violence (power so thoroughly internalized people do not experience it as violence).³

Slow violence is not a distinct system state but a structural condition affecting all states. It manifests differently depending on the dominant interaction pattern.

Slow violence reveals its frequently structural origins when we think about how landscapes are located within wider geographic extents. Local collaboration can dampen slow violence when it manifests locally—for example, collective monitoring prevents overextraction, equitable distribution addresses poverty, adaptive management responds to degradation. But slow violence generated at wider geographic extent requires governance at that extent.

Perfect village-level collaboration cannot stop climate change, reverse upstream mining contamination, or counteract global market forces extracting value from landscapes. This is why polycentric governance across nested geographic extents is essential—not because local governance is insufficient, but because regulatory effects operate at multiple extents simultaneously.

Treating slow violence as cross-cutting condition rather than discrete state allows us to:

- Recognize structural harm operating within any interaction pattern
- Understand how range mismatches enable violence (governed well locally but harmed from outside)
- See that moving rightward on integration spectrum doesn’t eliminate slow violence, only changes how it operates and whether communities have capacity to resist it
- Identify that collaboration’s advantage isn’t eliminating slow violence but providing collective capacity to recognize, name, and adaptively respond to it

Slow violence shapes system heading across all states. Soil depletion, groundwater decline, biodiversity loss, climate disruption—these operate over timescales making them invisible to immediate perception yet constraining future possibilities. Integration work must attend to slow violence: making invisible harm visible, connecting delayed effects to current causes, and building collective capacity to resist structural violence generated at wider geographic extent.

¹ Nixon, 2013.
² Galtung, 1968.
³ Bourdieu, 1977.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

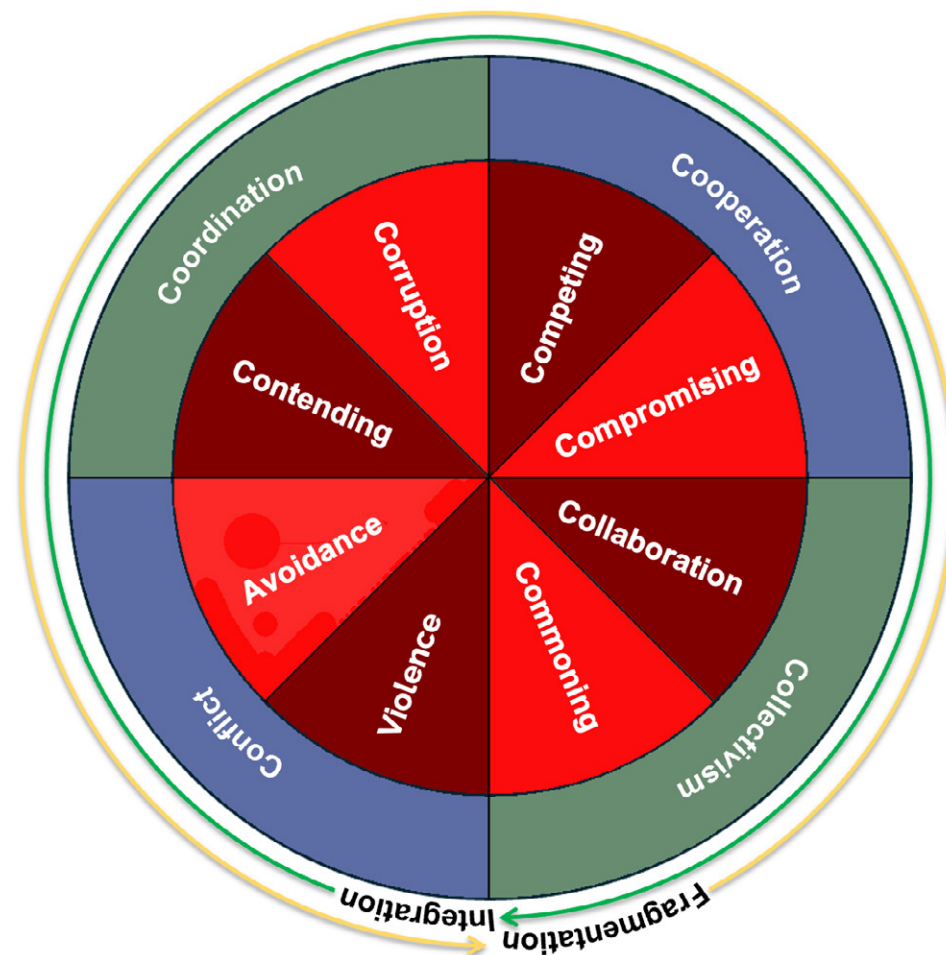
PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

The typology also describes a shift in the geometry of governance. At the conflict and coordination end, governance – to the extent that it exists – is monocentric: a single actor or coalition imposes order, concentrating regulatory capacity in one centre. As we move through cooperation towards collectivism, governance becomes progressively polycentric: regulatory capacity is distributed across multiple centres, each exercising regulation within its domain but connected to others through negotiation, shared norms, and institutional arrangements. This is not a movement from order to disorder. It is a movement from imposed coherence – which depends on a single centre maintaining control and collapses when that centre fails – to emergent coherence, which is sustained from many points and is resilient precisely because it has redundancy. The polycentric governance literature demonstrates that systems with multiple overlapping centres of decision-making are more adaptive and more resilient than monocentric alternatives, because failures are localized rather than systemic, and because distributed sensing detects problems that a single centre would miss.²

Below, we describe each state and its two sub-states, elaborating on three constituent dimensions of complex systems: (a) the container – whether ‘loose’ or ‘tight’; (b) difference – high or low; and (c) exchange – which emerges from the former two. Information exchange is of particular interest because the direction and openness of information flows serve as one of the most empirically observable indicators of power distribution within landscape systems.³ For each system state, we also examine practices through the meanings-materials-competencies (MMC) framework.



² For example: Andersson and Ostrom, 2008; Carlisle and Gruby, 2017; Ostrom, 2009.

³ Our inspiration here is the second dimension of Lukes's (2021) three dimensions: nondecision-making power, or agenda-setting, is precisely about controlling what information enters decision-making space. In Bachrach and Baratz's (1962) original formulation, this referred to the power to keep issues off the agenda entirely. Lukes extends this to argue that even without deliberate intent, structural biases in how information circulates can exercise power. His third dimension goes further still: shaping preferences so that actors do not even recognise grievances or alternative possibilities. Information is not just a resource in this framework—it is the medium through which power operates at its less visible registers.



Click any heading below to go directly to that section

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Conflict

Conflict comes from the Latin *confligere* – ‘to strike together’ – revealing its essence: actors colliding destructively rather than connecting productively. This is the most fragmented system state where actors work actively against each other’s interests through destructive interaction marked by threats, coercion, or silence.

Violence

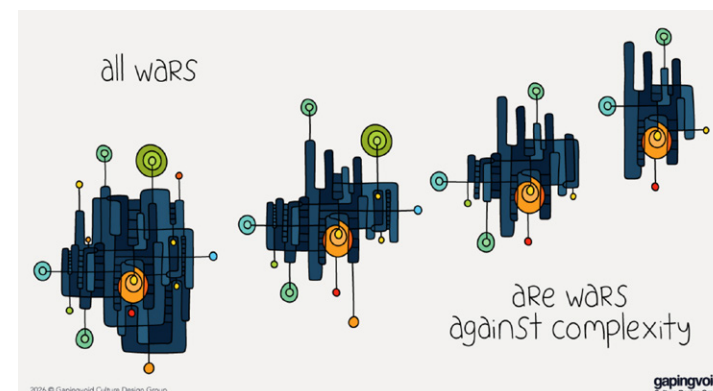
This is the most extreme fragmentation, characterized by direct physical harm and overt coercion. Power operates through raw force: muscle, guns, threats, physical domination. There is no stable regime governing behaviour at landscape scale, while at smaller scales, behaviour is reactive and threat-attendant. Power is expressed as ‘power over’.

At landscape scale, the *container* is collapsing or non-existent. Violent belligerents – whether armed groups or the state – may have tight containers due to identity or employment (as soldiers). At small scales, defensive communities also form tight containers. *Difference* is extreme and deliberately accentuated – clashes between religions, ethnicities, ideologies, or those with and without weapons. Distinctions are weaponized.

Exchange is severely limited. Contact between people may be minimal; tools of information exchange (mobile phones, internet, newspapers) may be absent; levels of trust are low and suspicion high. The choice of which information to act upon is highly safety related. Such exchange that occurs may be tightly controlled by dominant militia. Resource flows are blocked or extractive.

Practices directly reflect context. Sedentarization is regarded as highly risky; agricultural activities are limited. Foraging behaviour or mobile livelihoods (livestock) may prevail. *Meanings* refer to the preservation or taking of life. For belligerents, *materials* revolve around weaponry; for victims, tools for foraging and shelter. *Competencies* are skills of attack or, for victims, the ability to detect attack and escape.

System heading is chaotic, often towards rapid degradation. Free-riding may be rampant (Box 3). Contested territories may be deliberately destroyed – poisoning wells, burning forests, laying landmines, extensive shelling damage. Resource extraction becomes predatory: armed groups logging protected forests, illegal mining destroying watersheds, livestock raiding collapsing pastoral systems. The biophysical landscape both shapes and is shaped by conflict – resource scarcity triggers violence, violence destroys resource base, creating amplifying feedback loops. Refugee camps suffer intense resource extraction close to settlements. Further afield, resource extraction is limited by security concerns and restricted to those bold or foolish enough to venture out.





[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

The commons and free-riding

'The commons' refers to a class of natural resources that, due to their characteristics, can only be managed in common. These may include air, water, the oceans, pasture etc. They have two key characteristics: first, they are rivalrous—i.e., if you remove a certain amount from them, this means proportionately less is available to others. Second, they are difficult to defend from would-be exploiters.¹

Free-riding occurs when some actors take advantage of a collaboratively managed resource. For example, a community may have successfully managed a fishery or a water resource, which yields benefits to society. The free-rider manages to fish more than their share or takes more water than was allocated to them. At the same time, free-riders do not contribute to the collaborative management of the resource.²

Free-riding is a persistent threat to all collaboratively managed natural resources—which speaks to the importance of collective monitoring (of who is doing what) by the community, the presence of rules to define what is allowable or not, and sanctioning mechanisms to ensure that free-riders are disincentivized or punished.

Economists often frame free-riding as 'externalities'—i.e., the costs transferred elsewhere (such as society) as a result of resource extraction or the activities of private enterprise. It is very common that the low prices that we enjoy for something (e.g., electricity) are possible because much of its cost has been externalized elsewhere (e.g., the environmental costs of hydropower being produced far away).

In Garrett Hardin's³ 'tragedy of the commons,' a free-riding scenario in which many actors have 'open access' to a finite resource. Here, each actor maximizes private benefit while collectivising costs, inevitably degrading the resource until it collapses. Hardin argued this tragedy required extinguishing 'the commons' through either state control or privatization.

The act of 'commoning' is broadly equivalent to our understanding of 'collaboration' – although for us, collaboration is how all resources in a landscape are managed and regulated across multiple geographic extents – among other differences. We also, like the commoning literature, emphasize the importance of power dynamics when it comes to managing landscapes.

¹ Olson, 1965.

² Olson, 1965.

³ Hardin, 1968.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Avoidance

Actors withdraw from direct confrontation into minimal interaction. Following violent confrontation, exhaustion or stalemate leads to separation – physical, social, communicative. This is fragmentation through disconnection rather than collision. Regulation emerges from trauma of the recent past. Actors maintain mutual suspicion and avoid each other. Trust levels remain very low; free-riding remains high. Communities retreat to separate territories, factions behind boundaries. Regulation is absent or delivered through the latent threat of violence returning if contact occurs.

The *container* is highly fragmented. Actors maintain separate spaces; boundaries are barriers preventing interaction. *Differences* are extreme and unengaged, distinctions used to justify separation; “us vs. them” narratives may harden. *Exchange* is minimal to absent. Information is withheld or distorted, its trustworthiness consistently in doubt. Resource flows are blocked. Feedback loops are absent because actors are not monitoring each other; local communities and resources are very vulnerable to regulatory pressures of wide geographic extent.

Practices reflect cautious sedentarization inclined towards flight. Small-scale farming is limited as farmers weigh risks between investing in production and potential attack. Trauma and fear are significant factors in land-use decision-making. Where reassured of safety, nascent farming systems may emerge through forest clearing, though inclination towards mobile livelihoods persists. *Materials* are those related to chosen production types but are few and far between. *Meanings* are limited and still constrained by safety preoccupations. *Competencies* focus on avoidance and fight-or-flight responses.

Resource management and governance are fragmented. Upstream users extract without communicating downstream; adjacent communities manage separate territories without coordination; ethnic groups avoid shared commons, leading to degradation from lack of collective governance. The landscape becomes a patchwork reflecting separation—some areas overexploited, others abandoned, with no coherent management. Biophysical feedback loops are broken because actors watch only their fragment, not the landscape as a system. System heading is ambiguous.

Avoidance can persist for extended periods – generations maintaining grudges, communities avoiding contact, households not speaking. Fragmentation may be stable until something forces interaction: a resource crisis, an external coordinator, or gradual reconciliation attempts.

Coordination

Coordination comes from the Latin *co-ordinare* – ‘to set in order together’ – but critically, the ordering is imposed by external coordinating force rather than emerging from mutual agreement. This system state involves activities aligned through imposition of externally-derived power – perhaps market force, government, or dominant warlord. There is directionality to system heading, but it is determined by the source of ordering, not by those being ordered. This yields regulation reflecting the coordinating force’s interests – which may or may not have legitimacy in constituents’ eyes, may or may not have power to enforce regulations. The coordinator



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

accumulates regulatory capacity; power flows from periphery to centre, with minimal horizontal exchange among other actors.

Coordination is, by definition, monocentric. A single actor – typically the state, a donor, or a dominant private sector entity – holds regulatory capacity and dispenses it. This can be efficient under stable conditions, but it concentrates governance in a centre that is structurally distant from those it governs. The coordinator governs through abstraction: the village becomes a ‘target area,’ the farmer a ‘beneficiary,’ the landscape a set of indicators on a logframe. This abstraction is not incidental to hierarchy – it is the mechanism by which governance at a distance operates, and it systematically strips out the experiential, relational knowledge that would make governance effective. The governed are rendered legible but not understood.

Contending

An external coordinator emerges or imposes itself, obliging avoidant actors back into interaction. Actors must engage within the imposed framework but may resist, test boundaries, and push against imposed order (e.g., via ‘weapons of the weak’).⁴ This is struggle within structure, not violent confrontation. Actors contend for voice, resources, and recognition within a system they did not choose, exploiting opportunities a fragile peace can bring. Much activity revolves around testing opportunities – potential or otherwise – but without directly challenging the coordinator. For the coordinator, this involves establishing predominance – extinguishing challenges from competing armed groups while enabling peace. Among the broader populace, opportunism may be high, which can bring localized violence and free-riding.

The container is emergent but imposed. Its boundaries are contested. Membership is determined by coordinator. Difference is managed through the coordinator’s efforts to impose ‘legibility’⁵ the controls it seeks to establish and solidify dominance – and strong power asymmetries exist. Exchange is diversified and emergent as trade and interaction are established. Limited feedback flows from periphery to centre; resources flow but can be disrupted by coordinator whims. The coordinator may try to dominate information consumption by limiting press freedoms, issuing propaganda and blocking internet and mobile services. Within the populace, person-to-person information may be high, enabled by opening transportation routes.

Practices reflect that sedentarization is now considered more safe. *Materials* are farming implements, transport, or infrastructure to get goods to markets. *Competencies* are the ability to use these effectively. *Meanings* and values are likely still unsettled, but opportunism and ‘every-person-for-themselves’ attitudes predominate.

In the landscape, land use is increasingly extensified; depopulated lands are reinhabited; forests are cleared for agriculture. Regulation is determined by markets and whatever restrictions the coordinator imposes. Desire for peace to be maintained is high. At this juncture, large-scale investments are limited to non-existent.

⁴ Scott, 1985.

⁵ ‘Legibility’ refers to a concept advanced by Scott (1998) who defines it as the process by which centralised states transform complex, local social practices, landscapes, and knowledge into simplified, standardised forms that officials can read, measure, and control from afar



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Corruption

This widespread and common sub-state occurs where the coordinator has retained and consolidated power but has insufficient mechanism (or inclination) to impose this upon society. The coordinator allows society considerable latitude provided its supremacy is not challenged and it is allowed to conduct its own, largely self-interested, activities. Thus, investments in security apparatus may be high – to detect challenges. This system state may exhibit high levels of collusion – itself a collaborative form of engagement but conducted for illicit or nefarious reasons. Acquiescence, informing on colleagues, or prostration to the coordinator are necessary to provoke disbursement of favour and for upward social mobility.

The coordinator retains and nurtures its policing rights because these are the mechanism by which bribes are extorted. It is resistant to collective action or local-level empowerment. Outside of the coordinator, society competes – for resources, jobs, influence, basic necessities. Few rules regulate how competition is enacted; the playing field is rarely even. Nepotism and patrimony are common throughout. Rules are frequently discretionary – the coordinator can decide which rules apply, when, and to whom. These are not overtly violent contexts, though threat may not be far away. Legal recourse is generally pointless; any judiciary is not independent. Crime may be common, including crime syndicates colluding with the coordinator. Land-grabbing is common, as are large-scale investments – these serve the coordinator through corruption opportunities they represent, demonstrating commitment to development while having high externalities (Box 3) and few social dividends. Where groups cooperate, their successes draw attention and are quickly captured or stamped out. Many forms of collective action are regarded as threats, though certain neutered forms may be tolerated.⁶ Where resources are managed and conserved, it serves the coordinator's interests. Importantly, power is here a commodity: it can be bought, traded, and stolen.

The *container* is hard-edged with an upper limit which, if approached, increases risk. Membership is determined by coordinator and maintained through collusion and/or threat of exposure, violence, or disappearance. *Differences* can be significant – between rich and poor, haves and have-nots, the influential versus the insignificant. *Exchange* may be highly diffuse for small agreements or capital flow but highly unidirectional for large flows (from source to coordinator). Information exchange is high but may be highly regulated. Networks of trusted friends and colleagues are important. The coordinator may allow internet access but is sensitive to negative perspectives of its role, monitoring social media closely. Information exchange between coordinator and general population may be one-way – restricted to such information that the coordinator wants to know (if opposition is forming, negative commentary). Information from the coordinator is unreliable and propaganda.

Practices can be diffuse and dependent on coordinator interests. If collectivization is seen as a means to controlling the populace, this might be pursued. If large-scale monoculture is seen as in its interest, this is another option. Small-scale communities, uncaptured by coordinator intent, will deploy MMCs appropriate to their activities.

⁶ Terrence McGee's (1979) 'conservation-dissolution' theory illustrates this strategy well. Power accumulators work to dissolve local-level power structures just enough that they can no longer resist the dominant group's interests. Elements of these local structures are, however, conserved—to suggest the state is sympathetic to their identity, or to conserve certain traits (e.g., cultural symbols) that address other interests. For example, the power of an ethnic minority is dissolved, but because their dances and traditional clothing are of interest to the tourism sector, these are conserved.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

At landscape level, it can be very apparent that there is administrative structure monitoring on behalf of the coordinator. Its role is not to dispense social services, mediate conflict, or be neutral arbiter. External initiatives often kowtow to this administration—not because it adds value, but because it has power to close them down. Local communities feel marginalized and ignored. Production can be very primary – small-scale agriculture, pastoralism, fishing, collection of forest products – and then large-scale investments: plantations, monoculture, hydropower plants. Many of these can become white elephants that go nowhere, yielding little besides disruption.

Biophysical consequences can be stark. Plantation agriculture may be present. Resource exploitation may be extensive and unregulated. Clear-felling, small-scale mining and ore processing, wild animal trafficking, poaching, sand-mining are common. Large-scale infrastructural investments and seizure of land for monoculture or ranching are also common – frontier economics in action.

Cooperation

Cooperation comes from the Latin *co-operare* – ‘to work together’ – but in this system state actors increasingly work alongside each other pursuing separate goals with lower levels of coordination. Regulation is emergent, though tensions remain around its source. The coordinator is inclined to be the primary source, but pressures have been applied upon it to cede some degree of its regulatory powers. In this transitory place, atomization may be high, regulation still weak. Many characteristics of the corrupt state may be retained in dialled-down form. Recourse mechanisms are struggling to emerge. The importance of scale is retained—a central, potentially distant coordinator is still ‘in charge’ – but more localized opportunities for regulatory emergence exist. There is uneasy balance between coordinator and civil society – they are competing for regulatory space. In this dynamic state, opportunities exist for both to seize the upper hand, though eventually compromise may be the outcome.

Competing

Something has happened forcing the coordinator to cede much of its dominant power. In the landscape beyond the coordinator, other actors are seizing the initiative – movements emerge of many different varieties, spinning off commonly perceived concerns around conservation, farming, religion, ideology. There is willingness to engage with the coordinator, though everyone understands difference persists – the coordinator has its interests and modus operandi, while civil society has theirs. The retreat of the coordinator has opened regulatory space to competition. Actors jostle to take advantage. There is therefore also competition between actors – potentially to secure more followers but also over a limited resource pool – but for many movements, they are seeking to carve out some right to dominate or at least influence regulation. In this sense, the competitive sub-state is still highly fragmented. The competition between actors is a relation the coordinator may well use to keep them atomized while simultaneously broadening its own regulatory envelope – this is divide-and-rule strategy, a strong example of how interrelations between actors can be tweaked or manipulated in particular directions. Regulation exists – there is persistent, moderating effect both between coordinator and wider society and between all actors in the system. There may be an elevated (though highly diversified) sense of ‘value’ – human, moral, natural values—that goes beyond simple commodification or monetization. Violence may exist but is considered surprising and accompanied by broad outrage.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

The *container* has contested boundaries, which ultimately means they are weak. Membership is fluid. *Differences* are widespread – exemplified by differences in opinion and virtue, though there is still an elite and often accentuated differences in income. All these differences are perceived as contestable and vulnerable to being influenced. A high degree of *exchange* exists, especially around communications and information. People are exposed to large quantities of superfluous information potentially augmented by a free press and diversified sources of information, argument, and perspectives.

Practices are diffuse. *Materials* are very much in evidence – trade thrives, government initiatives implement infrastructure products, aid organizations promote a variety of farming inputs and systems, enterprise and small businesses flourish. The diversity of materials reflects both competition and the diversity of interests and the extent to which materials can further these. *Meanings* are equally diverse – though dominated by markets and businesses. While an air of possibility hangs over the competitive sub-state, disappointment is widespread. People may channel unrealized ambitions into a plethora of religious outlets. Key *competencies* reflect the dynamism of this system – identifying a competitive edge, a new product, a new niche market, a new political angle. Specializations are relatively niche demands; generalist capacities contribute to survival.

In the landscape, actors jostle to have their interests represented. The coordinator's white elephants have shamed it. There may be large amounts of reclaiming going on – for example, lands previously grabbed being reclaimed by local communities for small-scale agriculture. The landscape is a mosaic reflecting the diversity of interests and claims. Pockets or islands of biodiversity may form but require vigilance to maintain. The coordinator may inject larger-scale land use (e.g., protected areas, outgrower schemes) which better reflect emergent societal values around conservation or community engagement that it feels it needs to address to maintain legitimacy.

Compromising

In this state, there may be many coordinators, though some dominate more than others. Some may be regarded as more legitimate than others – for example, because they may have been selected via democratic processes and in transparent ways. There is order in this system, emerging from the tension between coordinators' interests and an acceptance of institutional structures (which influence how interactions occur). The system is generally stable. Power accumulated by coordinators is perceived to be moderated and excesses deemed mostly unlikely. It is in the interest of coordinators to maintain themselves in this position – they can still address their own interests while maintaining the appearance of civic responsibility.

The compromising sub-state represents an emergent polycentricity. Multiple actors hold regulatory capacity, none dominates entirely, and governance emerges from negotiation between them. This is messier than coordination – slower, more contested, harder to report on – but it is also more resilient, because the governance function is distributed. If one actor withdraws or fails, others compensate. The institutional arrangements that contain accumulation – the rules of engagement, the deliberative spaces, the norms of reciprocity – are themselves the product of multiple actors' investments, not the imposition of a single centre. They are therefore harder to capture and harder to destroy.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

The container boundaries are increasingly defined by strong institutions. These serve to ensure that the quantum of power available for accumulation is accessible only via innovation (Box 4) or through compromise. Hence, there is much deal-making and negotiation as actors seek to influence regulation – *quid pro quo* arrangements, negotiated access, reciprocal concessions. Relationships remain transactional and power accumulation is a predominant ambition. Trust is limited to specific transactions; broader collective identity is absent – though collective approaches to empowerment are an innovation. Assuming innovation is relatively rare, compromise becomes the next best strategy. Compromise emerges from cooperation because of mutual recognition that actors are unwilling to cede all of their power in favour of another but are willing to allow a certain reduction to obtain something else. In this sense, power is still commodified, but its exchange differs from that under the corruption sub-state.

Innovation

We see innovation as “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption.” Fundamentally, we see innovation as novel ways of attracting, accessing, articulating and accumulating power – by mobilising new capacities and organizational forms. You may be familiar with the expression that ‘necessity is the mother of invention’ – typically, innovation emerges in response to some kind of pressure, such as a collectively experienced problem. Within social confines (institutions), power may appear to be finite (i.e., a commodity) if everyone keeps on doing things in the same way. Every so often, someone, somewhere, comes up with something novel – a new strategy, a new hood-wink, a new piece of technology that opens doors through to untapped power sources. Innovation creates novel power. In strand terms, innovation is what happens when an actor finds a way to increase the weight of their strand – or to create an entirely new strand that shifts system heading in directions that the existing regulatory structure did not anticipate.

Michael Kirton’s adaption-innovation theory offers a useful distinction here.¹ Kirton argues that people differ not in *how much* creativity they have, but in *how* they prefer to exercise it. Adaptors seek to do things *better* – refining, improving, and optimizing within established structures. Innovators seek to do things *differently* – breaking frames, working outside existing paradigms, challenging the way things are done – or, ‘thinking outside the box.’ Neither style is superior; both are creative. Kirton’s research shows that the most durable change happens when both adaptors and innovators are involved. But here is the rub: most social systems are structured to reward adaption and punish innovation. Adaptors work within the rules; they are safe. Innovators challenge the rules; they are threatening.

This has profound consequences for landscape interventions. Development programmes routinely call for ‘out of the box thinking,’ ‘innovation,’ and ‘creative solutions.’ But calls for innovation are hollow – even dishonest – in the absence of a social read of the system into which the innovation must land. Communities police the boundaries of acceptable differentiation.

¹ Kirton, 1976.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Where material scarcity and fragile trust prevail, conspicuous local success can trigger fear, envy, and accusations of betrayal. Innovators are frequently regarded as deviants and ‘cut down’ for standing out – the tall poppy syndrome.

The implication is that innovation – whether of practices, institutions, or relationships – cannot be understood independently of the power configurations within which it occurs. An innovative practice that threatens existing arrangements will be resisted, not because people are ‘resistant to change,’ but because the regulatory structure actively defends the status quo. Innovation can be seen as destabilizing. An innovative practice that aligns with existing power configurations, or that can be framed as enhancing collective benefit rather than individual advantage, has a better chance of recruiting practitioners.

We revisit this in the [Foments](#) section (see ‘Endogenous innovators’), where we discuss how to identify and work with innovators as opportunity points for designed foments – and why getting their political ducks in a row is a precondition for doing so safely.

Differences in the compromise sub-state rely less on physical attributes and peoples’ backgrounds and more on power – those who have it, those who don’t. Inequalities in power distributions may be high. In such situations, these inequalities can represent a significant threat to sub-state stability. Exchange may be very high. Actors with diverse interests often mingle, and the spaces needed (in-person contact, venues, social media) for this to occur exist.

In the landscape, practices reflect compromise between different interests, uses, and values. Upstream-downstream water users negotiate release schedules. Farmers and pastoralists negotiate crop residue grazing. Communities and protected areas negotiate resource access. Deals are made, broken, renegotiated. Each of these negotiations is an interaction between strands – and the aggregate heading that emerges from many such interactions is what defines this sub-state’s trajectory. Landscape management is a patchwork of bilateral arrangements – some work, some fail, overall heading emerges unintentionally from the aggregate of individual negotiations. Biophysical feedback loops may be recognized in negotiations (upstream user acknowledges downstream impact), but responses remain individualized, not collectively governed.

The transition from Compromising to Collectivism represents the paradigm shift from power accumulation to power sharing. This is where intensive enabling becomes essential—building trust, modelling collective action, demonstrating power-sharing, developing skills for deliberation and conflict resolution. This is where the deliberative system – the constellation of arenas described in the Compromise section – becomes essential. This leap is the primary challenge for ILM interventions. It will only occur if there is broad acceptance that it should happen. The compromise state is where most western countries are, and the single biggest source of compromise is between the state and its people. If the former is seen to be exploiting or taking advantage of the latter, the compromise evaporates. Perceived legitimacy of the state and capitalism is fundamental to the operation of this state. If the state is on board and the vagaries of capitalism are reined in, then the springboard is primed for the leap into convening.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning
& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Collectivism

Collectivism derives from the Latin *collectivus*, based on *collectus* (past participle of *colligere*), meaning 'to gather together.' *Colligere* itself is *com-* ('together') and *legere* ('to gather, pick'), so the Latin origin encodes the idea of people or things being gathered into a whole.

We use 'collectivism' here in its sociological sense – the condition in which actors regulate collectively – not in its ideological sense of imposed collective structures. Collectivism is an integrated state. Regulation is internally generated through collective practice. Power distributes horizontally; leadership exists but gives power rather than takes it. This is the highest stable integration state achievable in complex landscape systems, characterized by continuous collective work maintaining conditions for shared resources and shared governance. Collectivism is fundamentally about ongoing practice, not static structure.

A collectivist state is not, however, the absence of hierarchy. In any human group, dominant individuals will surface and attempt to establish hierarchy – this is an emergent property of social organization, not an aberration. What distinguishes collectivism from coordination is not that the hierarchical impulse is absent but that the regulatory architecture – internalized norms, reciprocity mechanisms, institutional constraints – is sufficiently robust to contain it.⁷ This does not prevent individuals from attempting to accumulate; they create regulatory structures that make accumulation costly and cooperation rewarding. The collectivist state requires active maintenance; it is a dynamic equilibrium, not a resting point.

The collectivist state achieves genuine polycentricity: regulatory capacity is distributed across the landscape, held by multiple actors who exercise it within their domains while maintaining coherence through shared norms and institutional connections. This is not the absence of centralization but its distribution – many centres rather than one, each influenceable by those it governs because governance operates through relational proximity rather than bureaucratic distance. People are more tolerant of regulation they consider influenceable, and regulation is influenceable when it is populated by people whose behaviour can be observed, whose reasoning can be challenged, and who experience the consequences of their own decisions.

This is fundamentally a relational argument. These are social systems: what matters is how people relate, engage, and interact with each other. This is inbetweenness at its most productive – the substance of what passes between actors is not command or transaction but shared regulatory capacity. The collaboration and commoning sub-states take advantage of this relational density because of the regulatory potential and strength it represents. Relational proximity – the capacity to know, monitor, negotiate with, and be accountable to those with whom you share a landscape – is a powerful regulatory mechanism available to any governance arrangement. It is not abstract institutional rules, but the lived experience of mutual dependence that can shift system heading. Ignoring or overlooking this potential is discussed further in [Unstated Intent](#).

⁷ Ostrom's eight principles of 'institutional robustness' are outlined in her seminal 1990 work. These capture well the internalised norms, reciprocity mechanisms, institutional constraints referred to here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Collaboration

The entry point to collaboration, where power-sharing begins. Collaboration is the active practice of bringing together, facilitating collective deliberation, mediating conflicts, building trust, and demonstrating collaborative governance. This is where the paradigm shift from accumulation to sharing occurs.

The emergence of a collaborative state is often inspired and encouraged by effective leadership. Effective leadership is profoundly important in integration. In a collaborative sub-state there may be one – and possibly more – leaders, who represent important opportunity points because they are central to distributing and redistributing power. Leaders are not power accumulators. While willing to share their own power, their key role in collaboration is tweaking and influencing the ways in which power circulates within a community of actors towards collectivity.

Diversity – of people, perspectives, knowledge systems, and cognitive styles – is not merely a social good in this context; it is a functional requirement of working in complex systems. A collaborative platform that convenes only like-minded actors lacks the cognitive variety needed to generate novel responses to complex problems. Stimulating a system with diversity – introducing perspectives that do not fit the prevailing frame – is itself a form of intervention, because it increases the system's capacity to generate novel responses.

Collaborative sub-states may well operate within wider systems dominated by power accumulators, where they are potentially islands in a sea of imposed regulation. Indeed, leaders display significant wisdom in the ways they negotiate the community's collaborative ways of doing things versus these external styles of wielding power. This is also a key vulnerability – external factors can penetrate and destroy them rapidly. Regulatory rights may be in stark competition – with external representatives present, seeking to uphold their rules, versus those of the community. The question of geographic extent is critical here. Localized empowerment and natural resources management will be tolerated – even encouraged by actors whose regulatory reach extends beyond the landscape – and/or sufficient decentralization exists that wider-extent actors are concordant with local action. Where this tolerance is absent, collaborative systems are vulnerable, and adaptivity in intervention design becomes essential.

The *container* is fairly well defined. There is a collective sense of identity that translates into collective action. Leaders work to maintain the container – though not in an exclusionary way. *Differences* are minor. Leadership ensures that power asymmetries are managed and adjusted. There is a key, however, vulnerability in a collaborative system. If the leader should, for whatever reason, disappear, the sub-state becomes very vulnerable to power accumulators and free-riders. *Exchange* is generally high – convened by leaders – and channelled in collective directions.

Dominant practices differ significantly from those in other states and sub-states. Materials are not necessarily physical in nature but include spaces in which to meet, fora within which small deliberations happen – the types of inter-personal venues where co-creation, decision-making, and compromise occur. But so too, the presence of leader(s) has material relevance to the sub-state, due to their mediation, facilitation, negotiation competencies. Meanings in this context orient towards leadership – faith in their abilities: equitability, consistency, fairness, and above all, power-sharing intentions.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

System heading begins stabilizing as collective direction emerges. Biophysical feedback loops become visible through collective monitoring – community observations of forest regeneration, water quality, soil health, wildlife populations. Collective interpretation occurs through deliberation that integrates diverse knowledge systems. Regulation is high because buy-in to the collective project is high. Community members watch for free-riders, and communities have sanctioning approaches. Adaptive responses emerge from collective decision-making – adjusting harvest rates based on observed stock health, modifying grazing patterns responding to pasture condition, collective investment in water infrastructure. Leadership structures make biophysical feedback interpretable and actionable. Convening doesn't eliminate power asymmetries but creates mechanisms to address them – amplifying marginalized voices, rotating authority, checking elite dominance.

Commoning

David Bollier⁸ argues that the commons (Box 3) are less a noun than a verb. Commoning is, we argue, a practice – more specifically, collective practice. Commoning refers to the active social processes of mutual support, negotiation, and experimentation by which communities create and sustain shared resources beyond market/state logics. It emphasizes a dynamic 'living system' of production, governance, culture, and values, often aiming for post-capitalist alternatives like de-commodified provisioning.

Commoning applies to shared resources – and not just commons resources alone. Commoning differs from collaboration in two key ways: first, leadership is not confined to one or two individuals. Leadership is distributed. Almost everyone is power-sharing. Second, external pressures are far less threatening – far away coordinators embrace commoning. They are particularly keen to see localized forms of management and regulation. Communities are not 'islands' – commoning communities are everywhere. Governance is horizontal, not vertical.

Commoning sub-states are well regulated. People operate and behave within socially defined parameters – this system sub-state is, essentially, homestatic. These are not imposed but have emerged from society. There is little need for third parties or external authorities to maintain regulations. Everyone monitors everyone else's behaviour. Feedbacks in the commoning sub-state are dense and regulate effectively.

The commoning *container* is well-defined but highly flexible. It exists despite high diversity within it. It can tolerate perturbations well. The definition of its boundaries are socially constructed – but not in an 'us/them' exclusionary way. Differences are very high, but their relevance is relatively low – accompanied by high levels of acceptance and tolerance. The commoning sub-state's exchanges are multitudinous, amplified by high levels of societal trust. Society and ecology are largely integrated, and people are well aware that what they do ripples. *Exchanges* revolve around power-sharing, monitoring the world around them, and mutually reinforcing collective action.

Capitalizing on diversity under a commoning sub-state is similar to how this happens under the collaborative sub-state.

8 Bollier, 2014.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Practices are dominated by collective activities. Key competencies that reinforce the system state include high levels of monitoring – of landscape condition, of what others are doing within it – and sanctioning transgressors. *Materials* are similar to those in collaboration, but there is no convener. Everyone convenes through a reproducing process of socially-constructed engagement spaces that may be small or large but are diffusive. *Meanings* derive from the sub-state's self-confidence. There is a high level of trust in the system and its ability to deliver at collective scales. It is seen as fair and equitable. *Exchange* is dense and little interrupts or constrains it. Information flows rapidly and easily.

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[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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PART 3

Practice



Designing and implementing an ILM intervention

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

- Design and implementation are a single continuous process, not two phases – you are sensing from the moment you begin the desk review, implementing from the moment you enter the landscape, and redesigning from the moment your first foment generates a response.
- The Playbook offers an eight-step sequence (scope → team → enter → deep sensing → op-points & alt-heading → ferment design → release-observe-adjust → iterate, deepen, sustain) – presented linearly for proposals, but practised iteratively and recursively.
- The anchoring question – who is doing what, when, where, why, how, and to whom – runs through every step; the and to whom is what distinguishes describing behaviour from reading practice-as-regulation.
- Sensing arcs across all steps and produces three living maps (strand map, power vista, practice map) plus an interaction-spaces overlay – these are thinking tools, revised every time you learn something new.
- The exit question – what would need to be true for this system to sustain its new heading without you? – is an ongoing design consideration from the start, not a project closure milestone.

Introduction

This section presents the operational sequence for designing and implementing an ILM intervention as described in this Playbook. It is intended as a practical guide – each step links to the conceptual sections where the underlying thinking is elaborated. The sequence is presented linearly for clarity, but in practice steps overlap, loop back, and inform each other continuously – and should be encouraged to do so. The Playbook's epistemological commitment – **release, observe, adjust** – applies throughout, not just at Step 7 but from the moment you enter the landscape.

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you're interested, check out the 'evidence page' for this section here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

There is no clean boundary between ‘design’ and ‘implementation.’ The Playbook treats them as a single continuous process. You are sensing from the moment you begin your desk review. You are implementing from the moment you enter the landscape. You are redesigning from the moment your first foment generates a response. The steps below are presented sequentially because proposals require sequences, but the practitioner should understand that the real work is iterative and recursive.

If the steps below inspire you to include them in a proposal, they can be presented as a sequenced set of activities, each with defined outputs. The conceptual reasoning behind each step is elaborated in the relevant Playbook sections; a proposal need only state what will be done, what methods will be used, and what each step will produce. For proposal purposes, Steps 1–6 constitute the design phase and Steps 7–8 the implementation phase – though the practitioner should understand that, in practice, implementation begins at Step 3.

Throughout this sequence, sensing is a persistent activity. Sensing is the continuous, deliberate practice of reading a system you are embedded in. This is not data collection. It is interpretive, relational, and ongoing. Sensing draws on Snowden’s weak signal detection, and Weick’s insight that meaning is constructed retrospectively from ambiguous cues. Sensing requires presence, because the signals that matter most are often tacit – held in relationships, expressed through stories and practices, invisible to formal reporting. The team’s sensing capability improves cumulatively with time in the landscape, which is why embeddedness matters.

The point to stress here is that sensing arcs across all the steps that we present below – you are never not sensing when it comes to ILM. As a consequence, the approach that you decide to use when it comes to sensing is important. Lodged in your mind as you sense your landscape is our over-arching question: **who is doing what, when, where, why, how – and to whom?** The sensing approach that you deploy should allow you to display your sensing and provide a locus for learning and deliberation among your team members. We describe sensing here.

Step 1: Scope your landscape

Purpose: define where you will work and why – not just geographically but in terms of the system you are entering. Establish the right analytical disposition from the outset: the biophysical problem is not the problem; it is a symptom of regulatory dynamics that must be traced.

Key activities

- Define landscape boundaries (geographic, ecological, administrative) – acknowledging these are provisional and that interaction spaces will extend beyond them.
- Identify the biophysical concern that motivates the intervention.
- Desk-based review: existing literature, data, previous interventions, donor evaluations, NGO reports.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

- Media scan: news coverage, social media, political commentary. These are rich sources for detecting heavy strands, contested narratives, and the stories actors tell about the landscape. A politician's public statements, a mining company's CSR reports, community protest coverage – strand signals available from a desk.
- Preliminary strand tracing: from the desk, begin sketching which actor groups are visible, what their practices appear to be, and where regulatory influence seems to concentrate. This is explicitly rough – a proposition to be tested.

Methods and tools

- Secondary data review and literature scan.
- Media and social media analysis (what stories are being told about this landscape, by whom, and what do they obscure?).
- The 'chain of explanation' is a way to trace a biophysical concern backward through proximate causes, social relations, political economy, and structural drivers. This establishes from the outset that the problem is not what it appears on the surface. Box 2 explains the chain of explanation.
- Initial GIS/remote sensing for landscape characterisation.

What this produces

A scoping document containing: your initial proposition about what the landscape's problem is and where its drivers might lie; a **preliminary strand sketch** (which actor groups, what estimated weight); a first draft [alt-heading](#); and an honest statement of what you do not yet know. All explicitly provisional.

Step 2: Assemble and orient your team

Purpose: design a team fit for complexity; establish how the team will conduct itself; distinguish leadership from management.

Key activities

- Recruit for relational capacity, comfort with uncertainty, genuine curiosity, reflexivity, and polymathery (see [Team Design](#)).
- Decide on single team or mosaic structure. If mosaic, make initial allocation of teams to anticipated interaction spaces – revised after Step 4.
- Establish team ethos: agree explicitly on how the team will conduct itself in the landscape. What principles guide your engagement? What will you do and what will you not do? How will you relate to communities – as extractors of information or as participants in a shared endeavour? What does 'held lightly' mean in practice when a foment fails?
- Positionality strategy: what does your team signal (embodied, enacted, existential)? Design your entry deliberately (see Positionality).
- Clarify leadership and management as distinct functions. The person who reads the system, maintains relationships, and



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

steers the intervention's heading is not necessarily the person who manages the budget, writes the donor reports, and ensures compliance. Both functions are essential; conflating them – which is the default in most project structures – overloads one person and underserves both.

Methods and tools

- Team design principles.
- Positionality audit.
- Team charter exercise: a facilitated session where the team agrees its operating principles, decision-making norms, and conduct expectations.

What this produces

A team with defined roles, an explicit ethos and positionality strategy, agreed operating culture, and clarity about who leads and who manages.

Step 3: enter the landscape – presence, relationships, and initial sensing

Purpose: establish presence, begin bilateral engagement, and start sensing – recognizing that your entry is itself a foment and that sensing begins the moment you arrive.

Key activities

- Initial visits deliberately designed to counter development tourism biases – spatial, seasonal, person, professional, diplomatic (see Positionality).
- Bilateral engagement with accessible actor groups – listen before you speak.
- Begin sensing: who is here? Who is visible and who is not? What practices are apparent? What power dynamics are signalled by how people interact with you and with each other? Tell stories and read reactions. Listen to stories and interpret.
- Appreciative inquiry: this is described in the [Sensing](#) section. AI surfaces assets, existing capacities, and nascent initiatives that your intervention can build on – and avoids the deficit framing that characterizes much development engagement. But complement this with power-aware questioning: who benefits from current arrangements? Whose voice is absent? What is not being said?
- Where relevant to agricultural or pastoral landscapes, consider Conway's Agroecosystem Analysis: work with practitioners to map their own system through its properties – productivity, stability, sustainability, equitability. This reads practices from the practitioner's perspective rather than imposing external categories.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Methods and tools

- Bilateral stakeholder engagement (see the [Foments](#) section).
- Participatory rural appraisal tools (transect walks, seasonal calendars, wealth ranking) – used as sensing instruments, not extractive data collection.¹
- Appreciative inquiry – specifically the ‘discover’ and ‘dream’ phases (see the [Sensing](#) section).
- Agroecosystem analysis.²
- Liberating Structures: ‘1-2-4-All’ for initial community engagement; ‘Discovery & Action Dialogue’ for surfacing local knowledge.³
- Development tourism checklist (see the Positionality section).

What this produces

Initial relationships; a preliminary actor map (who is here, who is visible, who is not); early signals about power dynamics, dominant narratives, and existing capacities; and the system’s first response to your presence – observe it carefully, because it tells you things about the regulatory landscape that no baseline study will. Your preliminary strand sketch from Step 1 begins to be tested and revised.

Step 4: Deep sensing – strands, power, practices

Purpose: read the system’s regulatory architecture. This is the deep sensing work – sustained, iterative, and never complete. The anchoring question: *who is doing what, when, where, why, how – and to whom?*

Key activities

- Map strands: identify actor groups and their practices over time; estimate strand weight (who exerts disproportionate regulatory force); trace how strands regulate each other.
- Map the power vista: who regulates whom, through what mechanisms, at what geographic range?
- Map practices: for each key practice, analyse through MMCs – what meanings sustain it, what materials enable it, what competencies reproduce it? Which elements are internally generated and which are regulated by other strands?
- Identify interaction spaces: where do strands’ regulatory fields overlap? Which overlaps are most consequential for heading?
- Detect unstated intent: where does the gap between stated purpose and actual operating logic lie?
- Continue and deepen bilateral engagement – sensing is relational, not extractive.

¹ See Chambers, 1994 or Calub, 2003.

² See Conway, 1985; 1987.

³ See Lipmanowicz and McCandless, 2013; or the Liberating Structures website: <https://www.liberatingstructures.com/>



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Methods and tools

- Net-Mapping – influence network mapping, adapted for strand mapping: each actor group as a strand; link types as regulatory exchange; tower height as strand weight.⁴
- Circles of Explanation – now applied to specific practices, tracing each back through regulatory drivers to structural causes (see [Sensing](#) section).
- MMC analysis worksheet – for each target practice, unpack meanings, materials, and competencies; identify which are internally generated and which are externally regulated. See the [Practices](#) section for a description of the worksheet.
- Power analysis framework⁵ – here, we can distinguish power over, power with, power within, and power to. In Playbook terms: *power over* is power accumulation ($A \rightarrow B$, one-way regulatory dominance – what heavy strands exert); *power with* is power sharing ($A \leftrightarrow B$, bidirectional regulatory exchange – the collaborative state the Playbook works towards); *power within* is capabilities – the degrees of freedom available to a practitioner within the regulatory context; *power to* is agency – the capacity to generate effect; and *power to convene* is a foment – using accumulated regulatory weight to create spaces for others. The this vocabulary describes the species of power; the Playbook’s strand and interaction space framework describes the regulatory dynamics through which those species operate.
- Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) for story collection and narrative [sensing](#).
- Liberating Structures: ‘What, So What, Now What?’ for team sensemaking after field encounters; ‘Ecocycle Planning’ for mapping which practices and institutions are in birth, maturity, creative destruction, or renewal.
- Social network analysis (if resources permit) – for mapping relational density between actor groups.⁶

What this produces

Three maps that constitute your read of the system:

- Strand map – actor groups, their practices, estimated weight, regulatory relationships between them.
 - Power vista – who regulates whom, at what range, through what mechanisms, with what effect.
 - Practice map – key practices unpacked through MMCs, showing which elements are internally generated and which are externally regulated.
 - Interaction spaces map; a narrative landscape (dominant stories, suppressed stories); and an assessment of unstated intent.
- These maps are living documents – updated continuously from Step 7 onward.

Not every method produces every map. Net-Map yields the power vista directly. The MMC analysis worksheet (see the [Practices](#) section) yields the practice map. The strand map is assembled cumulatively through sustained sensing over time – no single

⁴ See Schiffer, 2007; Schiffer and Hauck, 2010.

⁵ See VeneKlasen and Miller, 2007.

⁶ See, for example, Hanneman and Riddle, 2005; Scott, 2012; IRC, 2012.



Click any heading below to go directly to that section

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

method produces it; the mind-mapping and crime board approach (see the [Sensing](#) section) is where this assembly happens. The interaction spaces map emerges from overlaying the strand map onto the power vista. The circles of explanation (see the [Sensing](#) section) provide the spatial framework for displaying all four maps, positioning actors by regulatory range.

Step 5: Identify opportunity points and refine your alt-heading

Purpose: determine where the system has give – where your intervention can most productively work – and refine what you are working towards based on what sensing has revealed.

Key activities

- Apply the six op-point categories to your strand map and interaction space map: asymmetric dominance, regulatory incoherence, latent reciprocity, regulatory weakening, regulatory redirection, convergent light strands (see Op-Points section).
- Assess which interaction spaces are most consequential for heading and most amenable to being shifted.
- Consider depth: are you working at instrument level, information level, regulatory level, or intent level? Be honest about what your institutional form permits.
- Refine your [alt-heading](#): what you proposed in Step 1 will almost certainly need revision in light of what sensing has revealed. What is actually possible given the regulatory architecture you have mapped?
- Assess the not-always-adversarial question: is the heavy strand amenable? Is the lighter strand heading in the right direction? Do you need to work the lighter strand's own practices first?

Methods and tools

- Op-point diagnostic – the six categories applied systematically to each interaction space identified in Step 4.
- The Playbook's four depths of intervention (from the Op-Points section) – as an honest self-assessment tool.
- Liberating Structures: 'Critical Uncertainties' for scenario planning around op-points; '15% Solutions' for identifying what each team member can already do without additional resources or permission.

What this produces

A prioritized list of interaction spaces and op-points; a revised [alt-heading](#); an initial sense of which strands need dampening, amplifying, or redirecting; and a clear-eyed assessment of the depth at which your intervention can realistically operate. This is where your proposal crystallises.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Step 6: Design your foment

Purpose: select, design, and sequence foments for each target interaction space.

Key activities

- Select from the foment palette: bilateral stakeholder engagement, relational brokering, convened spaces, info-bombs, stories, boundary objects, demonstration effects, endogenous innovators, institutional micro-shifts, building on what is already there (see the [Foments](#) section).
- Design each foment with an explicit proposition: if we do X, we believe Y will happen, because of Z.
- Ensure the foment addresses all three MMC elements across the interaction space (see the [Practices](#) section on why targeting a single element guarantees unintended consequences).
- Design for the dual task: regulatory space *and* practice change. One without the other yields either an opening that nothing fills or effort that snaps back.
- Sequence foments: bilateral before convened; meaning-level before material-level where appropriate.
- Assign foments to teams in the mosaic.
- Stress-test the ferment: what could go wrong? What dampening loops might absorb your foments? What unintended consequences might arise?

Methods and tools

- Foment design canvas – a one-page template for each foment: target interaction space, target strand(s), target MMC element(s), proposition, expected system response, indicators of movement, indicators of resistance.
- Ferment architecture – maps how foments in the ferment interact with each other, which angles of the interaction space each addresses, and how the dual task is covered.
- Mind mapping – particularly useful here for externalizing the team's thinking about how foments connect, what angles are being covered, and what gaps remain (see [Sensing](#) section).
- Liberating Structures: 'Design StoryBoards' for sequencing foments as a narrative; 'Troika Consulting' for peer review of foment designs within the team.
- Theory of Change – treated as a living proposition, not a fixed causal chain.

What this produces

A ferment design – a coordinated set of foments, each with an explicit proposition, assigned to specific interaction spaces and teams. This is what goes into a proposal. It is held lightly – the ferment will be redesigned after the first cycle of release-observe-adjust.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Step 7: Release, observe, adjust

Purpose: introduce the ferment into the system and learn from the system's response. This is where design becomes implementation – but the distinction is artificial. You have been implementing since Step 3 and designing since Step 1. What changes here is that you are now deliberately releasing designed provocations and systematically observing what happens.

Key activities

- Release foments. The language matters: you are not executing a plan; you are introducing provocations and watching what the system does.
- Observe: what responded? What did not? What surprised you? What moved towards the alt-heading? What moved away?
- Monitor for ripples: is the disturbance travelling? Who is talking about it? What adjacent practices are shifting?
- Watch for cascade signals: are actors who were not directly involved beginning to respond or change their practices?
- Curate learning across teams – the Team E function described in [Team Design](#), Principle 7.
- Discard foments that produce no response; redesign foments that produce promising but imperfect movement; amplify what works.
- Update your three maps (strand map, power vista, practice map) based on what you have learned.

Methods and tools

- Outcome harvesting – for detecting emergent change rather than pre-specified indicators.⁷
- Most Significant Change – narrative-based monitoring that captures what conventional indicators miss.⁸
- Developmental evaluation – evaluation embedded in the intervention, informing real-time adjustment rather than retrospective judgement.⁹
- Liberating Structures: 'What, So What, Now What?' as a regular team reflection rhythm.
- Learning curation protocol ([Team Design](#), Principle 7).
- After Action Review after each foment cycle.

What this produces

An updated read of the system; evidence of which foments are working and which are not; a revised ferment design for the next cycle; and updated strand map, power vista, and practice map. Each cycle of release-observe-adjust deepens your understanding and sharpens your foment design.

⁷ See Wilson-Grau and Britt, 2012

⁸ See Davies and Dart, 2005.

⁹ See Patton, 2011.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Step 8: Iterate, deepen, and sustain

Purpose: sustain the intervention through multiple cycles; attend to your own growing presence in the system; plan for what endures after you leave.

Key activities

- Redesign the ferment based on learning from Step 7.
- Revisit your alt-heading: has what you have learned changed what you think is possible or desirable?
- Attend to your own strand: your intervention is getting heavier in the system. Are you becoming part of the regulatory architecture? Is this desirable?
- Scale deep: more foments targeting the same practices from different angles.
- Scale out: cascade through demonstration effects, institutional diffusion, social learning.
- The exit question – not as an afterthought but as an ongoing design consideration: what would need to be true for this system to sustain its new heading without you?

Methods and tools

- Liberating Structures: ‘Ecocycle Planning’ revisited – which foments are in renewal, which are mature, which need creative destruction?
- Exit strategy as a living design question, not a project milestone.

What this produces

A continuously refined intervention that deepens its read of the system with each cycle. Over time, the intervention becomes less about what you introduce and more about what the system generates from within.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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Designing your intervention team: the principles

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

- The team is the only element of the system you can truly control – its composition, dynamics, capabilities, conduct and operational culture are the principal drivers of intervention success.
- Recruit primarily for relational capacity, comfort with uncertainty, curiosity, reflexivity and polymathery – technical knowledge can be hired in; the relational and adaptive capabilities cannot.
- Distinguish leadership from management: the person who reads the system, holds relationships and steers heading is rarely the same person who manages the budget and writes donor reports – conflating them overloads one and underserves both.
- Embeddedness is non-negotiable: only teams that live in or near the landscape, with diversified income streams (epistemic independence) and continuity beyond a single project cycle, can sense and steer effectively.
- Mosaic structures with semi-autonomous teams – each working a different interaction space, plus a 'Team E' that curates (rather than collects) cross-learning – are the form most fit for complexity.

In complex systems, the only element you can truly control is your own intervention—its composition, dynamics, capabilities, practices, and modus operandi. How the team works – with its membership, and with its broader partnership – is *critical* to intervention success.

You are crossing a river by feeling the stones under your feet. You cannot see the whole path ahead. You cannot know which strategies will work until you try them. In turn, this has direct relevance to how your intervention team works, and its operational culture.

In the [Integration](#) section, we presented a graphic with a fictional landscape showing interaction spaces. In the [Adaptivity](#) section, we showed a graphic of a 'mosaic approach' – a dispersed team better able to capture landscape diversity and to respond to contextual changes and opportunities with agility. If we merge these two graphics it might look like the following:

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you're interested, check out the 'evidence page' for this section here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

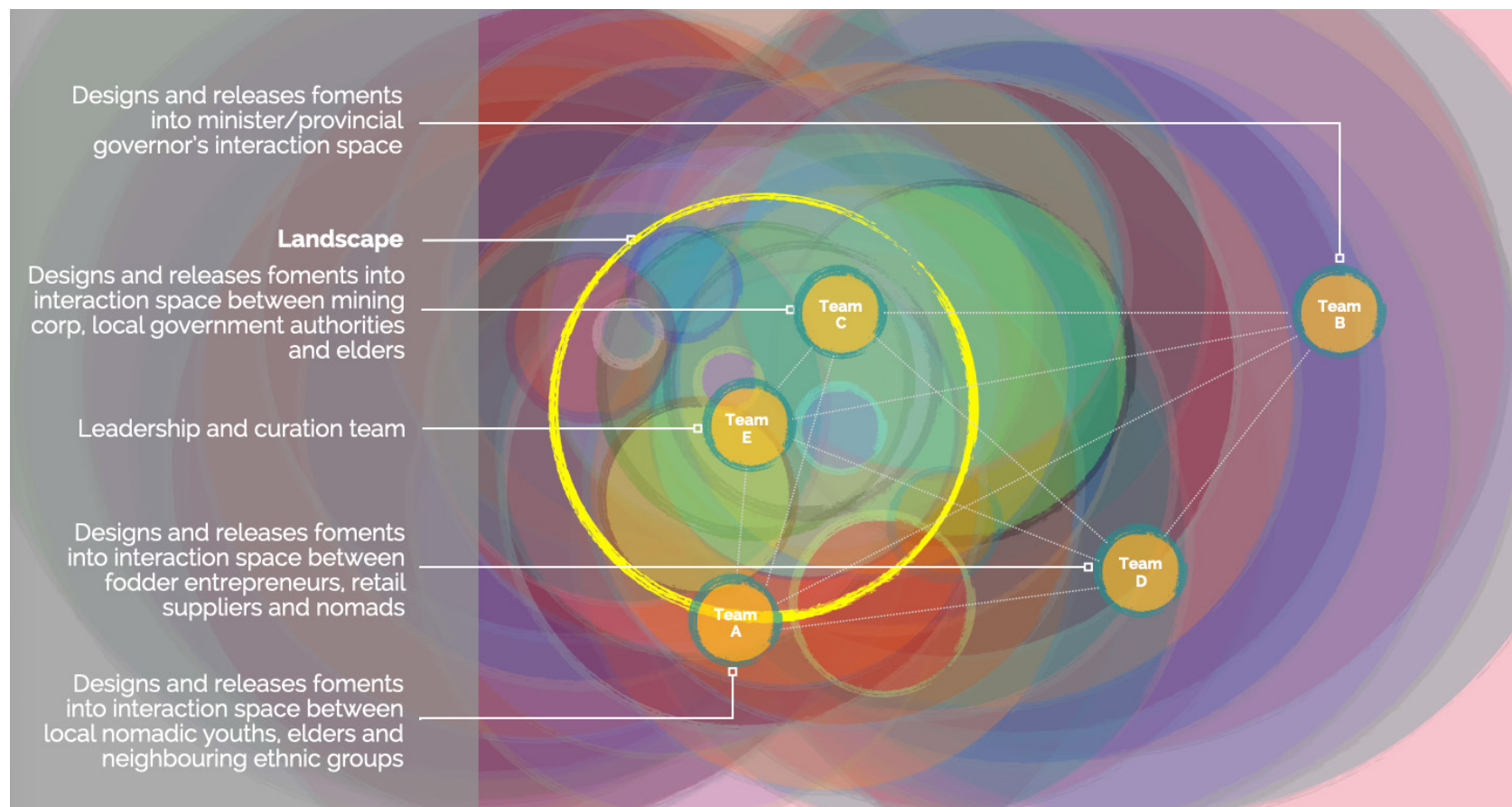
Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)



In this rendering, we have five dispersed teams, each targeting a different interaction space identified through sensing as consequential for system heading. Team A works the interaction space between local nomadic youths, elders, and neighbouring ethnic groups. Team B operates outside the landscape, releasing foments into the minister/provincial governor's interaction space. Team C targets the interaction space between the mining corporation, local government authorities, and elders. Team D works the interaction space between fodder entrepreneurs, retail suppliers, and nomads. Team E curates learning across all teams. The grey lines connecting teams represent the cross-learning that holds the mosaic together: without it, the different interaction spaces risk being worked in fragmentation. Each team designs its own foments for its own interaction space, but the learning generated by each informs the others' foment design – because a shift in one interaction space changes the regulatory conditions facing all the others. Distribution is by target practice and interaction space, not by geography: Teams A and C are physically close but attending to entirely different strands. Team B is 600 kilometres away but integral to the ferment. The landscape boundary (yellow) is porous – the interaction spaces that regulate practices within it extend well beyond its geographic edge.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Obviously, the extent to which you can design your intervention in this way is constrained by the quantum of resources that you have access to – both human and financial. If these are limited, or there are other constraints in the way, you may be forced to field a single team. Nevertheless, important and influential work can still be done. To guide you, we provide seven key principles that should guide how an intervention team for a complex landscape system can be designed.

Principle 1: Build (and run) for complexity

Intervention team composition and dynamics are critical to successful ILM practice. In many respects, the expertise of individual team members is less relevant to success than how they interact with each other.

Why this matters

Your team is the vehicle through which your intervention acts. In complex systems, change happens through relationships, and your team's relational and adaptive capabilities matter more than technical expertise. Technical knowledge can be accessed when needed; the capacity to build trust, navigate uncertainty, and learn from failure cannot be hired in.

What to prioritize

Relational capacity over technical expertise: select people who can build trust across difference, facilitate difficult conversations, and navigate conflict.

Comfort with uncertainty: select people who can work with partial information and see ambiguity as interesting rather than threatening.

Genuine curiosity: look for people who ask good questions, listen well, and genuinely want to understand perspectives different from their own.

Reflexivity: working in complexity means encountering resistance and your own blind spots. Select people who can handle this without defensiveness.

Legitimacy: where possible, include people with established relationships and credibility within the landscape.

Essential functions

While team members may be anchored in some function or expertise, everyone understands that they are jack/jills-of-all-trades and masters-of-none. Polymathery matters in successful ILM. Key team functions are: sense-making; systems-convening and facilitation; knowledge brokering; relationship cultivation; and foment design.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Leadership

Leadership in complexity is not about command and control. It is about creating conditions for others to flourish. Effective leaders in this context delegate and trust their teams to act. They maintain a wide-scope perspective while empowering local decision-making. They value alternative (and unusual) perspectives and actively seek out views that challenge their own. They listen more than they direct. They ensure their teams take credit for successes. They absorb heat when things go wrong. They model the adaptivity and reflexivity they ask of others.

Structure

For a focused landscape, a minimum viable team is typically 4 – 5 people covering the essential functions. For larger landscapes, consider the multiple small teams each targeting different interaction spaces and the strands that regulate them, coordinated by a small central team. Distribution is by target practice and interaction space, not simply by geography – though in practice the two often overlap. Keep teams at a scale where trust and rapid communication are possible. Avoid hierarchical structures – they kill the nimbleness required for complexity. Locating some or all of your team within the landscape is essential – presence matters.

Principle 2: Design for engagement

Landscapes are socially produced. The things people are doing in your landscape establish its heading. Focusing on human practices is the best bet for changing system heading.

Why this matters

System behaviour emerges from the practices of actors and the relationships between them. If we want to shift a landscape system's heading, we need to influence what people do and how they interact. This means designing your intervention primarily around engagement – not infrastructure, not technology, not policy alone, but the human dimensions that animates all of these.

The relationship between your intervention and stakeholders matters, but what matters more is the relationships between stakeholders themselves. Your intervention's role is often to convene, broker connections, and create spaces where new relationships can form and existing ones can strengthen.

How to design for engagement

Focus on practices: we discuss practices in the [Practices](#) section. When we seek to change practices, we focus on foments that will change meanings, materials, and competencies. To change practices, we need to attend to all three. Ask yourself: who needs to be doing what differently for our [alt-heading](#) to emerge? What are they doing now, and why? What meanings, materials, and competencies would need to shift for new practices to take hold? What reasons and justification would we provide to incentivize a shift?



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Influence from the beginning: your intervention begins the moment you start engaging with the landscape. Every early interaction – problem analysis, stakeholder mapping, initial workshops – is already shaping perceptions, establishing your presence, and influencing system heading. Use these engagements deliberately to design foments, build relationships, demonstrate your values, and create conditions for later change.

Attend to power: engagement happens within power relations. Power shapes what practices are possible, what meanings are legitimate, what materials are accessible, and whose competencies are valued. Read the power landscape: who has power over others? Who has power to convene? Who has power with (collective action)? Who has power within (sense of agency)?

Key questions

As you develop your design, the following questions may be helpful in guiding you:

- Which human practices are most responsible for current landscape trajectory?
- How can these practices be unpacked in terms of meanings, materials, and competencies?
- What seeds already exist—people, practices, relationships aligned with your [alt-heading](#)?
- How does power flow, where does it concentrate, and how does it shape what is possible?

**“If failure is not
an option, then
neither is success.”
– Seth Godin**

Principle 3: Design for adaptation and agility

Because landscapes are complex systems, interventions must be designed to adapt to new information as it emerges.

Why this matters

In complex systems, we cannot predict outcomes. The moment your intervention enters the landscape, it changes the system – and the system will respond in ways you cannot fully anticipate. Rigid plans fail. Blueprints become obsolete. Success depends on your ability to sense system responses, learn quickly, and adjust course.

Adaptive interventions create tight feedback loops, treat strategies as safe-to-fail provocations, embrace failure as learning, and maintain flexibility to change direction. They start small, learn fast, and amplify what works.

How to design for adaptation and agility

Design and release foments: foments are described in the [Foments](#) section. Foments are designed with a proposition: if we do X, we believe Y will happen, because of Z. It is important to remember that propositions are intended to be tested, not defended. Failure is an essential part of ILM – the knowledge we derive from it is as valuable as the knowledge of success.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Start small and release many foments: rather than betting everything on one large intervention, release multiple foments. If the landscape is large, break it down into smaller parts – multiple interconnected small-scale interventions from which large-scale change may emerge. Scaling happens by amplifying successful foments, not by replicating a master plan.

Create tight feedback loops: learning happens fast when system responses are quickly visible and immediately inform subsequent actions. Design for rapid feedback: short foment cycles, frequent check-ins with stakeholders, real-time sensing of system responses, regular reflection sessions. Avoid long gaps between action and reflection.

Maintain strategic flexibility: be prepared to change not just tactics but strategies – and even your [alt-heading](#) if evidence suggests it is implausible or undesirable. This requires authority to make adjustments without lengthy approval processes, resources held in reserve for emerging opportunities, and psychological readiness to abandon what is not working.

Key actions

- Frame strategies as testable propositions with explicit assumptions.
- Release multiple foments; invest in what works, abandon what does not.
- Build rapid feedback mechanisms into your intervention design.
- Schedule regular decision points to review and adjust.
- Negotiate flexibility with funders from the start.

Principle 4: Enable, don't control

You cannot control stakeholders or predict how the system will respond to your interventions. Attempts to control in complex systems typically fail or generate unintended consequences. Your role is to create conditions that enable stakeholders to change their own practices.

Why this matters

Control is an illusion in complex systems. You can influence, catalyse, broker, and support – but you cannot dictate outcomes. Interventions that try to control typically encounter resistance, generate dependency, or produce unintended consequences. Enabling is more effective and more sustainable.

Working with the grain

Understand what practices already exist in the landscape. Where possible, build on existing ones rather than trying to replace them wholesale. Look for 'positive deviance' – instances where desired practices are already happening—and explore how these can be amplified or spread. Swimming against a system's current is exhausting and rarely succeeds; the intention is to *shift* heading, not to replace the system.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

How to enable

Invest in relationships: trust is the foundation for everything else. Without it, nothing moves. Build relationships before you need them.

Create and hold spaces: design workshops, roundtables, and dialogues for genuine deliberation – not just information transfer or consultation theatre.

Broker knowledge: technical information means nothing if stakeholders cannot understand or relate it to their interests. Translate across knowledge systems without distorting meaning.

Connect people: networks create opportunities; isolation limits them. Actively connect people who should know each other but do not.

Key actions

- Prioritize relationship-building in early engagement
- Design multi-stakeholder processes for genuine deliberation
- Make resources available without creating dependency
- Identify and amplify positive deviance

Principle 5: Design with positionality

Your intervention is not an external observer – it is a player in the system. Your presence carries power, creates expectations, and changes dynamics. Positionality is not just a bias to manage; it is a resource to deploy.

Why this matters

The moment you enter a landscape, you become a part of it. Your positionality changes the system you are trying to understand and influence. Pretending otherwise is delusional.

But this is not a problem only to be managed. Compared to many of the communities you work with, you are elite. You have credentials, networks, access to decision-makers. You move in circles of influence that others do not. This is power – and power is a resource for shifting systems.

How to design with positionality

Recognize your three forms of presence: embodied positionality (who you are) cannot be changed, but you can be aware of what it signals. Enacted positionality (how you behave) can be adjusted. Existential positionality (that you are there at all) cannot be eliminated – your presence is already an intervention.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Audit your power as a resource: what doors can you open? What legitimacy can you confer? What connections can you broker? What protection can you offer? Rather than minimising your power differential, ask how it can be deployed towards the alt-heading you seek.

Guard against development tourism: brief visits, professional biases, and standard consultation processes are misleading. Compensate by spending more time, seeking out those your biases make invisible, and asking communities how they experience your presence.

Design for reflexivity: build mechanisms for communities to give feedback on how they experience your intervention. Document how your framing evolves. Conduct power mapping that includes your own role. Create regular moments for examining whose voice is being heard – and whose is not.

Key questions

- What does your presence signal to different stakeholder groups?
- What power do you carry that you have been treating as incidental?
- How can your networks, credentials, and access be deployed strategically?
- What feedback mechanisms exist for communities to tell you how they experience your presence?

Principle 6: Design for embeddedness

The quality of your sensing, the trust you build, and the effectiveness of your foments all depend on how deeply your team is embedded in the landscape. Parachuted teams cannot read the system well enough to design good foments, cannot maintain the relationships through which foments travel, and cannot monitor the slow signals of change that unfold over years.

Why this matters

Research on innovation processes consistently finds that the most durable change happens when teams work with the same networks over long periods. Sensing improves cumulatively – each foment cycle deepens your sense of the system. Relationships compound: the trust you build in year one is the infrastructure through which your foments travel in year three. A team that has been present through a drought, an election, a market collapse, and a good harvest has a read of the system that no baseline study can replicate.

How to design for embeddedness

Locate in the landscape: teams that live in or near the landscape they are working in develop a feel for the system that cannot be acquired from a distance – or makes them vulnerable to development tourism. They sense seasonal rhythms, political shifts, and social tensions as they unfold – not as reports delivered weeks later.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Diversify income streams: a team funded by a single donor is beholden to that donor's logframe. Multiple income streams are not just financial resilience – they are epistemic independence. They free the team to pursue what the landscape needs rather than what a single reporting framework demands.

Build on what is already there: the landscape is not a blank slate. There are already people, practices, relationships, and initiatives that embody aspects of the alt-heading you seek, even if they are small, marginal, or struggling. Finding these and creating conditions for them to flourish is more effective than introducing entirely new initiatives from outside. Work with the grain of existing social organization rather than against it.

Resist the parachute model: the typical project cycle – design, inception, implement, close – works against embeddedness at every stage. Negotiate from the outset for team continuity, for presence that outlasts project cycles, and for the institutional flexibility that allows your team to persist in the landscape even as funding instruments change.

Principle 7: Design for learning

Every foment generates learning – from success, from failure, and from the unexpected. But learning that stays within a single team is a fraction of its potential value. In a dispersed mosaic, a shift in one interaction space changes the regulatory conditions facing all the others. Without deliberate cross-learning architecture, the mosaic fragments.

Why this matters

The Playbook's epistemological commitment – release, observe, adjust – is a learning cycle. But in a mosaic of dispersed teams, the 'observe' from each team must be assembled into the 'adjust' that reshapes the next ferment for all teams. Team A's discovery that the elder community is more receptive than expected changes what Team C should try at the mining – elder interface. Team B's finding that the minister is immovable changes what Teams A and D should prioritize locally. This cross-pollination is what the curation function (Team E in the graphic above) exists to provide.

How to design for learning

Establish a learning rhythm: regular shared reflection across teams – not reporting upward, but lateral exchange. What did you release? What responded? What surprised you? What should the rest of us know? The frequency matters: too infrequent and teams drift apart; too frequent and the overhead kills the fieldwork.

Curate, don't just collect: learning curation is not data management. It is the interpretive work of assembling dispersed observations into a coherent, updated read of the system. The curation team asks: what does this combination of findings tell us about how the system is responding? Which interaction spaces are shifting? Where has the regulatory architecture loosened or tightened? What should the next ferment look like?



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Let failure teach: foments that produce no response or move away from the alt-heading are not waste – they are diagnostic. They reveal dampening loops you had not mapped, regulatory pressures you had not detected, or meanings you had misread. A team culture that treats failure as information rather than embarrassment will learn faster and design better foments. This requires psychological safety within the team and institutional protection from funders who penalise failure.

Document for the system, not the logframe: conventional reporting asks what you did and what it achieved. Learning documentation asks what you tried, what the system did in response, what you now understand differently, and what you will try next. The audience is the team and its successors, not the donor. If the documentation would not help a future team member understand the system, it is not learning – it is compliance.



Positionality

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

- Positionality is the difference between you and the people you are trying to support – and reflexivity, the self-critical scrutiny of that difference, is the precondition for honest analysis and effective intervention.
- Positionality has three layers – *embodied* (race, gender, nationality, comportment), *enacted* (clothing, methods, transport, the choices you make about who to meet) and *existential* (your presence itself perturbs the system) – and only the enacted layer is wholly under your control.
- Your presence is already an intervention before you have done anything: pretending you can observe a landscape from outside is delusional, so design for your effects rather than wishing them away.
- Beware development tourism – the brief, dry-season, project-itinerary visit that bakes spatial, seasonal, person, professional and diplomatic biases into your read of the landscape.
- Positionality is also a resource: you have networks, credentials and convening capacity that your target groups do not, and deploying them strategically towards the alt-heading is itself a leadership move – provided you know you are doing it.

For us, positionality is the difference between us and the people we are trying to support. To address it, reflexivity is required, the “self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self”. We draw attention to three types of positionality.

Types of positionality

Embodied positionality

These are things we cannot do anything about, but which nevertheless send out powerful signals. They include your race, gender, nationality, and comportment – the way you carry yourself, your gestures, your walking and talking style, the language you speak and the accent you speak it in. Whether you like it or not, these things say something about you before you have said anything at all. If you are a woman walking into a highly patriarchal society, your gender will matter.

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you're interested, check out the 'evidence page' for this section here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

If your race or nationality differs from that of your target group, it will feed their stereotypes. If your target group is rural, your department may signal 'urban', 'connected', 'educated', or 'socially mobile'. Speaking through an interpreter, or in a language considered elite, powerfully signals difference.

Enacted positionality

These are things we often do not think about, but which can be addressed. At the personal level, they include our clothing, our accessories (phones, tablets, drones, other tech), our transport (showing up in a brand-new four-wheel drive sends very strong signals), and even our smell (soap, deodorant, perfume). If we arrive as a team and stand self-consciously in a group, we are almost willing our differences to be advertised.

Beyond personal presentation, enacted positionality includes our methods: the formality of our meetings, the questions we ask (and do not ask), who we choose to meet, how long we stay, whether we accept hospitality, and how we record what we learn. All of these are choices – often made unreflectively, but choices nonetheless.

One particularly important body of enacted positionality is how we approach rural communities. Here we refer to what Robert Chambers called '*development tourism*'—the brief, filtered visits that introduce systematic bias into what we see and hear (see Box 2).

Development tourism

Robert Chambers¹ coined the term 'rural development tourism' to describe the brief, biased visits through which outsiders typically encounter rural realities. The development tourist flies in, visits a project site, meets with local leaders, and flies out – having seen a carefully filtered version of the landscape that systematically excludes the poorest, the most marginalized, and the most inconvenient truths. From our perspective, development tourism can be a powerful way of ensuring that we deliberately invite a void to our observations, and bake in failure to development initiatives.

Chambers identified several interlocking biases that shape what the tourist sees:

Spatial biases: we visit places that are accessible – near roads, near towns, near project offices. Remote areas, where poverty is often deepest, remain invisible.

Seasonal biases: we visit during dry seasons when travel is easy and conditions appear manageable. The hunger season, when food stores are depleted, disease is prevalent, and coping strategies are strained, is rarely witnessed.

1 Chambers (1983)



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Project biases: we visit successful sites, showcase villages, communities where things are working. Failures and struggles are not on the itinerary.

Person biases: we meet those who are presented to us, typically men, elites, the articulate, or those with time to attend meetings. Women, the very poor, the socially marginalized, and those whose daily survival leaves no time for visitors remain unseen and unheard.

Professional biases: we see what our training has prepared us to see. The agronomist sees soils and crops; the economist sees markets and prices; the ecologist sees species and habitats. Each disciplinary lens illuminates some things while casting others into shadow.

Diplomatic biases: we do not wish to offend our hosts, so we do not pose uncomfortable questions. Communities, in turn, perform for visitors, presenting what they think we want to see.

These biases do not reflect bad intentions; they are structural features of how outsiders encounter unfamiliar places. But their cumulative effect is profound: development tourists return home with confident assessments based on highly partial evidence. Interventions are then designed on the basis of what was seen, not what was missed.

A final subset of enacted positionality relates to the things that you intend to do with your target groups. From the outset, seeking to change peoples' practices is already provocative. Obviously, in designing your intervention you feel that it is 'right' and 'good' – these are powerful biases that will be resisted by your target groups to lesser or greater degrees. Introducing funding, creating new institutions, legitimizing certain voices over others, shifting who has authority: these are not subtle perturbations.

Existential positionality

Imagine a community deep inside the Congo Forest who have never encountered an outsider. An anthropologist arrives to study them. The difficulty is that, by virtue of showing up, the anthropologist has already changed the society. They are not studying a 'pristine' system; they are studying a system that now includes themselves.

The same is true for any intervention. Simply by being present – without having done anything at all – you have changed the system. Your mass, however small, exerts force. The effects may be tiny but, accumulated over time, may shift the system's heading in ways you do not notice and may not intend.

This is not to say that you should stay away. It is to recognize that your presence is already an intervention. You are not observing from outside; you are part of the configuration. This is a form of power – subtle but real. Be aware of it.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Addressing positionality

You cannot eliminate your effects; you can only account for them. You should not, under any circumstances, ignore them. The trick is to recognize that you are different from your target groups- imagining that you are 'the same' is delusional. How, then, can you manage these differences and capitalize upon them?

Navigating embodied positionality

You cannot change your race, gender, nationality, or the way your body has learned to move through the world. But you can be aware of what these signal, and you can compensate. If you are entering a patriarchal society, recognize that gender will shape how you are heard. If your race or nationality triggers stereotypes, be conscious of what assumptions may precede you. Greet people warmly, even if not in their language – warmth translates. The goal is not to pretend these differences do not exist, but to acknowledge them and work with awareness.

Navigating enacted positionality

Here you have genuine choices. Dress modestly. Limit the technology you visibly carry. Think about the vehicle you arrive in. Be conscious of standing in a huddle with your team. Stay longer than the development tourist. Meet people who are not on the official itinerary. Show up in the hunger season. Ask questions you do not already know the answer to. Accept hospitality. These are small adjustments, but they shift how you are perceived and what you are able to learn.

Navigating existential positionality

Your presence changes things whether you intend it to or not. Accept this. You have known unknowns (you know you do not fully understand how your presence changes dynamics) and unknown unknowns (effects you are not even aware of). Awareness and humility here are not paralysis – they are adaptive competence. You cannot observe from outside the system; you can only observe from within it, as a participant who alters what you observe.

Capitalizing on positionality

Compared to a rural community, you are elite. You have credentials, connections, networks. You move in circles of influence that your target groups do not. This is not something to be embarrassed about – it is a resource. The question is whether you deploy it strategically towards the alt-heading you seek. Can you open doors? Confer legitimacy? Connect people who would not otherwise meet? Positionality is not only a bias to be managed; it is a capacity that can be used – and using this capability is a key tenet of leadership.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Designing for reflexivity

Positionality cannot rest on individual self-awareness alone; it requires intervention architecture. Build in mechanisms for communities to give feedback on how they experience your presence. Document how your framing evolves. Conduct power mapping that includes your own role. Create regular moments for examining whose voice is being heard – and whose is not.

Positionality does not counsel inaction. Reflexive positioning means intervening with awareness: recognizing your presence as part of the system, tracking the effects you create, and adapting based on what you observe. Interventions fail when they misread contexts, miss key dynamics, or inadvertently reinforce the problems they aim to solve. Reflexivity is not just ethical – it is effectiveness.

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Sensing

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

- Sensing is an ongoing, relational diagnostic practice – not data collection – and produces an evolving read of the system that deepens with each encounter; only a team that stays in the landscape can do it.
- The components are observing, listening, asking, mapping, interpreting and trialling: foment release is itself sensing, because the system's response is what tells you whether your read was right.
- Attending to absence is the hardest part: who is not in the room, whose practice is invisible because it is normalized, what the formal reporting is not capturing – absence is itself a signal, often the most important one.
- Sensing is appropriately imprecise: you do not need to know everything about a system to produce a useful read – a few key functional relationships and a few well-asked questions are enough.
- We propose four approaches – circles of explanation, mind-mapping/crime boards, appreciative inquiry, and Participatory Narrative Inquiry – to be combined: at least one for structural clarity, at least one for narrative depth.

Introduction

Sensing is best understood as an ongoing, relational diagnostic practice that surfaces how practices regulate one another in the landscape. It is practice-oriented, power-attentive, and action-oriented. Sensing identifies major strands and estimates their regulatory weight: which actors' practices disproportionately shape current system heading, and which have lighter, more local effects. It aims to detect the perturbations that foments provoke. It focuses on interactions between strands, asking *who is doing what, when, where, why, how – and to whom?*, thereby shifting from observing behaviour to understanding practice-as-regulation. Sensing reads the inbetweenness – what flows between actors, what is blocked, what is amplified, what is dampened. It is not a catalogue of who is present but a diagnostic of how they relate.

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you're interested, check out the 'evidence page' for this section here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Unlike standard diagnostics that catalogue problems or capacities, sensing attends to the bundles of meanings, materials, and competencies (MMCs) that constitute practices, and to the regulatory context in which these bundles sit. It recognizes that changing a practice requires reconfiguring both the practice's MMC bundle *and* its interaction space, so sensing is oriented towards uncovering those bundles and spaces, not just describing actors or incentives.

A baseline study happens once, at the beginning, and produces a dataset. Sensing happens every day, never stops, and produces an evolving read of the system that deepens with each encounter. A baseline study can be done by consultants who leave. Sensing can only be done by a team that stays – which is why embeddedness is a principle.

The act of sensing comprises, *inter alia*:

- **Observing:** watching what people *do*, not just what they say. How do people interact with each other when you are present? How do they interact when they think you are not watching? Who speaks first in a meeting? Who defers to whom? Who sits where? When a district officer arrives, what changes in the room? These micro-signals are regulatory exchange made visible. You are also watching the landscape itself – where is it degraded and where is it not, and what does the boundary between those two conditions tell you about whose practices produce each?
- **Listening:** and specifically listening to/for stories, for what is said casually rather than formally, for what is repeated, and for what is conspicuously absent. The farmer who says “there is no alternative” is telling you about a heavy strand. The officer who changes the subject when you ask about permits is telling you about unstated intent. The community leader who tells you the same origin story that three other communities also told you – that is a meaning that structures practice. Participatory Narrative Inquiry (see below) sits here, but so does the informal conversation at the end of the meeting, which is often where the real information surfaces.
- **Asking:** the anchoring question, operationalised. Not as a survey but as a disposition: every encounter is an opportunity to refine your answer to *who is doing what, when, where, why, how – and to whom?* But also asking laterally: what changed recently? What used to be different? What do people worry about most? What would they do differently if they could? What stops them? The ‘and to whom’ is the part most practitioners miss – without it you are describing behaviour, not regulation.
- **Mapping:** externalizing what you are learning into the three maps (strand map, power vista, practice map). But also informal, in-the-field mapping: sketching relationships on paper with your team after a field day, drawing influence diagrams with community members, building Participatory Three-Dimensional Models (see Rambaldi, 2010). The maps are not products to be delivered; they are thinking tools that get revised every time you learn something new.
- **Interpreting:** the team sensemaking practice. You come back from the field with observations. You sit together and ask: what did we see? What does it mean? What should we do about it? This is akin to Karl Weick’s retrospective sensemaking – meaning is constructed after the encounter, not during it. The Liberating Structures approach (Box 1) ‘What, So What, Now What?’ works



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

here because it forces a team through all three stages rather than jumping from observation to action. The interpretation is always a proposition, never a conclusion.

Box 1: Liberating Structures

These are a collection of 33+ simple, configurable facilitation methods – ‘easy-to-learn microstructures’ – that help groups involve everyone, share control, and work together on what matters. They replace conventional formats (presentations, managed discussions, open forums) with structured interactions that distribute voice and generate collective intelligence. We reference these tools throughout the Sensing section.

For the full collection, see Lipmanowicz and McCandless (2013) and <https://www.liberatingstructures.com>

- **Trialling:** your interpretations are propositions about the system’s regulatory architecture. You test them by releasing foments and seeing whether the system responds as your reading suggests it should. If you have read an interaction space as asymmetric dominance and you release a foment designed to build B→A capacity, and the system’s response is completely unexpected – your reading was wrong. The foment was diagnostic. Revise the map. This means that sensing and foment release are not sequential (sense first, then release). They are simultaneous: you sense, you release, the release generates sensing, the sensing reshapes the next release. This is the release-observe-adjust cycle, and sensing is where ‘observe’ lives.
- **Attending to absence:** perhaps the hardest part. Who is not in the room? Whose practice is invisible because it is normalized? What is the formal reporting not capturing? What did the community not tell you? Absence is itself a signal – often the most important one. The occluded opportunities from the Op-Points section are found here: they become visible only through sustained relational presence.
- **Attending to time:** what has changed since you arrived? What do people say used to be different? What slow trends are visible in the landscape but invisible in daily experience – soil depletion, groundwater decline, demographic shifts, changing market pressures? Temporal sensing connects to the Integration section’s treatment of temporal fragmentation: the future is embedded in the present, produced by practices whose consequences are already contained within them. Reading how the system has changed over time is essential for understanding where it is heading.
- **Attending to yourself:** reflexive sensing. How is the system responding to your presence? What are people telling you because you are an outsider? What are they withholding? Has your presence changed what you are observing? This connects directly to existential positionality – you are part of the configuration you are sensing.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Sensing, it should be stressed, is not the same as research. It is not delimited by hypotheses, methodologies, or disciplines. It should be 'appropriately imprecise.' In practice, this means:¹

- It is not necessary to know everything about the system to produce a realistic and useful analysis.
- Understanding the practices and other important properties of the system requires knowledge of only a few key functional relationships.
- Producing significant improvements in the performance of a system requires changes in only a few key strands.
- Identification and understanding of these key relationships and decisions requires that a limited number of appropriate key questions are defined and answered.

Below, we introduce four sensing approaches that we like, and which can help you to conceptualize your system, and identify key areas where foments can be introduced. Each approach surfaces different dimensions of the system, and no single approach gives you the full picture. We recommend deploying at least two in combination: one that provides structural clarity (the circles of explanation or mind-mapping) and one that provides narrative depth (appreciative inquiry or PNI). The combination of a structural and a narrative approach gives you both the architecture of the system and the meanings that hold it in place.

Circles of explanation

One way you can organize your sensing is with the 'circles of explanation'² which we present below. If drawn out as a basic template, the Circles can be used as a way of displaying your main practice (target) groups, the interactions within their own communities, and then the interaction spaces with other communities.

Here, actors (the different coloured dots) interact within each ring. Note the following:

First, this representation shows embeddedness rather than hierarchy. At the centre is 'A' – your site, the landscape. It is at the centre, not at the bottom. Community A is embedded in B, which is embedded in C, which is embedded in D. This is the Playbook's layered model – practices embedded in power embedded in the system – rendered spatially. The 'levels' are not above or below each other; they surround each other. This is horizontal geography with different ranges, not vertical hierarchy with different ranks.

Second, the arrows go both ways – inward and outward, and laterally within each ring. This is regulatory exchange. Community D's practices (perhaps a distant government, a global commodity market) exert regulatory force inward towards the land. But Community A's practices also exert outward force – however weakly. And within each ring, actors regulate each other laterally.

¹ Based on Conway (1985).

² These derive from Blaikie and Brookfield's (1987) 'chain of explanation' which, they say, "...starts with the land managers and their direct relations with the land (crop rotations, fuelwood use, stocking densities, capital investment and so on). The next link concerns their relations with each other, other land users, and groups in the wider society who affect them in any way, which in turn determines land management. The state and the world economy constitute the last links of the chain. Clearly then, explanations will be highly conjectural, although relying on theoretical bases drawn from natural and social science". This is, from our perspective, too hierarchical and linear. Geheb and Mapedza (2008) reformulate these as 'the circles of explanation' (although they do not call them this).



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

This is strand interaction within and across interaction spaces. As you radiate outwards, the size of the actor dots increase. This reflects the power asymmetries between actor groups – many actors with small claims at the centre, few actors with enormous claims at the periphery. This is also the heavy strand/light strand distinction rendered as a spatial property of the system.

At the centre, many people make small claims – their stake is existential but their regulatory weight is light. At the outer rings, few people make vast claims – their stake may be instrumental (profit, strategic interest) but their regulatory weight is heavy. This is what the Op-Points section describes as ‘asymmetric dominance.’ A mining company (outer ring) has a vast claim on the landscape but no existential stake in it. A local community (inner ring) has a tiny claim by comparison but their entire life depends on it. And yet the outer ring’s regulatory force overwhelms the inner ring’s. This asymmetry between stake and power is at the heart of what the Playbook is trying to address.

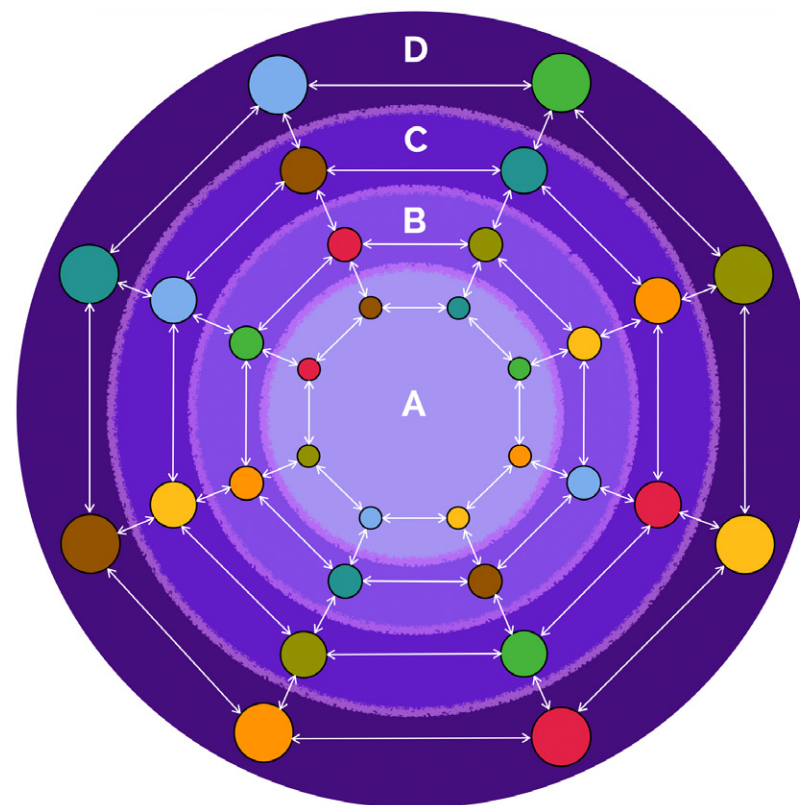
Third, between the rings (in light purple) are the amorphous the interaction zones – between the different regulatory fields. Characterizing these is a key focus of your sensing work. It is important to remember, however, that this is a representation used to clarify and explain. The interaction zone between A and B is not just between these two rings – there is also an interaction zone between A and C, and A and D.

The different rings may be described as follows:

Ring A: proximate regulation – actors whose practices directly regulate landscape practitioners through daily interaction. Their regulatory effect is felt personally and frequently – and often comprise other community members, institutions, norms etc. Note that when we refer to ‘communities’ these may not be local communities

Ring B: intermediary regulation – actors whose practices regulate the proximate regulators. District and provincial administration, regional markets, political representatives, NGOs operating in the area. Their regulatory effect reaches the landscape through the proximate ring – the district officer regulates the extension officer who regulates the farmer. You may need to travel to the provincial capital to find them.

Ring C: structural regulation – national-level actors whose practices set the terms within which all inner rings operate. Ministries, national policy, legislation, the judiciary, national markets, the ruling party, or the police force. Their regulatory





[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

effect is diffuse but powerful – it reaches the landscape through administrative chains, legal frameworks, corruption, and market structures.

Ring D: global regulation – international markets, commodity prices, donor agencies, multinational corporations, international treaties, climate change. Their regulatory effect reaches the landscape through structural and intermediary rings. They may not know your landscape exists, but their practices shape what happens in it.

Mind-mapping and crime boards

At its core, a mind map is a visual diagram that organizes information around a central concept. It uses a non-linear, radial structure where main ideas branch out from the centre and are further divided into related subtopics.

Mind maps can be created on paper or digitally, and the process is straightforward:

1. Place your main idea or subject in the centre.
2. Draw lines out from your main idea with related or supporting concepts (these are called 'nodes').
3. Continue adding more nodes and details as you think of them.
4. Make connections between related nodes by drawing lines between them.

There is lots of mind-mapping software available if you feel like running this on a computer. We, however, encourage you to draw it by hand and to involve your team members – everyone gets to have a pen!

We also encourage you to expand on the original mind-map 'template'. You can go in multiple directions, but the police crime board is, we think, an important articulation of the mind-map. At a crime scene, detectives will observe many things, some of which are explainable. A bloody dagger lying next to a corpse with stab wounds is explainable – it fits the story the vista implies. But there are other things at the crime scene are more difficult to explain and their relevance is not as easy to explain – two glasses on the counter; a small ball of fluff found under the table; a black hair on a side table. These things must nevertheless be investigated to determine whether or not they are of





PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

relevance to the crime. This pile of evidence is attached to a board, and as the investigation proceeds, detectives remove the things that are irrelevant, retain relevant things, and begin identifying the relationships between them: the black hair belongs to this person; the latter person turns out to be an acquaintance of the victim, so a photo is posted; she says that she was at a meeting at a hotel at the time of the murder, so a map is pinned up with the hotel and the crime scene circled in red. And so it goes on.

We like this approach because of its emphasis on multi-media (which provides texture and visual stimulation), Maybe you start with a map that shows your landscape. On it, you post pictures of land degradation; maybe photos of some of the key actors; press reports generated about some of them; prints of social media reports about violence flaring; a brochure provided by the open cast mining company; etc. This visual approach with so much media keeps your own mind perturbed and constantly wondering about the relations between the different elements that comprise your landscape and what relevance they have to system heading. The mind-map does not end. It remains with the intervention, being changed and adjusted throughout. While it requires energy to maintain, the dividend is that you have a persistent point of reference against which to assess how you are doing, what your foments are stimulating, and how far or close you are from your alt-heading.

For a good step-by-step resource on mind-mapping see Schmitz, 2025.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a strengths-based approach to change that starts from what is *working* and what people value, and then builds forward from those stories rather than beginning with problems or deficits. It treats inquiry itself as an intervention: the questions you ask start to create the future you are imagining.

AI rests on five classic principles:

- **Constructionist** – realities are socially constructed through language and conversation.
- **Simultaneity** – inquiry and change happen together; the first questions already start change. Here, questions become foments.
- **Poetic** – any system's 'story' can be read and rewritten in many ways.
- **Anticipatory** – images of alt-heading guide current behaviour.
- **Positive** – focusing on strengths and hopes generates energy for change.

In community settings, this usually means structured conversations about 'peak experiences,' existing assets, and desired alternative presents, rather than workshops centred on problems or needs.

There is an AI step-wise approach (often called the 4-5D cycle), but in practice the intervention team often spreads these moves across multiple visits or engagements, using different techniques in each phase.

1. **Define** (sometimes added as a first 'D'): clarify the affirmative topic or question (e.g., "how do we strengthen local cooperation around water?"), not "What is wrong with...?"



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

2. **Discovery – ‘what gives life?’** Use narrative interviews, pair work, or small groups to elicit stories of times when the community, organization, or group was at its best with respect to the topic. Then identify themes: strengths, conditions that made success possible, and existing assets.
3. **Dream – ‘What might be?’** Facilitate collective deliberation of the direction the ‘now’ should be heading. This is grounded in stories: alternative presents, what would make things better, community drawings, scenarios – if we did this, then what would happen?
4. **Design – ‘What should be?’** Translate the dream into enabling structures, relationships, and practices: principles, foments, or ‘design statements’ that describe how things will work if the [alt-heading](#) is accomplished.
5. **Delivery – ‘How do we sustain it?’** Support self-organised action, learning, and adaptation over time; check-ins, reflective sessions, and further appreciative interviews to document emerging successes.

The above has been adjusted to reflect this Playbook’s language. AI is often framed in visioning terms which, as we have discussed elsewhere, diminishes the potency of the intervention, and can disempower your target community.

Good guidance on AI can be found in Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2010; Ashford and Patkar, 2001; and Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005.

Participatory Narrative Inquiry

PNI is “an approach in which groups of people participate in gathering and working with raw stories of personal experience in order to make sense of complex situations for better decision making” (Kurtz, 2026). It is participatory, not extractive: stories are used so people can think together, not just so outsiders can analyse them.

Standard narrative inquiry often relies on researchers analysing a small number of in-depth stories; PNI uses many short, everyday stories, interpreted collectively, to support shared understanding and action. PNI is explicitly positioned as a form of participatory action research, where the goal is to help communities and organizations think, decide, and change together.

Typical stages

One widely used formulation describes PNI as having three essential stages, often supported by planning and return.

Planning (optional but wise)

- Clarify the purpose/questions, who will participate, and what you hope stories will inform (e.g., strategy, evaluation, design).
- Design prompts, story-elicitation questions, and simple self-interpretation questions; often test with a small pilot.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Collection (essential)

- Community members tell “everyday anecdotes, not polished performances” about “what happened,” not “what they think.”
- Stories can be gathered via interviews, group sessions, paper forms, or digital tools; people usually also answer a few short questions about each story (e.g., how they felt, who was involved, what changed).

Sensemaking (essential)

- Groups of participants (often including story-tellers) work with clusters, patterns, and contrasts across many stories to explore values, tensions, possibilities, and emerging themes.
- Facilitators use visualisation, sorting, mapping, and structured dialogue to help people see patterns and consider implications, not to impose an external interpretation.

Intervention/decision (often folded into sensemaking)

- Participants use insights from the stories to propose actions, design interventions, adjust policies, or reframe strategies.
- The focus is “not for preservation or persuasion, but to improve thought and discussion” that leads to better decisions.

Return and iteration (supporting stage)

Findings and decisions are taken back to the wider community; further rounds of story collection and sensemaking can track change over time.

Practical design features

- Use concrete prompts like “Tell me about a time when...” rather than abstract opinion questions, to keep stories grounded in lived experience *and the present*.
- Ask people to interpret their own stories (e.g., rating scales, multiple-choice questions, tags), which allows later pattern-finding across many narratives while keeping interpretation anchored in participants’ meanings.
- Combine qualitative reading of individual stories with simple quantitative views of the self-interpretation answers (graphs, clusters) to support group sensemaking.

The above pointers are derived from Kurtz (2026).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Methods for maps: vistas, strands, practices and interactions

The Intervention Design section describes four maps that constitute your read of the system. Each is produced by different methods, and no single method produces all four.

The **power vista** is produced primarily by Net-Map (influence network mapping), which yields actors, links, and influence towers showing regulatory weight. PNI contributes a narrative dimension – revealing whose stories dominate and whose are suppressed. The circles of explanation provide the spatial framework onto which Net-Map results can be arranged, positioning actors by regulatory range.

The **strand map** is not produced by a single method at a single moment. Strands are practices over time, and most methods capture a snapshot. The strand map is assembled cumulatively through sustained sensing: bilateral engagement repeated over months, seasonal calendars, temporal sensing, and stories that reveal how practices have changed. The mind-mapping and crime board approach is where this assembly happens – the team pins up what they are learning and traces trajectories over time.

The **practice map** is produced by the MMC analysis worksheet which we describe in the [Practices](#) section: for each target practice, unpack meanings, materials, and competencies, and identify which are internally generated and which are externally regulated. Agroecosystem Analysis feeds into this for agricultural and pastoral practices. Appreciative inquiry's 'discover' phase also contributes – what people say is working reveals the MMC configuration from the practitioner's perspective.

The **interaction spaces map** emerges from overlaying the strand map onto the power vista and asking: where are the most consequential overlaps? The circles of explanation show these visually as the interfaces between rings. This map is not produced by a separate method – it is the product of reading your other maps together.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

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The alternative heading

PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Key take-aways

- We work with an *alt-heading* – a navigational bearing, not a destination – because complex systems do not allow reliable prediction and a vision becomes a fiction long before it is accomplished.
- The alt-heading expresses three things: what practices should be shifting and in what direction, what should be amplified because it already works, and what should be left alone.
- A heading is falsifiable in a way a vision is not – and that falsifiability is what keeps the intervention honest and adaptive; recognizing the heading is wrong is not failure but navigational adjustment.
- The alt-heading emerges from sensing and is revised as the system responds – it is never fixed, and the team should build explicit heading-review moments into its rhythm.
- Visions are politically convenient because they cannot be falsified in the present, which is why we reject them as the organizing frame for intervention – they are abstract, deferrable, and ultimately disempowering.

Many interventions build around a vision that they want to accomplish. We, however, advocate for an ‘alternative heading’ (‘alt-heading’). **This is a sense of direction** – the trajectory along which we want the system to move. It is not a description of a destination, but a navigational *bearing*: a compelling and actionable sense of where ‘better’ lies.

With the alt-heading, we respond to the question: in what direction should this landscape’s system be moving? This comprises three important parts: (a) what practices should be shifting, and in what direction; (b) what should be amplified because it is already working; and (c) what should be left alone. The alt-heading is expressed in practice terms – who is doing what, when, where, how, why, and to whom – but as a *direction of travel*, not a blueprint.

An alt-heading emerges from the sensing work described in intervention design. It provides the *sense of trajectory* that guides the Theory of Change: without an alt-heading, foments have no direction and the intervention cannot distinguish between change that moves the system towards ‘better’ and change that merely moves it.

An alt-heading is a sense of what the landscape’s practices, power relations, and material arrangements would need to be shifting *towards* for the something to change: the regulations that make it viable, the market relations that incentivize it, the

“The future
depends on what we
do in the present.” –
Mahatma Gandhi



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

meanings that normalize it, the absence of alternatives that sustain it.

The alt-heading emerges from the team's synthesis of everything it has learned about the system – what is possible, what is desired, and what the inter-relations between practices suggest about where the system might realistically be 'nudged.' It is expressed in practice terms (who should be doing what differently, and why), but as a direction, not a destination.

The alt-heading is not fixed. Your first formulation – which can be used as a baseline – will be based on the best understanding available at that time – which, at the start of an intervention, is necessarily incomplete. As the intervention learns from its foments and from the system's responses, the heading may need to be corrected, just as a navigator adjusts course in response to currents and wind. This is not failure; it is the intervention working as it should. In our [Adaptivity](#) section we show how the alt-heading can be revised as learning and experience accumulate.

Why a heading rather than a vision? We have three reasons for rejecting visions, and one for preferring headings:

- What we are dealing with is a complex system, which means that we cannot make *realistic* predictions about the future. The alt-heading is embedded in a present sense of the system's heading.¹
- We advocate for *plausible change*. 'Plausibility' indicates that the strategies we employ are *realistic propositions* for the change we want to accomplish. Generally, the further into the future we envision, the more implausible things become.
- A vision is an abstraction – it has not yet occurred, and we cannot know if it will occur. Because it is abstract, we tend to discount it – i.e., because it is not 'real' then we can essentially aim for anything. The future cannot be falsified in the present, and when that future disappoints, it can always be deferred. With visions, the horizon recedes as one approaches it. For this reason, it is often employed in politics – it implies something concrete that is being promised, while in reality, nothing is promised. For this reason, the abstract nature of visions can be *disempowering*.

A heading, by contrast, is honest about what we can and cannot know. It says: given what we understand about this system, *this* is the direction in which we believe it needs to move. It acknowledges that the system will respond to our interventions in ways we cannot fully predict, and that the heading itself may need correction as we learn. Unlike a vision, a heading can be wrong – and recognizing that it is wrong is not a failure but a navigational adjustment. This makes it *falsifiable* in a way that a vision is not – and it is this falsifiability that keeps the intervention honest and adaptive. A heading is something you steer by, not something you build towards.

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¹ Fry and Perera (2024) advance the idea of 'defuturing' in which they argue that it is current practices that are actively destroying future possibilities – they negate it through what we do now. The future is not a distant horizon connected to the present, but something that is being assembled *now*.

“Forethought we may have, undoubtedly, but not foresight.”
– Napoleon Bonaparte



Stakeholders

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

- The Playbook treats stakeholders as actors whose practices constitute strands – moving from “who has an interest?” (a list) to “who is doing what, to whom, with what regulatory effect?” (a strand map).
- Reading what is at stake requires the MMC lens: meanings as stakes (homeland, identity), materials as stakes (the whole material scaffolding of a way of life), competencies as stakes (place-specific knowledge that cannot be relocated).
- The asymmetry between place-specific stakes (existential, light strand) and portable stakes (instrumental, heavy strand) is itself a power analysis – and lies at the heart of what ILM has to address.
- Conflict is to be assumed in any landscape, and trust is the precondition for collaboration – fostered through consistency of conduct and an honest-broker reputation that treats actors with neither fear nor favour.
- *Target groups* are the strategic subset of stakeholders most likely to shift system heading – and must include both those expected to support the intervention and those expected to resist it.

What are stakeholders?

‘**Stakeholders**’ are people who have an interest in a system, and who may be affected (positively or negatively) if system patterns change. Typically, this is not a passing interest, but a vested one. Stakeholders drive change in landscapes through their practices – which drive the problems that affect it or the solutions that can sustain it.

In the Playbook’s vocabulary, stakeholders are actors – people and groups whose practices constitute the strands that produce system heading. What conventional practice calls ‘stakeholder analysis’ we call reading the system’s actors. The difference is not semantic. A stakeholder analysis asks who has an interest; an actor analysis asks who is doing what, to whom, and with what regulatory effect. The first produces a list; the second produces a strand map.

All stakeholders in a system influence its patterns – but in different ways, depending on their practices, and the regulation they are able to bring to bear. This is an inherent power in all stakeholders. Associated with this is another inherent power: stakeholder

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you’re interested, check out the ‘evidence page’ for this section here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

agency – i.e., the power to act. As we have repeatedly emphasized, stakeholders are not necessarily located in a landscape but can nevertheless influence landscape system dynamics from beyond it.

Reading what is at stake for each actor requires an expansive mind. Conventional analysis tends to identify financial or political interests – the obvious ones. But the MMC framework (see the [Practices](#) section) reveals deeper and more diverse attachments:

Meanings as stakes: the landscape as homeland, as the place where ancestors are buried, as the territory that defines identity. A pastoralist's stake in rangelands may not be economic alone. It could be existential. A politician's stake may be symbolic: this landscape demonstrates national progress, or it is where his voter base live.

Materials as stakes: not just financial investments but the entire material configuration of a way of life – paths, markets, water points, infrastructure. When a dam submerges a valley, the material stake is not 'land' but the physical scaffolding of daily practice.

Competencies as stakes: the landscape where a practice has been learned, failed, and adapted over generations. A fisher's knowledge of a lake's seasonal patterns, a farmer's understanding of their particular soil – these are place-specific competencies that cannot be relocated. A mining company also has a competency stake, but its competencies are portable and transferable in ways that indigenous knowledge is not. This asymmetry in competency-stakes is itself a power analysis.

ILM interventions inevitably create shifts in which stakeholders benefit, or bear the costs – these are trade-offs which require careful attention in intervention design and implementation.

It is important to remember – persistently – that **when an intervention commences, it also becomes a stakeholder**. Intervention teams are neither neutral nor disembodied from the system they enter to change.

Stakeholders are nearly always part of a **community**, which is a unit of social organization in which individuals are connected via shared interests and/or identity. Foremost in our minds is that community may form around a practice – hence, those who farm see themselves as farmers. But community can also form around ethnicity, religion, occupation, politics, culture, values, customs, norms, and/or institutions. A community, we emphasize, is not only a village in a landscape – it could be a community of politicians, a community of mining engineers. Note also that a member of one community may be a member of several others at the same time.

Whatever the case, the trick is to identify which communities stakeholders themselves identify with – it is these groups who we will be targeting.

In a landscape, the stakes are **heterogenous** – a quality that reflects its diversity. Of necessity, therefore, many of these stakes will contrast or even conflict. Heterogeneity can introduce instability into a system – especially if these different stakes are competing against each other. The challenge then becomes one of introducing homogeneity and stability. Community implies

“[A] central problem of environmental management is to establish systems of regulation and compensation that bring about a convergence of narrow self-interest and the common good.”
– Kenneth Oye and James Maxwell



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

a certain degree of homogeneity, even if this is only around a particular theme or issue. Therefore, how do we create community where it did not exist previously?

It is important to dwell for a moment on conflict. The latter is disagreement or disharmony between people or ideas. Most conflict is low grade – i.e., it is not open and/or violent. Conflict-avoidance is a significant reason for why institutions form in societies. All societies contain conflict, and where such societies are stressed (e.g., by insufficient access to natural resources), these can shift to dominate social interactions and may even get violent. **When designing an intervention, it is important that conflict is assumed.**

Trust is an essential tenet of human organization. An intervention will want to foster trust (a) between itself and stakeholder groups; and (b) between stakeholder groups. For collaboration to occur, levels of trust between actors must be very high. Trust can be understood as a measure of belief in the honesty, fairness, or benevolence of another person or group. Trust is sometimes defined as the belief that another person will behave as expected.¹ It is important here to emphasize that this implies expected behaviour within a certain bandwidth. Imagine a person known for their serenity who suddenly freaks out. That moment will be judged decidedly out of character – beyond the normal bandwidth – and invite questions about that person’s reliability and trustworthiness. For you intervention, trust can – among many other strategies – be fostered through consistency of conduct. If your intent is to engage in the interaction space among several actors, it makes sense to develop an honest broker reputation – of treating all groups more or less the same, providing neither fear nor favour to any group.

“Trust is a confident relationship with the unknown.” – Rachel Botsman

Close attention needs to be paid to the stakeholders in a landscape, and we include this analysis in our suggested approach to developing an ILM intervention. Through this process, a very large number of stakeholders will potentially be identified. Due to your own resource limitations, however, you will not be able to address them all. Therefore, a subset of stakeholder groups must be selected. This will be a strategic choice – the groups selected are the groups in landscape system who you think, if your strategies are successful, are most likely to generate a change in system heading and achieve your alt-heading. We call these people **target groups** and, of necessity, should comprise both those who you think will be supportive of your intervention, as well as those who you think might resist it.

1 Schilke et al, 2021.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

References and further reading

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Monitoring, learning, & evaluation

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

- We use MLE – monitoring, learning, *and* evaluation, with learning at the centre – because what conventional M&E reads as failure (“we did not do exactly what we said”) is in complex systems the most valuable form of information.
- Monitoring in a complex system is the systematic observation of how the system responds to your foments – primarily through the three maps, plus attention to ripples, dampening/amplifying loops, cascade signals and absence.
- We distinguish *compliance* indicators (what you did), *movement* indicators (whether the system is shifting towards the alt-heading) and *learning* indicators (whether the team’s read of the system is deepening) – and treat learning as the primary measure of project quality and sincerity.
- The *proposition log* – original proposition, what actually happened, what was learned, how the next foment was redesigned – is the intervention’s learning history and the document a successor team would need to continue the work.
- Three audiences need different things: the team needs real-time learning, the donor needs narrative reporting (more informative than indicator dashboards), and the system needs documentation that outlasts the intervention.

Why MLE, not M&E

Conventional monitoring and evaluation asks: did we do what we said we would do, and did it produce what we predicted? In a complex system, the answer is almost always ‘no, not exactly’ – which conventional M&E interprets as failure rather than as information. The Playbook’s release-observe-adjust cycle is a learning architecture, but conventional M&E cannot see it because it is looking for compliance with a pre-specified plan.

We use MLE – monitoring, learning, and evaluation – with learning at the centre. This is not a cosmetic rebranding. It reflects a substantive reordering of priorities. Monitoring is not indicator-tracking; it is the systematic observation of what the system does in response to foments.

Learning is the team’s capacity to revise its read of the system and redesign foments accordingly – the whirlpool described in the [Adaptivity](#) section. Evaluation is the honest assessment of whether the intervention is producing movement towards the [alt-heading](#), conducted not for a distant donor but for the team and the system.

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you’re interested, check out the ‘evidence page’ for this section here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

MLE serves three audiences, each of which needs different things:

- **The team** needs real-time learning to assess how the system has responded to its foments. The question the team asks is: what did the system do in response to what we released, and what should we try next? This is the primary audience. If MLE does not serve the team, it serves nobody.
- **The donor** needs assurance that money is well spent and the intervention is credible. The question the donor asks is: is this intervention making progress, and is the team competent? We address this in the Guidance for Donors section, but the short answer is that narrative reporting – what was released, what the system did, what was learned, what will be tried next – is more informative than indicator dashboards and more honest about what the intervention is actually doing.
- **The system** needs documentation that outlasts the intervention – what was tried, what the system did, what was learned. The question the system asks (through future practitioners, successor projects, and the communities themselves) is: what do we now know about this landscape that we did not know before? This audience is routinely ignored, but it is the most important for long-term impact.

What monitoring looks like in a complex system

In conventional project management, monitoring means tracking indicators against a plan. In a complex system, monitoring means observing the system's response to your foments. The distinction is fundamental. Indicator-tracking asks whether the intervention is on schedule. System observation asks whether the intervention is producing movement – and if so, in which direction?

The Playbook's primary monitoring instruments are the three maps described in the Sensing and Intervention [Design and Implementation](#) sections: the **strand map**, the **power vista**, and the **practice map**. These are living documents – updated after each cycle of release-observe-adjust. If the maps have not changed in six months, either the team is not sensing or the system is not responding. Both are problems. If the maps have changed in ways the team did not predict, that is not a failure – it is the most valuable kind of monitoring data, because it reveals something about the system that was not visible before.

In addition to the three maps, monitoring in a complex system attends to:

- **Ripples:** is the disturbance from your foment travelling? Who is talking about it? What adjacent practices are shifting? Ripple monitoring is inherently qualitative – it involves listening, observing, and asking, not counting.
- **Dampening and amplifying:** is the system absorbing your foment (dampening) or is the effect growing (amplifying)? If dampening, which regulatory forces are doing the absorbing? This tells you where the system's resistance lies – and where your next foment needs to target.
- **Cascade signals:** are actors who were not directly involved in the foment beginning to respond? A cascade is the most powerful



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

sign that the system is shifting, but it is also the hardest to attribute – which is why conventional indicator-based monitoring cannot see it.

- **Absence:** what is not happening? Which actors are not responding? Which interaction spaces remain unchanged? Absence is monitoring data – it tells you where the system's regulatory architecture is strongest and where your foments have not yet reached.

On indicators

Indicators are reductionist. They reduce the irreducible complexity of a landscape system to a number, and then treat that number as though it tells you something meaningful about change. In our experience, there has rarely been an instance where an indicator actually indicates anything particularly useful about system-level change. This is not because the people designing indicators are incompetent. It is because indicators are structurally ill-suited to complex systems.

The problems are well documented. Indicators decontextualise: a number stripped of its story tells you nothing about why it changed, whether the change is durable, or whether it matters. Indicators incentivize the wrong behaviour: teams design activities that move the indicator rather than the system, because the reporting instrument rewards the former. Indicators are vulnerable to manipulation, masked by a widespread belief that quantitative data are more trustworthy than qualitative data – a belief for which there is no evidence. And indicators create a yawning gulf between what the implementing team sees as satisfactory on-the-ground progress and what a distant donor demands in numerical form.

We do not reject indicators entirely. Some things can be usefully indicated – particularly compliance-level information (how many workshops were held, how many people attended, what proportion of the budget has been spent). But it is important to distinguish between three types:

- **Compliance indicators** measure whether you did what you said you would do. They are useful for fiduciary accountability but tell you nothing about the system. Most conventional indicators are compliance indicators disguised as impact indicators.
- **Movement indicators** measure whether the system is shifting towards the [alt-heading](#). These are harder to define, harder to measure, and vastly more important. They include: changes in the three maps (are strands shifting weight? are interaction spaces reconfiguring? are practices changing their MMC composition?); evidence of ripples and cascades; shifts in the narrative landscape (are different stories being told?); and changes in actors' causal beliefs about their own system (see below on ChaRL's psychometric approach).
- **Learning indicators** measure whether the team is learning. This is the most important category and the one conventional M&E cannot see. Learning indicators include: the rate at which the team's read of the system is deepening (are the maps getting richer and more accurate?); the speed at which failed foments are discarded and redesigned; the extent to which learning from one



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

cycle feeds into the design of the next; the quality of the team's sensemaking (are interpretations becoming more nuanced?); and the degree to which cross-team learning (the curation function from [Team Design](#), Principle 7) is functioning. Learning is an indication of project quality and sincerity. A team that is learning fast is a team that is doing this work properly, regardless of what the compliance indicators say.

Learning as the primary measure of quality

The Playbook places learning at the centre of its epistemology. The release-observe-adjust cycle is a learning cycle. The whirlpool in the [Adaptivity](#) section describes how learning spirals inward towards deeper understanding rather than progressing linearly towards a pre-specified outcome. Sensing is learning. Foment redesign is learning. The three maps are learning artefacts. If the team is not learning, the intervention is not working – regardless of what the logframe says.

Three dimensions of learning matter:

- **The pace of learning:** how quickly does the team update its read of the system after each foment cycle? A team that takes six months to process what it learned in the field is too slow for complexity. A team that debriefs the same day, updates its maps the same week, and redesigns its foments the same month is operating at the pace the system requires.
- **The mechanisms for learning:** what internal structures does the team have for converting experience into insight? The Liberating Structures approach 'What, So What, Now What?' (described in the Sensing section) provides one such structure. The mind-mapping and crime board approach provides another – a persistent, visual, evolving record of the team's collective intelligence. The learning curation protocol from [Team Design](#) Principle 7 provides the cross-team architecture. Without deliberate mechanisms, learning remains individual and tacit rather than collective and actionable.
- **The extent to which learning feeds into decisions:** does what the team learns actually change what the team does? If the strand map has been updated but the ferment design has not changed, learning is decorative rather than operational. The proposition log (see below) provides a way to track this: for each foment, the original proposition, what actually happened, what was learned, and how the next foment was redesigned in response.

Evaluation approaches fit for complexity

Several evaluation methodologies have been developed specifically for complex systems interventions. The Playbook draws on three in particular:

Outcome harvesting works backward from observed changes rather than forward from intended outcomes. Instead of asking 'did we achieve what we planned?', it asks 'what changed, and can we plausibly connect it to what we did?' This is particularly suited to landscape work where the most important outcomes are emergent – not predicted at the proposal stage, not specified in a



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

logframe, but real and consequential. The method involves collecting outcome descriptions from multiple sources (team members, community members, partner organizations), verifying them, and assessing the intervention's contribution. See Wilson-Grau and Britt (2012).

Most Significant Change (MSC) is a narrative-based monitoring and evaluation technique that captures what conventional indicators miss. Project participants – at all levels – are regularly asked to describe the most significant change they have observed over a defined period, and to explain why they consider it significant. The stories are then collectively reviewed and the 'most significant' selected through structured deliberation. MSC is valuable because it surfaces changes that indicator frameworks cannot detect, and because the deliberation process itself produces learning. See Davies and Dart (2005).

Developmental evaluation embeds evaluation in the intervention rather than imposing it from outside. The evaluator is part of the team, participating in sensemaking and contributing to real-time adjustment rather than delivering retrospective judgement. This is structurally aligned with the Playbook's approach: the evaluator is a team member who helps the team learn, not an external auditor who measures compliance. Developmental evaluation asks: is this intervention adapting effectively to what it is learning? Is the adaptation improving the intervention's capacity to produce movement towards the [alt-heading](#)? See Patton (2011).

Smajgl and Ward's **Challenge and Reconstruct Learning (ChaRL)** framework offers a further dimension: psychometric measurement of belief change among decision-makers. By eliciting causal beliefs before and after structured engagements, ChaRL can detect whether foments are actually shifting how actors think about their system – which is a movement indicator that no conventional instrument can capture. See Smajgl and Ward (2013).

What to report and to whom

For the **team**, the primary reporting instrument is the three maps and the proposition log. The proposition log records, for each foment: the original proposition (if we do X, we believe Y will happen, because of Z); what actually happened when the foment was released; what was learned; and how the next foment was redesigned in response. Over time, the proposition log becomes the intervention's learning history – a record of how the team's understanding of the system deepened cycle by cycle. This is the document that a successor team would need to continue the work.

For the **donor**, narrative reporting is more informative than indicator dashboards. Each reporting cycle should address:

- What foments were released and in which interaction spaces.
- What the system did in response – including surprises, failures, and dampening.
- What was learned – how the team's read of the system changed.
- How the maps have been updated – what the strand map, power vista, and practice map now show that they did not show before.
- What will be tried next – how the ferment has been redesigned in response to learning.
- An honest assessment of progress towards the [alt-heading](#) – including whether the alt-heading itself has been revised.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

This format gives the donor something that an indicator dashboard cannot: a credible account of whether the intervention is learning and adapting, which is the strongest available evidence that money is being well spent.

For the **system**, documentation should be designed for a future reader who was not present. The proposition log, the three maps in their final state, and a narrative account of the intervention's learning trajectory constitute the system's inheritance from the intervention. If the documentation would not help a future team member understand the system, it is not evaluation – it is compliance.

References and further reading

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Compromise

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

- We reject consensus as the goal of multi-stakeholder work: under consensus rules the powerful need only withhold agreement to prevent change, producing lowest-common-denominator outcomes that protect the status quo.
- We pursue deliberation, not dialogue: dialogue improves relationships without redistributing power, while deliberation requires participants to confront trade-offs and change positions in light of reasoned argument and the claims of others.
- Deliberation is a system, not an event – the workshop is one component of a wider ferment of foments (bilateral preparation, relational brokering, narrative work) that together perform the deliberative functions no single forum can perform alone.
- Compromise creates value the status quo cannot: a 30% concession from each party can yield a 140% outcome, because mutual cooperation unlocks capacity (tenure security, social licence, compliance) that no actor could generate alone.
- Skilled mediators and negotiators are not optional extras but core team capacities – deliberation is demanding work and shapes who must be on the intervention team (see section 7.4).

Compromise, not consensus

In the section on [trade-offs](#), we argued that the real trade-offs in ILM are in the power domain: any intervention that shifts a system's heading creates winners and losers. This raises a practical question: how are these trade-offs navigated? The default answer in much landscape and natural resource management literature is consensus. We disagree.

Consensus sounds democratic. It implies that all parties have been heard, that differences have been reconciled, and that everyone has agreed. In practice, however, consensus in multi-stakeholder settings tends to produce lowest-common-denominator outcomes – proposals sanded down until they threaten no one and change nothing. At the opening plenary of COP27 in 2022, Bangladesh's representative made exactly this argument: that consensus-based decision-making

On what evidence do we base the arguments and perspectives in this section? If you're interested, check out the 'evidence page' for this section here.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

was producing outcomes too weak to address the crisis they were designed to confront. The pattern is structural, not incidental. When consensus is the decision rule, any actor who benefits from the current system heading holds an effective veto. The most powerful parties – those who have successfully externalized costs, captured regulatory processes, or accumulated disproportionate benefits – need only withhold agreement to prevent change. Consensus thus tends to protect precisely the arrangements that an ILM intervention is trying to shift.

The political theorist Chantal Mouffe² has argued that conflict and antagonism are ineradicable features of political life, and that attempts to ground collective decision-making in rational consensus are both illusory and dangerous. They are illusory because they assume shared starting principles that, in pluralistic societies with asymmetric power, do not exist. They are dangerous because the fiction of consensus obscures the power relations that actually produced the agreement. In Mouffe's terms, the question for democratic politics is not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values. We think this applies directly to ILM: the question is not how to find a position everyone agrees with, but how to construct arrangements that honestly distribute power, benefits and costs – and that enough actors can live with.

Deliberation, not dialogue

If consensus is not the goal, what kind of process gets us to compromise? We argue for **deliberation**, and we distinguish it from dialogue – a term more commonly used in landscape and stakeholder engagement practice. This distinction matters.

Dialogue, at its best, builds understanding. It asks participants to listen, to surface perspectives, to develop empathy across difference. We do not dismiss this – it is valuable groundwork. But dialogue, by itself, can leave power relations undisturbed. Participants understand each other better; they may even like each other more. But nobody has been asked to give anything up, and the structural conditions that produce the problem remain intact. In the worst case, dialogue becomes a performance of inclusion that substitutes for the harder work of redistribution.

Deliberation is different. Following Dryzek,³ we understand deliberation as a process in which participants are *expected to change their positions* in light of reasoned argument, new information, and the claims of others. This is not a conversation aimed at mutual understanding; it is a structured confrontation with trade-offs. Deliberation invites conflict to be surfaced – not smoothed over, not deferred, but engaged with directly. Van de Kerkhof⁴ makes this distinction explicit: consensus-building constrains what can be discussed and tends towards lowest-common-denominator outcomes, while deliberative design helps participants critically assess arguments and deal with stakeholder conflict at an early stage.

² Mouffe, 2000, 2005.

³ Dryzek, 2000.

⁴ Van de Kerkhof, 2006.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Elsewhere in this Playbook, we call for ILM practitioners to assume that conflict is present: competing interests, structural inequalities, externalized costs. Deliberation is the process that brings this conflict into the room. It requires skilled facilitation, mediation, and negotiation – capacities that we argue are essential components of any well-functioning ILM team. Effective deliberation demands “explicit recognition of politics and power” in process design, and the larger goal is to “turn potential conflict into constructive engagement.”⁵

Deliberation as system, not event

There is a further step. Deliberation, as described above, can sound like something that happens in a single room at a single moment – a well-facilitated workshop where conflict is surfaced and trade-offs confronted. That is part of it, but only part. Mansbridge et al.⁶ have argued that deliberation should be understood not as a single forum but as a *system* – an interconnected set of forums, actors and communication spaces that together perform the key functions deliberation requires. Crucially, no single arena has to be perfectly deliberative; the system as a whole is judged by how its parts interact and compensate for each other’s deficits. Mansbridge et al. call this a ‘division of discursive labour.’

This reframing matters for ILM because it solves a persistent problem. Multi-stakeholder forums are treated, across much of the landscape literature, as the deliberative moment – the place where differences are aired, perspectives shared, and agreements reached. But as we have argued elsewhere in this Playbook, MSFs often reproduce the very power dynamics they are supposed to address: the powerful speak, the marginalized perform deference, and the forum legitimizes existing arrangements under the banner of ‘participation.’ Deliberative systems theory tells us why: a single forum is being asked to perform too many functions at once. It is expected to inform (epistemic function), to build mutual respect across difference (ethical function), to include diverse voices (democratic function), and to generate new possibilities (generative function). No single workshop can do all of these well, and the attempt to make it do so is what produces the lowest-common-denominator outcomes that we criticized above.

The alternative is to design a deliberative system – a constellation of arenas, each performing specific functions, whose collective effect is genuine deliberation even though no single arena achieves it alone. This is what the Playbook’s foment palette provides. This gives ILM practitioners a powerful response to the inevitable question from donors and partners: ‘so you’re not doing workshops?’ The answer is: we are. But we are designing a deliberative system, not a deliberative event. The workshop is one component. It only works if the other components – the bilateral preparation, the relational brokering, the knowledge translation, the narrative work – are also in place. What we are not doing is treating the workshop as the place where deliberation happens. Deliberation happens across the entire ferment of foments; the workshop is where its results are confronted, negotiated, and – if the preparation has been adequate – converted into compromise.

⁵ Dore et al, 2010.

⁶ Mansbridge et al, 2012.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

One note of caution. The deliberative systems literature is rooted in democratic theory and largely concerns democratic polities in the Global North. The translation to landscape governance requires care. The Playbook does not assume a democratic baseline. It works from the reality that deliberation often occurs in contexts where power is deeply asymmetric and where some actors actively resist the inclusion of others. The Playbook's power analysis – the layered model, the power vista, the regulatory structure – is what makes it possible to design deliberative systems in these contexts, because it diagnoses who holds what power, who is excluded, and what feedback loops maintain exclusion. A deliberative system designed without this analysis risks reproducing the very asymmetries it is supposed to address, just as a poorly designed MSF does.

The logic of compromise

If deliberation surfaces conflict honestly, compromise is the mechanism through which it is navigated. Compromise is not consensus. It does not pretend that everyone got what they wanted. It acknowledges that actors have genuinely conflicting interests, and it requires real concessions – real costs – from all parties.

There is a common intuition that compromise means everyone loses: each party gives up part of its position, and the result is less than anyone hoped for. This is wrong, or at least it is incomplete. Compromise creates value that does not exist under the status quo. Consider: if two parties each concede 30% of their starting position, the result is not 70% of what was. The result, if the compromise is well designed, is 140% – because the agreement unlocks possibilities that neither party could access alone. A community that concedes some land-use flexibility gains tenure security; an investor that accepts tighter environmental conditions gains social licence and reduced political risk; a government that shares regulatory authority gains compliance and legitimacy. These are not zero-sum trades. They are the creation of new value through the honest confrontation of trade-offs.

This is what distinguishes compromise from both consensus and capitulation. Consensus sands proposals down until they threaten no one; capitulation concentrates losses on the weakest party. Compromise asks all parties to bear real costs in exchange for real gains – and the resulting arrangement, precisely because it cost something, has a durability that consensus outcomes typically lack. Actors comply not because they were persuaded, but because they struck a deal whose terms they helped to shape and whose benefits they stand to lose if they defect.

This logic is, in effect, a restatement of the 'prisoner's dilemma' – and of Ostrom's⁷ solution to it. In the prisoner's dilemma, two suspects are arrested for a crime and held in separate cells, unable to communicate. Each faces the same offer from the prosecutor:

- If both stay silent (cooperate with each other), there is not enough evidence, so they each get a light sentence (say, 1 year).
- If one confesses and implicates the other (defects) while the other stays silent, the confessor goes free (0 years), and the silent partner gets a heavy sentence (say, 10 years).
- If both confess (both defect), they each get a medium sentence (say, 5 years).

7 Ostrom, 1990.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Each prisoner reasons: that whatever the other does, confessing gives me a better personal outcome (0 vs 1 year if the other is silent; 5 vs 10 years if the other confesses). So defection (confessing) is the individually rational choice for both. The result is that both confess and each gets 5 years—worse for both than the 1 year each they'd have received by both staying silent. The 'dilemma' is that individually rational, payoff-maximizing behaviour leads to a collectively worse outcome than mutual cooperation.

Mutual defection is, therefore, individually rational but collectively disastrous: both parties get a worse outcome than if they had cooperated. The dominant strategy is to defect, because the individual gain from betrayal is total and the loss to the other party is absolute.

Ostrom's insight, developed across decades of empirical work on common-pool resources, is that real actors are not the purely self-interested maximizers of standard game theory. They are *boundedly self-seeking*: they will accept individual costs when the collective gains are visible, credible, and when institutional arrangements make defection more costly than compliance.

In our terms, the 30% concession is the choice to cooperate rather than defect. The 40% surplus is the payoff that exists only under mutual cooperation – it is not available to any party acting alone. But here is the critical point for ILM practice: in the abstract dilemma, the payoffs are given. In a real landscape negotiation, they have to be *constructed* – made legible, concrete, and specific enough that a boundedly self-seeking actor can weigh them against what they are being asked to give up. The ILM practitioner's job in preparing for deliberation is therefore not just facilitation; it is framing the collective gain. You come to the table having done the work to show what mutual cooperation actually produces: the tenure security, the ecosystem services, the market access, the reduced political risk. Without that concrete articulation, you are asking people to cooperate on faith – which is precisely the situation the prisoner's dilemma says will fail.

The compromise arithmetic also maps onto the Playbook's power framework. The 30% loss is a redistributive move – power as redistribution, in which an actor gives up position. The 40% gain is a capacity move – power as capacity, in which the collective now has resources, legitimacy, or coordination that no individual actor could generate alone. Compromise, then, is the mechanism that converts redistributive losses into capacity gains. This is a stronger formulation than merely 'everyone gives a bit and gets a bit'. It explains why well-designed compromise creates durable arrangements: the collective capacity it generates is real, and actors have a stake in maintaining it.

Implications for practice

This argument has direct consequences for how ILM interventions are designed and facilitated. First, it means that the pursuit of consensus should be treated with caution. Where all parties 'agree', the ILM practitioner should ask: what was given up to reach this agreement? If the answer is 'nothing', the agreement probably changes nothing. Second, it means that skilled mediators and negotiators are not optional extras in an ILM team – they are core capacities. Deliberation is demanding work. It requires people who can hold space for conflict without letting it become destructive, who can identify the real interests beneath stated positions, and who can help parties see the value that compromise might create. Third, it connects directly to our discussion on [trade-offs](#):



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

if the real trade-offs in ILM are in the power domain, then the process for navigating them must be one that confronts power honestly. Deliberation does this. Dialogue, on its own, does not.

Fourth, it explains why ILM is necessarily iterative. Ostrom's work on repeated games shows that cooperation becomes self-reinforcing once actors can see it working: each successful round of cooperation provides the evidence that the collective gains are real, making the next round easier. No single actor will give up everything at once, but they may accept incremental concessions if each step delivers visible collective benefits. In our terms, each step around the Playbook's dartboard is a bounded compromise – a small redistribution of concentrated power in exchange for a demonstrated gain in collective capacity. Early rounds require the hardest work in framing the collective gain, because there is no track record. Later rounds can point to results. This is also why Ostrom's design principles emphasize monitoring and graduated sanctions: they make cooperation visible and defection costly, which is what sustains the process across iterations. The ILM process, then, is not a single grand bargain but a sequence of bounded, self-seeking negotiations in which each compromise builds the institutional foundation for the next.

Finally, this framing helps explain why so many ILM interventions fail to produce lasting change. If the process was designed around consensus, it likely produced an outcome that the most powerful actors could live with – which means it did not shift the system's heading. If it was designed around dialogue, it likely improved relationships without redistributing power. Only a process designed around deliberation and compromise – one that surfaces conflict, confronts trade-offs, and requires real concessions – has a chance of producing the kind of shift that ILM is supposed to deliver.

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Landscape multi-functionality and trade-offs

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Key take-aways

- Conventional landscape multifunctionality treats trade-offs as a biophysical optimization problem – but the real trade-offs in ILM are in the power domain, where any heading shift creates winners and losers.
- Power has two faces: redistribution (who gets to act) and capacity (the tenure, voice, authority and material resources that make action possible) – and any well-designed intervention works both at once.
- ‘Benefit-sharing’ framings typically obscure cost-sharing: the powerful externalize costs to others, and forcing those costs to be internalized is the heart of the trade-off, not an afterthought.
- Losers from any heading shift will resist, and the system’s institutional infrastructure will work to snap back to its prior configuration – so trade-offs must be confronted honestly, not optimized away.
- Designing your alt-heading is designing a different distribution of power, benefits and costs – there is no neutral design, and pretending otherwise produces interventions that the system absorbs without changing.

Background

Much landscape literature focuses on landscape multifunctionality – the joint supply of several ecosystem services at the landscape scale. Understanding the synergies and trade-offs between these services is, it is argued, essential to designing land-use systems that increase provision of desired services while maintaining or restoring biodiversity.¹

1 Jay and Plieninger, 2025.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

The trade-offs, then, focus on, for example:

- Land-use competition: agriculture vs conservation, production vs protection, intensive vs extensive use.
- Ecosystem service trade-offs: provisioning services (food, timber) vs regulating services (water quality, carbon storage) vs cultural services.
- Spatial optimization: where to locate which functions to maximize overall landscape benefits.
- Temporal trade-offs: short-term productivity vs long-term sustainability.

This framing treats landscapes as portfolios where different functions compete for space and resources, and the challenge is finding the optimal allocation or configuration. The underlying logic is often technocratic: if we can map the functions, model the interactions, and identify the Pareto frontiers, we can design better landscapes.

Re-framing trade-offs

We agree that landscapes are multi-functional. As we have argued elsewhere in this Playbook, however, landscape condition depends on the people who influence and exploit it. We cannot resolve biophysical trade-offs without engaging (human) distributional and power dimensions. This raises some important considerations.

If you go back to our page on systems, you will remember that we see landscapes as complex systems; within human systems, power dynamics serve to pattern these systems; these patterns emerge as particular sets of human practices. If we judge the system's heading to be undesirable, we need to focus on these (and not only biophysical or ecosystem properties), and consider the ways in which we might gain a shift by influencing its power dynamics.

Power as redistribution

Any shift in a system's heading redistributes power. If one group of people is empowered, then another group is disempowered. This is not necessarily a bad thing – it may be exactly what we need to create a system shift. It is, however, a trade-off, and it needs to be understood as such.

This can have important strategic implications for the implementation of your intervention, which need to be thought through – the group being disempowered will almost certainly resist, and empowering marginalized groups threatens powerful actors who benefit from current arrangements.

Traditional literature often frames this in positive terms: 'benefit-sharing' – in our systems thinking, this would be like Actor A only sharing those benefits that will not disturb its predominance in the system. It seems unlikely that it would because this is contrary to its interests. Thus, the 'benefits' shared are superficial and symbolic. In any case, close attention should be paid to 'cost-sharing' – i.e., the 'externalities' created by Actor A that have to be shouldered by other actors in the system. For example, perhaps



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Actor A pollutes local streams, a cost that downstream communities have to address. At a larger scale, a country that focuses on hydropower development exports associated ecological problems, changes to the river's hydrology and reductions to the river's sediment load to downstream countries who share the same river system. The powerful are often those who have successfully externalized costs. Shifting this – making polluters pay, making extractive industries internalize environmental damage, or having their products reflect the 'true' costs of production – challenges existing power distributions.

Power as capacity

Power can also be understood as a prerequisite for agency – the material resources and structural conditions that agents need in order to act. These include decision-making authority, voice in policy, enforcement capability, market access, information, legal standing, and collective organization. Without these, agents cannot change their practices even if they want to.

For example:

- A community cannot adopt 'sustainable land use' if they lack tenure security (a capacity deficit).
- A county officer cannot enforce protections if politicians override them (redistribution at work).
- Farmers cannot shift practices if traders control market access (a capacity constraint).

These two dimensions – power as redistribution and power as capacity – are not separate problems; they are two faces of the same intervention. Strengthening a community's tenure security (a capacity move) simultaneously weakens the discretionary authority of those who previously controlled access (a redistributive move). This is why conventional trade-off analysis, conducted in the biophysical domain of ecosystem services and land-use optimization, misses the point. The real trade-offs in ILM are in the power domain. Any intervention that seeks to shift a system's heading will create winners and losers. The losers – typically those who benefit from current arrangements – will resist, and the system's institutional infrastructure will work to restore its prior configuration (the 'snap-back effect' discussed elsewhere in this Playbook). Framing this as 'benefit-sharing' obscures more than it reveals: it implies that the powerful will voluntarily redistribute without cost to themselves, which is contrary to their interests and rarely observed in practice. Designing your [alt-heading](#) means designing a different distribution of power, benefits and costs. This is not a problem to be optimized away. It is the central political reality of landscape intervention, and it must be confronted honestly if the intervention is to have any chance of shifting the system rather than being absorbed by it. How these trade-offs are navigated is addressed in our discussion on [Compromise](#).

References and further reading

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PART 4 **Investment**



Investment and Integrated Landscape Management

[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

The central proposition

Integrated Landscape Management (ILM) begins from the landscape. Much conventional project preparation starts with a proposed asset or activity and asks what conditions it needs to succeed. ILM reverses the entry point: it starts with the territory and asks what a place needs, what it can support and what it will tolerate, allowing those answers to shape what is invested in, where, in what sequence and alongside what else. Applied from the outset, a landscape reading can shape the investment and the wider package around it. Applied to an asset already chosen, it can still help identify and strengthen the conditions and complementary measures on which performance depends. Its distinctive value comes earlier, as a design principle rather than a safeguard added to a decision already taken.

This argument applies beyond revenue-generating infrastructure. Conservation, restoration, livelihood support and other public-purpose investments also depend on conditions beyond their immediate boundary: rights and resource access, local institutions, ecological processes, market conditions where relevant, relationships among actors and the capacity to sustain useful functions after external funding ends.

A landscape reading brings those dependencies into view early enough to shape design. It helps a donor, financier or national institution decide what belongs in the funded package, which partners and capabilities are required, which risks need to be addressed through complementary measures and what should remain open to learning during implementation.

See this in practice

CAMBODIA: The Tonle Sap brief shows why important drivers can lie outside any one mandate, making coordination across protected areas, fisheries, fire management and livelihoods part of delivery.

TIMOR-LESTE: The Maloa brief shows how urban infrastructure and resilience depend on the upstream watershed and on a local institution able to connect the catchment.

These briefs are evidence summaries and illustrations, not independent causal impact evaluations.¹

¹ The examples in the "See this in practice" sections are drawn from the Landscapes For Our Future country brief series (forthcoming). The briefs provide contextual evidence and illustrations rather than independent causal evaluations.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

What a landscape reading adds

Good project appraisal already assesses environmental and social impacts, engages stakeholders, considers cumulative effects and adapts mitigation as evidence emerges.² A landscape reading can nevertheless add two distinct elements. The first is its entry point. Project-level appraisal generally takes a proposed asset or activity as its starting point and reads its effects outward onto surrounding receptors. A landscape reading starts from the territory and reads inward – what the place needs, what it can bear, and how power shapes decisions over land and water – before asking whether this is the right intervention. Applied early, this reading can expose a potential white elephant: an asset that may be technically sound but poorly matched to the needs and political economy of the place.³

The second is integration. Project appraisal may draw on separate environmental, social, gender and cumulative-impact studies, often produced by different specialists. A landscape reading interprets this evidence as one account of a territory and its dynamics, making relationships visible that no single study owns. ILM therefore provides a common frame for connecting specialist findings rather than another study to add to them.

From an asset to an investment package

Bankability depends on conditions around the asset

Bankability is one lens on this argument and a useful one for a financier. It is a benefit of reading the landscape rather than the reason to do so. Bankability is a lender's test: can future revenues be expected with sufficient confidence to service the financing? Within that assessment, the asset remains central, but many conditions that make its revenues possible sit outside the asset boundary. A road's traffic depends on the economy, land use, feeder infrastructure and maintenance around it. A plant's offtake depends on demand, grid performance and institutions. A landscape frame turns those conditions into findings to be investigated rather than assumptions left outside the transaction.

This is the useful sense in which a landscape can be described as 'bankable'. The landscape itself does not become a financial asset. Rather, the conditions on which assets depend are understood, strengthened and, where appropriate, financed as part of the investment package.

2 See IFC 2012 and EIB 2022 for established requirements and standards concerning environmental and social risk assessment, stakeholder engagement, cumulative impacts and adaptive management.

3 On the political economy of "white elephant" projects, see Robinson and Torvik 2005.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

The public component becomes specific

Some necessary conditions cannot be financed from the asset's own revenue: regulatory reform, institutional capacity, ecosystem management, livelihood support, public infrastructure, coordination or rights safeguards. Public and concessional finance can support such enabling measures. ILM helps specify which are necessary in this landscape, for this investment, rather than treating the public component as a generic accompaniment.

Power and distribution are investment variables

Investment changes access to resources and opportunity. Who gains, who loses and who can influence the arrangement therefore matter to durability as well as to equity. Where benefits concentrate while costs are borne by those with little power, contestation and non-cooperation can become investment risks. A landscape reading makes rights, power and benefit distribution part of preparation rather than issues discovered after design.

Infrastructure enters a living system

Infrastructure is always placed in a landscape, but it is rarely planned from one. The deeper the asset reconfigures land use, access, practices or power, the more important the landscape reading becomes. ILM adds most value where effects cross administrative or ecological boundaries; where an asset is long-lived, difficult to reverse or transformative; where several institutions must act together; or where social, livelihood, governance and environmental measures are essential to performance.

This is not only a matter of how deeply the landscape is read, but of when the reading begins. The more an asset will reshape a place, the more important it is for the reading to precede the choice of asset rather than merely accompany it. Where an intervention is genuinely self-contained, a lighter reading may be sufficient. The distinctive value of a landscape lens comes from being applied before the design is fixed, when it can still change what is built. This separates it from a longer checklist applied to a decision already taken.

See this in practice

COLOMBIA: The Ciénaga Grande brief shows how water governance, community legitimacy and formal institutionalization became part of the investment-enabling system.

PARAGUAY: The Cerro Chovoreca brief shows how rights, remoteness, facilitation and public administration presence altered what could be achieved and in what sequence.

ECUADOR: The Simiátug brief shows how water security connected rights, livelihoods and a legally recognized Water Protection Area.



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

The effects often exceed the project footprint

Roads make this visible. Their direct footprint is only a small part of their effect: access can trigger secondary roads, settlement, extraction, land-value change and new patterns of resource use far beyond a corridor. Hydropower creates a different form of system effect: individual dams may appear sound while their combined effects alter a river basin's flood pulse, sediment, fisheries and downstream economies.⁴ The practical lesson is not that roads or dams should not be built. It is that cumulative and indirect effects need to be read at the scale at which they occur.

ILM strengthens existing appraisal

ILM does not replace engineering, cost-benefit analysis, feasibility studies, Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA), cumulative impact assessment, due diligence or safeguards. These retain their legal and technical functions. A landscape frame supplies a common system context within which their findings can speak to one another and inform design.

The difference is not only one of sequence and scope, but of unit and entry point. A feasibility study asks whether a defined asset can be built and operated; an impact assessment tests the effects of a defined project on its area of influence; due diligence asks what may go wrong for the transaction. These processes generally begin with a proposed asset and may be commissioned as specialist workstreams. A landscape reading begins from the territory – what it needs, what it can bear and how power operates within it. It reads across boundaries, sectors and separately financed activities, and interprets the specialist studies as a connected account. It can therefore ask whether anything should be built at all, and what should be designed, complemented, relocated, distributed or avoided, before the asset is fixed. This differs from assessing the impacts and compliance of an already-defined project.

There is a further reason the entry point matters, and it is not resolved by drawing a larger boundary. Each of these instruments works by turning a place into quantities, and it is that conversion that gives their findings standing with the ministries and financiers who will accept a measured figure and set aside a judgement. For a bounded asset this serves well enough, because a project's first-order effects are broadly countable. But as the boundary widens to take in associated facilities, induced development and cumulative effects, what falls inside it becomes less countable, not more: second- and third-order effects in a living system are non-linear and contingent on behaviour and power, and do not resolve into defensible numbers.

See this in practice

CAMEROON: The Benoué brief shows multiple land uses and mandates competing in the same territory, requiring negotiated trade-offs and coordination.

VIET NAM: The Central Highlands brief shows how a commodity system links forests, water, farmer practices, public policy and private demand.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA: The Enga brief shows why formal planning and customary authority have to be read together in a high-risk operating environment.

⁴ See Foster et al. 2023 and Vilela et al. 2020 on the wider development and land-use effects of roads, and Hecht et al. 2019 on the cumulative hydrological effects of Mekong hydropower.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

The demand for quantification hardens as the stakes rise, even as the quantifiability falls away – leaving the assessor either to manufacture a false precision that becomes a contest of rival models, or to offer an experienced reading that the framework sets aside the moment it is not a number. A landscape reading is built for exactly this point. It does not abandon measurement; it places it – quantifying what can be quantified, reasoning systemically where numbers cannot reach, and being explicit about the join between them. Structured sensing, triangulation across independent sources and openness about uncertainty are what make that reading accountable, rather than the more elaborate guess a wider quantitative study would produce.

Scale should fit the landscape

Large assets are not inherently wrong, and small investments are not inherently safe. The relevant comparison includes economies of scale, cumulative effects, reversibility, coordination costs, distribution of benefit and the landscape's capacity to absorb change. In some landscapes a large asset will be the best fit. In others, a distributed portfolio of smaller interventions may spread risk, permit learning before commitment becomes irreversible and better match local social and ecological conditions.

Where investments are distributed, they still need to be patterned as a portfolio. Individually sound projects can compete for the same water, labour or land, or create cumulative pressures that no single appraisal detects. Landscape-scale design asks how investments should be sited, sequenced and combined so that they reinforce rather than undermine one another.

Read the landscape before design is fixed

The steps below show how to read power and need, integrate evidence and understand the territory before an asset is fixed. Several activities overlap with safeguards and conventional preparation. What makes this an ILM sequence is its landscape-first entry point and its attention to relationships across boundaries, sectors and separately financed activities. The steps are cumulative but not rigid: sensing continues throughout, later learning can send the team back to earlier questions, and the depth of each step should be proportionate to the decision.

See this in practice

KENYA: The RangER brief illustrates how team and partner capability, county institutions, community conservancies and conflict management form part of the operating conditions for investment.

LAO PDR: The ECILL brief shows why sustained relationships across village, provincial and national levels can become a core delivery capability.

MAURITIUS: The Ridge to Reef brief shows that national institutions can lead ILM directly, while still needing cross-sector convening capacity.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

STEP	WHAT IT DOES
1. Scope the landscape	Establish the provisional system boundary, the mosaic of sub-landscapes, the main social, economic, environmental and governance conditions, and the key uncertainties. This first reading can already indicate whether the proposal should continue unchanged, be reframed or pause for deeper inquiry.
2. Compose the team	Ensure the preparation team has the capabilities the landscape requires: technical and financial expertise alongside governance analysis, facilitation, local knowledge, language, relational skills and the ability to read power and practice.
3. Enter and engage	Build relationships with rights-holders, authorities, communities, private actors and other stakeholders. Bilateral engagement before convening can surface interests and power differences that formal consultation may conceal.
4. Deepen the diagnostic	Map the actual regulatory architecture, power relations, practices, livelihoods, ecological conditions and interaction spaces that will determine how the landscape responds to investment.
5. Identify opportunity points and tolerance	Ask where investment can act productively, what the landscape can absorb, which trade-offs cannot be designed away and what remains uncertain. Modelling may be used where useful, but to generate propositions rather than predictions.
6. Design the package	Define the core investment together with the governance, livelihood, environmental and institutional measures required around it. State what each component is expected to do and what evidence would indicate that the proposition needs revision.
7. Implement, monitor and adapt	Track not only delivery but the landscape's response, including surprises, ripple effects and cumulative risks. Adjust the components that remain changeable through agreed review and approval processes.
8. Iterate, deepen and sustain	Revisit the design at defined intervals and plan early for the functions, capabilities, finance and institutional arrangements that need to persist after project closure.

The assessment informs a decision, not just a report

The value of the assessment lies in what it changes. Depending on the evidence, a proposal may proceed, be redesigned, relocated, distributed across several interventions, deferred while important uncertainties are resolved, or stopped. A negative conclusion is a legitimate result where the proposed investment is poorly matched to the landscape.

The questions that matter at each review point are practical: What does this intervention depend on beyond its immediate boundary? Which of those conditions can the investment influence? What belongs in the funded package? Who must be involved or protected? What remains uncertain? What can still be changed? What must persist after closure?



PART 1 Introduction

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Funding design is part of the landscape system

The donor is not outside the system. Funding rules shape incentives, time horizons, reporting behaviour, team composition and the room an intervention has to learn. ILM therefore asks not only how an investment is implemented, but whether the funding architecture supports the behaviour the intervention requires.

Make stated objectives and operating incentives point in the same direction

Geopolitical positioning, supply-chain security, visibility, climate objectives, biodiversity and community resilience can all be legitimate objectives. Problems arise when calls, budgets, incentives and accountability frameworks hold implementers to one goal while rewarding another. The operating logic of the funding instrument will shape behaviour more strongly than the rhetoric around it.

Accountability and adaptation are not alternatives

Fiduciary, legal and safeguard accountability are non-negotiable. The challenge is to design accountability so that it protects funds, rights and public purpose while permitting structured learning and authorized revision. Logframes and similar results frameworks can remain useful high-level accountability structures, particularly where they distinguish fixed obligations from propositions that may need to be revised as evidence accumulates.

For landscape work, the practical question is not whether to have indicators or a results framework, but how to prevent them from freezing inquiry. Useful arrangements include an adaptive inception phase, a living theory of change, revisable indicators and activities within agreed limits, scheduled decision points, proposition and decision logs, contingency provisions, narrative explanation of what changed and why, and a clear change-control process through which material revisions are authorized.⁵

This allows learning and accountability to advance together. The implementing team remains accountable for what it spends, what it delivers, the rights and safeguards it must respect and the decisions it takes. It is also expected to show what the landscape did in response, what was learned and why evidence justifies any proposed change.

See this in practice

SENEGAL: The RIPOSTES brief links restoration to local land-use planning, community management and value chains, illustrating how ecological and economic measures can be designed together.

SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE: The Obô brief shows a partnership divided by expertise rather than geography, connecting agroforestry around the park with biodiversity work inside it.

ZIMBABWE: The Gonarezhou brief illustrates bottom-up planning, adaptive facilitation and exploration of longer-term finance beyond the donor project cycle.

⁵ For critiques of rigid logframe use and approaches that preserve accountability while supporting learning, see Gasper 2000 and Hummelbrunner 2010.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Fund an inception period in which the package can be refined

Calls need not require applicants to have completed a full landscape assessment before submission. They can define the public objective, territory, legal and safeguard guardrails and decisions that remain open, while requiring a credible preliminary understanding and a team capable of doing the deeper work. An inception and sensing phase can then refine the causal problem, system boundary, partnership and intervention package before major commitments are locked.

Select for capability, not false certainty

Strong partners combine technical competence with long-term presence, trusted relationships, facilitation and governance capability, local knowledge and the disposition to treat plans as propositions rather than predictions. Where no embedded partner exists, the funding instrument needs to allow time for those relationships and capabilities to be built.

What wider LFF programme learning adds

The investment papers make the case from investment logic, evidence and the Playbook method.⁶ Wider LFF programme learning adds a useful calibration for programme or project design. Process functions such as stakeholder engagement, shared direction, facilitation and iterative learning can be strengthened across very different political and institutional settings when they are deliberately supported. Formal institutionalization and post-project continuity are harder: they depend more heavily on political commitment, administrative capacity, cross-sector relationships, legal frameworks and continuing finance that a time-bound project cannot simply manufacture.⁷

The design implication is to calibrate ambition. Cross-sector coordination needs explicit architecture rather than an assumption that proximity or goodwill will produce it. Institutional anchoring and successor finance should be planned early, while recognizing that in difficult settings a realistic objective may be to strengthen the preconditions for institutionalization rather than promise a formal outcome within the project period.

⁶ The four investment papers are Geheb 2026a, 2026b, 2026c and 2026d.

⁷ This section summarizes George Schoneveld's 2026 internal analysis of implementation and outcome conditions across the LFF portfolio, supplemented by the LFF country briefs and case-study materials.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

What good investment preparation looks like

An ILM-informed investment is not defined by a new compliance label. It is visible in the quality of its preparation and the way it is funded.

- The conditions on which performance depends have been investigated rather than assumed.
- The asset or core activity is designed together with the complementary governance, livelihood, environmental and institutional measures it requires.
- Rights, power, benefit distribution and potential losers are visible in the analysis and influence design.
- The team has the capabilities and relationships needed to work in the landscape, not only the technical skills needed to deliver the asset.
- Existing appraisal, ESIA, due diligence and safeguard instruments retain their functions but are connected through a common territorial reading.
- The depth of assessment is proportionate to how transformative, cross-boundary, irreversible and institutionally dependent the investment is.
- Monitoring tracks implementation and system response, with authorized routes for evidence-based adaptation.
- Continuity is treated as a design question from the outset: which functions, capabilities, relationships and finance must remain when project funding ends?

The opportunity

Many investment and programme models already recognize that a core asset or activity depends on more than itself. ILM reverses the order of enquiry: it begins from the territory rather than the asset, examines how power shapes whose needs count and which options are pursued, and interprets separate assessments as one account before the design is set. ILM complements existing investment models and safeguards by placing them within an earlier territorial frame and connecting findings that might otherwise remain separate.

The immediate opportunity is therefore practical: move the reading of the landscape towards the front of preparation; compose teams to carry it out; use the findings to specify the funded package; and keep implementation open to evidence from the landscape through normal review and approval processes.

The aim is not to promise certainty in a complex system, nor simply to help a chosen investment perform. It is to bring a territory's needs, tolerances and power relations into view early enough to shape what is invested in, and how – so that the investment better fits the landscape and the package around it is designed rather than assumed.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

References

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PART 5 **Evidence**



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Adaptivity

Adaptive management was widespread across the portfolio in practice and almost entirely absent from project design documents. Project teams responded to droughts, floods, fires, leadership changes, regulatory reversals, partner withdrawals, and the pandemic with continuous reconfiguration of activities, partnerships, and timelines. Few of these adaptations were planned for; few were systematically captured; almost none were rewarded by donor reporting frameworks.

Forms of adaptivity

The forms of adaptivity observed were diverse.

- **Operational adaptivity** – adjusting field activities to changing conditions – was the most common: rerouting patrols around new conflict zones, switching demonstration crops in response to seasonal failure, holding meetings remotely during pandemic restrictions, shifting from in-person training to peer-to-peer learning when logistics collapsed.
- **Partnership adaptivity** – reconfiguring the consortium when an implementing partner withdrew, lost capacity, or proved misaligned – appeared in several projects, sometimes formalised through contract revisions, more often handled informally at country level.
- **Strategic adaptivity** – recognising that the original theory of change was wrong, and reorienting accordingly – was rarer but appeared in projects where leadership had the authority to redirect substantively. In one case, this took the form of a delegated authority model in which the country team had standing permission from the consortium to vary activities within defined boundaries, accelerating response time considerably.

Two structural conditions repeatedly enabled or constrained adaptivity. The first was **donor flexibility at desk officer level**. Where a desk officer was empowered to permit no-cost extensions, contract revisions, budget reallocations, and substantive changes to logframe indicators, projects were able to act on emerging conditions. Several projects benefited from desk officers who attended steering committees as peers rather than as supervisors, who sought to understand operational realities, and who actively used their authority to remove blockages. Where the desk officer relationship was distant, transactional, or compliance-focused, the same projects were unable to make even minor adjustments without protracted negotiation. The variation across the portfolio in this respect was striking – and it appeared more determined by individual desk officers than by donor policy.

The second structural condition was **logframe lock-in**. Projects whose logframes specified outputs in detailed, quantitative form found themselves committed to delivering those outputs even when implementation experience revealed them to be inappropriate, counterproductive, or simply infeasible in the conditions encountered. The logframe became a constraint on learning rather than a tool for it. Several projects ran multiple parallel monitoring frameworks – the donor's logframe for compliance, the implementing partner's results framework for internal accountability, and informal team-level tracking for actual learning – at



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

considerable transaction cost. The Playbook's argument for proposition logging as an alternative finds support in this evidence: project teams were already keeping informal records of what they were trying, why, and what they were finding, but had no recognised vehicle for capturing this systematically.

A third pattern is **the brittleness produced by compliance procedures**. Procurement rules, financial reporting requirements, audit cycles, and registration regimes each absorbed substantial team time and constrained the speed at which adaptive responses could be implemented. In several cases, the time required to formally approve an adaptation exceeded the window in which the adaptation would have been useful. Adaptivity, in other words, was not only a matter of authorisation but of speed.

A fourth observation is that **adaptive practice rarely translates into systematised learning**. Project teams adapted continuously but had limited venues for stepping back from adaptation to ask what their cumulative adjustments revealed about the original theory of change. Where such venues existed – periodic learning missions, mid-term reviews oriented toward inquiry rather than compliance, peer exchanges between country teams – the learning was substantial. Where they did not, adaptation remained tacit and was lost when team members rotated.

The portfolio supports the Playbook's positioning of adaptivity as a system property rather than a technique: it depends on the structural conditions (donor flexibility, logframe design, compliance burden) as much as on team disposition. ([See the Adaptivity section](#)).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Compromise and deliberation

The portfolio offers consistent evidence that compromise – the negotiated, partial, often uncomfortable accommodation among actors with incompatible interests – is the substance of ILM in operation, and that the deliberative systems through which compromise is reached are the most important institutional infrastructure projects can build or strengthen.

Across the portfolio, **multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) were the most common deliberative instrument**, and their performance varied widely. The strongest MSPs were those built on pre-existing structures – district development committees, water user associations, conservancy boards, traditional councils, sector working groups – that had standing convening authority and an established pattern of meeting. Projects worked through these platforms, strengthened their facilitation, broadened their composition, and improved the quality of their deliberation. The weakest MSPs were those invented for the project alone: convened to satisfy a logframe indicator, populated with whoever could be assembled, and dissolved when the project ended. The MSP form is not the variable; what matters is whether the platform has standing in the wider system.

A second pattern is that **deliberation requires sustained facilitation**. The MSPs that produced durable outcomes had skilled facilitators – sometimes from the project, sometimes from neutral third parties – who managed agenda-setting, ensured marginalised voices were heard, surfaced disagreements rather than papering over them, and held the platform to its decisions between meetings. Where facilitation was weak or absent, MSPs defaulted to the dominant voices in the room: traditional authorities, government officials, and the largest private sector actors. The deliberative form was preserved; the deliberative substance was not.

A third pattern is that **compromise was rarely durable when reached on terms that excluded affected actors**. In several landscapes, agreements between governments, NGOs, and visible community leaders failed in implementation because the actors whose practices needed to shift – pastoralists moving across the agreement's boundaries, fishers operating informally, women managing the resources the agreement covered, youth excluded from the negotiation – had not been parties to the deal. The compromise looked credible on paper and unravelled in the field. Where deliberative systems included these actors from the outset, the resulting agreements were narrower in ambition but broader in reach.

A fourth observation is that **deliberation is itself a power-laden activity**. Who is invited, who chairs, what language is used, when meetings are held, where they are held, what is on the agenda, what is recorded, and what is allowed to be raised – each of these shapes what compromise is possible. Several projects encountered MSPs that were technically inclusive but substantively dominated by a small number of actors whose comfort with formal procedure, fluency in the relevant languages, and standing in government allowed them to set the terms of discussion. The remediation in such cases was not a better invitation list but a redesign of the deliberative process itself: smaller breakout groups, vernacular facilitation, separate convenings for marginalised actors before plenary, rotating chairs.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning
& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

A fifth pattern is the **relationship between deliberation and time**. Compromise that emerged quickly was often shallow.

Compromise that emerged slowly – sometimes over years of repeated convening – was often substantial. Projects with three-to-five year timelines and rigid annual milestones struggled to give deliberative systems the time they needed. Projects with longer horizons or programmatic continuity beyond a single project cycle gave compromise the time to consolidate. The Playbook's framing of integration as a system state passing through conflict, cooperation, coordination, collaboration and community is consistent with this evidence: passage between states takes time and cannot be compressed.

A final observation: **compromise sometimes consists of agreeing not to act**. In several landscapes, the most consequential deliberative outcome was a decision to defer a contested intervention, to hold a position rather than to advance it, or to acknowledge that the available actor configuration could not support a more ambitious step. These outcomes are difficult to capture in conventional reporting, which rewards activity rather than restraint. They are nonetheless important products of functional deliberative systems. ([See the Compromise section](#)).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Intervention design

The portfolio is rich in evidence about how interventions are actually designed and what makes them succeed or fail – and the consistent finding is that **the formal design moment is rarely where the intervention is decided**. Interventions emerge through accretion: a sequence of consultations, foments, partnership negotiations, donor expectations, partner capacities, and contextual constraints that together produce something different from what the original design document specified. The Playbook's eight-step sequence is therefore better understood not as a recipe for a single design event, but as an ongoing discipline applied iteratively as conditions change.

Several patterns emerge from the portfolio. The first is that **interventions inherited from prior programmes consolidate faster** than those designed from scratch. Where a project built on existing community structures, value chains, monitoring systems, or institutional relationships, the design phase was effectively shortened – much of the contextual reading had already been done, and the intervention could begin with operational activity rather than with stakeholder mapping. Where the project assembled a new design from scratch, the first year (sometimes the first two) was often consumed by preparatory work that produced limited tangible output. Programmatic continuity is, in this sense, a design instrument.

The second pattern is that **value chains and livelihood activities were the most reliable entry point**. Whatever the project's headline objective – biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation, peacebuilding, watershed restoration – the interventions that reached scale were almost always anchored in a tangible economic activity that improved livelihoods. Cocoa, groundnut, mangrove honey, livestock, ecotourism, agroforestry products, savings groups: these were the practical handholds through which more abstract objectives became operational. Projects that began with the abstract objective and tried to reach the livelihood through it tended to struggle. Projects that began with the livelihood and built the broader objective around it tended to succeed.

The third pattern is that **the original theory of change was almost always wrong in some respect**. This is not a criticism: theories of change are propositions, and propositions are trialled precisely so that they can be modified to be a better fit for purpose. The problem is that most projects had no mechanism for revising their theory of change in light of implementation experience. The original logic – sometimes constructed under pandemic conditions with limited field input, sometimes assembled in capital cities by consultants with little landscape experience, sometimes inherited from a donor's strategic framework – became frozen in the logframe and was treated as the standard against which performance was measured. Where projects had explicit permission to revise their theory of change at mid-term, this produced substantial gains. Where they did not, the theory of change persisted as fiction long after team members had ceased to believe in it.

The fourth pattern is the **importance of sequencing**. Several projects launched multiple parallel interventions in the first year and discovered later that some interventions depended on others having matured first. A grievance mechanism, for example, depends on stakeholder trust having been established; a multi-stakeholder platform depends on the platform's purpose having been identified; a market intervention depends on production capacity having been built. Projects that sequenced their interventions



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

deliberately – beginning with relational work, then institutional, then technical, then market – tended to produce more durable results than projects that ran all components in parallel.

The fifth pattern is the **role of demonstration and proof of concept**. In several projects, an early visible success – a successful crop trial, a functional water point, a profitable savings group, a wildlife-spotting tourism launch – generated demand from neighbouring communities and gave political cover for further work. In others, the absence of an early demonstrable success undermined credibility and made subsequent activities harder. Designing for an early, visible, modest success appears to be a discipline rather than a luxury.

A final observation: the portfolio repeatedly shows that **intervention design is itself a power-laden activity**. Whose theory of change is tested? Whose assumptions structure the logframe? Whose practices are deemed in need of change, and whose are taken as the baseline? These questions were rarely surfaced explicitly, but the choices made at design stage often carried into implementation as silent commitments that shaped what could subsequently be questioned. The Playbook's emphasis on positionality, on co-design with community actors, and on proposition logging as a vehicle for revision finds support in this evidence. ([See the Intervention Design section](#)).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Guidance for donors

The portfolio offers extensive evidence on how donor configurations shape what projects can do, and the consistent finding is that **donor behaviour is the single most influential variable that ILM project design cannot itself control**. Across 22 projects in 19 countries, variation in donor practice – sometimes within the same donor – explained as much variation in implementation outcomes as differences in landscape, partner, or theory of change.

Several patterns recur. The first is the **decisive role of the desk officer**. Where a desk officer attended steering committees as a peer rather than as a supervisor, sought to understand operational realities, used their authority to enable no-cost extensions and contract revisions, and engaged with substantive content rather than only with compliance, projects were able to navigate adversity, seize opportunities, and adapt to changing conditions. Where the desk officer relationship was distant, transactional, or compliance-focused, the same projects were unable to make even minor adjustments without protracted negotiation. The variation across the portfolio in this respect was striking – and it appeared to be more determined by individual desk officers than by donor policy. Donor agencies should consider that their operational character is, in practice, the character of their desk officers.

A second pattern is the **mismatch between funding instruments and ILM timescales**. ILM operates on the timescales of relational trust, institutional change, and ecological response – typically a decade or more. Funding instruments operate on the timescales of project cycles – typically three to five years. This mismatch is structural. The most productive projects in the portfolio were those operating in their second, third, or fourth iteration of a programmatic engagement, where the formal project was a discrete funding episode within a longer institutional relationship. Standalone projects without prior or subsequent programmatic continuity rarely produced durable outcomes within a single cycle. Donors that fund programmes – explicitly resourcing the continuity between projects – get better returns than donors that fund projects in isolation.

A third pattern is the **constraint imposed by logframe rigidity**. Donor logframes specifying outputs in detailed quantitative form constrained projects' ability to respond to what they encountered. Where indicators proved inappropriate, the formal mechanism for revising them was slow, contested, and often abandoned in favour of working around the problem informally. Several projects ran multiple parallel monitoring frameworks at considerable transaction cost. Donors that permit logframe revision at mid-term, that accept narrative reporting alongside indicator reporting, and that recognise proposition logging or equivalent qualitative learning instruments produce better-managed projects than donors that do not.

A fourth pattern is the **exclusionary effect of registration and procurement requirements**. In several landscapes, donor requirements for formal legal registration of community partners, for international procurement standards, or for fiduciary structures beyond the capacity of local organisations had the effect of excluding the actors whose engagement was most necessary. Communities, customary authorities, women's groups, youth associations, and informal economic actors were screened out by procedures designed to protect public funds. The protection achieved was often disproportionate to the implementation cost. Donors should consider whether their fiduciary architecture is functioning as a filter against the actors their programmes are intended to reach.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

A fifth pattern is the **counterproductive effect of contradictory donor portfolios**. Several projects encountered situations in which the same donor financed activities that worked against the project's objectives elsewhere in the same landscape – supporting cotton expansion in a conservation zone, funding infrastructure that fragmented a corridor the project was working to connect, financing extractive industry adjacent to areas the project was supporting communities to manage. These contradictions were rarely visible at desk officer level; they emerged from the wider donor portfolio whose components were not coordinated. Internal donor coordination across thematic windows is itself a form of integration that ILM would benefit from.

A sixth pattern is the **emergent practice of pandemic-era projects**. Several projects in the portfolio were designed during the pandemic, with limited field consultation and largely remote inception. These projects' theories of change were often inadequate at design stage and required substantial revision in early implementation. Donors that recognised this and permitted early redesign produced much better outcomes than donors that treated the original design as binding. This is an instance of a more general point: donors that distinguish between the design phase and the implementation phase, and that resource genuine learning between the two, get better projects than donors that treat the design as a contract.

A final observation: **donors are themselves landscapes**. Their internal politics, their changing strategic priorities, their leadership transitions, their compliance cultures, and their relationships with national governments shape what they can do as much as the operational reality on the ground shapes what implementing partners can do. Projects that read the donor as an actor in the system – with its own interests, constraints, opportunities, and contradictions – were able to engage more effectively than projects that treated the donor as a fixed external context. The Playbook's framing applies equally to donors: they are part of the system they fund. ([See the Guidance for Donors section](#)).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Integration

The Landscapes For Our Future portfolio provided consistent evidence that integration – the shift from fragmented, one-way regulation toward coordinated, bidirectional exchange among landscape actors – is both the central promise and the central challenge of ILM.

The most common condition observed across the portfolio was disintegration. In several Southeast Asian landscapes, responsibility for a single resource system was distributed across multiple government ministries whose mandates did not overlap and whose coordination was absent. In one wetland landscape, fisheries, water resources, zoning, and conservation each fell under separate jurisdictions – a fragmentation that appeared to serve the distribution of patronage as much as administrative efficiency. In dryland landscapes, agriculture, livestock, forestry, water and protected area management each reported to a different ministry, often with overlapping or contradictory regulations. Integration, in these settings, was not a matter of producing a new shared plan; it was a matter of creating a venue in which the existing plans could be reconciled.

A second pattern is that **water repeatedly emerged as the most effective integrator**. Where projects identified a shared water resource – a watershed, a wetland, an aquifer, an irrigation system – the otherwise dispersed interests of farmers, pastoralists, conservation authorities, sanitation services and local government converged around it. Water's capacity to integrate appears to derive, on the one hand, from its biophysical properties: it cannot be partitioned in the way that land can, its scarcity or excess affects everyone simultaneously, and its quality at one point reflects practices upstream. And on the other hand, because of its political potency. Several projects achieved their most durable integration outcomes around water governance, even when water had not been the project's headline concern. Other resource systems sometimes performed a similar role: a single dominant value chain (cocoa, groundnut), a shared protected area, a transboundary corridor.

A third pattern is that **integration is a system state rather than an output**. Across the portfolio, the operational integration encountered did not correspond to any single point on a spectrum from 'absent' to 'achieved'. Different actor configurations sat in different states at the same time: open conflict in one part of the landscape, formal cooperation in another, deep collaboration in a third. The states shifted with circumstance – a drought, an election, a price collapse, a leadership change. Projects that treated integration as a destination tended to be disappointed; those that treated it as a continuously moving condition were better positioned to work with it.

A fourth observation is the **horizontal dimension of integration**. In several landscapes, the most consequential integration challenge was not between sectors but between ethnic groups, between recent migrants and long-settled communities, between pastoralists and farmers, or between IDPs and host populations. The conventional framing – integration as a matter of coordinating ministries – risks missing this dimension entirely. Projects that recognised horizontal integration as a separate problem, requiring different instruments from sectoral integration, achieved more meaningful results.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

Finally, the portfolio confirms that **integration emerges in practice rather than from design**. Few projects had an explicit theory of integration at outset; most produced integration outcomes through accumulated activity – joint patrols, shared training, co-managed nurseries, multi-stakeholder budgeting – that gradually built relational infrastructure. Where this relational infrastructure was inherited from prior programmes, integration arrived faster. Where it was assembled from scratch, it often did not consolidate within the project's lifespan. Programmatic continuity, in this sense, is itself an integration instrument. ([See the Integration section](#)).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Landscapes

The Landscapes For Our Future (LFF) portfolio offers no template for what a “landscape” is. The 22 projects worked at scales from less than 500 km² to more than 10,000 km², in territories ranging from small islands treated in their entirety as the unit of management, to single districts of a single municipality, to multi-jurisdictional mosaics spanning four counties or several departments. Some landscapes were largely intact and lightly fragmented. Others had lost more than half of their habitat extent and connectivity over a decade. Some were defined by a single dominant land use – cocoa, groundnut, cattle, mangroves – while others contained mining, pastoralism, smallholder agriculture, conservation and tourism in active competition for the same territory.

Jurisdictional configurations were equally varied. In some cases the landscape sat within a single administrative unit, simplifying the question of who held authority. In others, the landscape crossed multiple districts, communes, conservancies, or wards, each with its own elected officials, technical staff, and budget cycle. In several cases, the landscape did not correspond to any administrative boundary at all – its meaning derived from ecology (a watershed, a Ramsar site, a flooded forest system), from cultural memory (a homeland, a corridor of seasonal movement), or from the footprint of a long-running institutional presence rather than from any official map.

This variation matters because the conventional language of “landscape projects” assumes a degree of typological similarity that the evidence does not support. A small-island landscape with one government, one ecology, and a long history of donor engagement is not the same kind of object as a transboundary corridor with four counties, customary tenure, pastoralist mobility and private conservancies. The instruments that work in one setting may be irrelevant or counterproductive in the other.

Three patterns nevertheless run through the portfolio. The first is that **physical scale is a poor predictor of complexity**. Some of the smallest landscapes contained the densest stakeholder configurations and the most intractable politics; some of the largest were administratively coherent and politically stable. The second is that **the landscape was almost never inherited as a settled object**. Even where ecological boundaries seemed obvious, the operational landscape was shaped by where partners had presence, where donors permitted operation, and where governments granted access. The landscape, in other words, was an outcome of the project’s institutional and political situation rather than a precondition for it. The third is that **the most durable landscape units were those with prior institutional history**. Where a partner had worked in the territory for ten or more years – sometimes thirty – the landscape had a recognisable identity to local actors that could be built upon. Where the landscape was assembled for the project alone, it tended to dissolve when the project ended.

The implication for ILM practice is that landscape definition is itself an intervention, not a given. The boundaries chosen, the actors enrolled, the scales nested within or transcended – all are decisions that shape what is subsequently possible. The Playbook treats landscape as something to be sensed, contested, negotiated and provisionally fixed, rather than as a stable platform on which other work proceeds. The portfolio bears this out. ([See the Landscapes section](#)).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Monitoring, learning, and evaluation

The portfolio offers consistent evidence that monitoring, learning and evaluation as practised across the projects bears limited resemblance to monitoring, learning and evaluation as required by donor frameworks, and that the gap between the two is itself a determinant of project performance.

Several patterns recur. The first is **logframe lock-in**. Project logframes were typically constructed at design stage, often under conditions of limited field knowledge, and once approved were treated as standards against which performance was judged. Where implementation experience revealed indicators to be inappropriate – measuring the wrong thing, measuring at the wrong scale, measuring outputs that no longer corresponded to the intervention's actual logic – the formal mechanism for revising them was slow, contested, and often abandoned in favour of working around the problem informally. Logframes thereby ceased to be tools for management and became instruments of accountability whose relationship to actual learning was tenuous.

A second pattern is the **proliferation of monitoring frameworks**. Several projects ran multiple parallel systems: the donor's logframe for compliance, the lead implementing partner's results framework for internal accountability, sector-specific frameworks for thematic donors, country-office frameworks for organisational reporting, and informal team-level tracking for actual learning. Each framework had its own indicators, its own reporting cadence, its own data requirements, and its own audience. The transaction cost of maintaining multiple frameworks was substantial, and the coherence between them was often weak. Project teams reported spending more time on reporting than on the work being reported.

A third pattern is the **disconnect between monitoring and learning**. Monitoring data was generally collected to satisfy reporting obligations rather than to inform decision-making. Learning, where it occurred, took place in different venues – team meetings, learning missions, peer exchanges, retrospective interviews – and drew on a different evidence base, typically qualitative, narrative, and experiential. The data that flowed up to donors and the insights that informed implementation were largely separate streams, intersecting only when an evaluation was commissioned and even then often inconclusively. The Playbook's argument for proposition logging as an alternative finds support in this evidence: project teams were already keeping informal records of what they were trying, why, and what they were finding, but these records had no recognised institutional home.

A fourth pattern is the **under-capture of unintended consequences and negative findings**. Monitoring frameworks were oriented toward expected outputs and outcomes; they had no place for surprises, perversities, or failures. A water point that drew unexpected populations, a tree-planting initiative that displaced food production, a successful community enforcement effort that produced state inventory rather than community management, a certification scheme whose materials logic worked against its conservation objective – each of these consequential dynamics was sensed by project teams but did not appear in reporting until retrospective evaluation, by which point the opportunity to respond had passed.

A fifth pattern is the **value of external review when oriented toward inquiry**. Several projects reported that external monitoring missions, when conducted as inquiry rather than as compliance audit, produced findings that the team would not have reached



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

alone. Even when uncomfortable, these reviews provided a form of structured outside attention that internal monitoring could not. The same projects often reported that external review oriented toward compliance produced findings of limited use, regardless of how thoroughly conducted. The disposition of the review matters more than its rigour.

A sixth observation is that **learning across projects in the portfolio was rare**. Each project was largely on its own – encountering similar challenges, developing similar workarounds, making similar mistakes, with limited mechanisms for cross-project exchange. Where regional or programmatic learning events were held, participants reported substantial value from them. Where they were not, parallel learning was lost. The programmatic level, in this sense, has a learning function that the project level cannot perform.

A final observation: **the most consequential evaluative judgements were often made informally**, in conversations between team members, in country office discussions, in donor desk officer briefings. These judgements shaped what would be funded next, who would be retained, and what would be quietly discontinued. The formal evaluation system rarely captured these judgements; the informal system rarely produced them in writeable form. The Playbook's framing of MLE as a continuous, embedded, proposition-tracking discipline is consistent with what the portfolio reveals about how learning actually happens. ([See the MLE section](#)).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Opportunity points

The portfolio offers extensive, if often implicit, evidence that ILM advances not through linear implementation of a workplan but through the recognition and seizure of opportunities – moments at which the configuration of actors, regulations, attention or resources shifts in a way that makes a previously stuck practice newly movable. The Playbook's framing of Op-Points finds support in nearly every project, even where the language used was different.

Op-Points took several recognisable forms. The most common was the **legislative or policy window** – a new law, a revised regulation, a national strategy that, often unexpectedly, created space for activities the project had been struggling to advance. In one case, a customary tenure provision in a new natural resource law allowed community structures the project had been informally supporting to be formally recognised and entered into national legislation. In another, a revised land use planning framework gave municipal authorities new powers that the project's multi-stakeholder platform was already positioned to exercise. Such windows were rarely predictable at design stage; what mattered was that the project had cultivated the relational and technical readiness to step into them when they opened.

A second recurring form was the **crisis-induced window**. Droughts, fires, floods, displacement events, disease outbreaks, and price shocks all reorganised actor priorities in ways that briefly suspended the usual obstacles. Projects that had built credibility in the landscape over time were able to convert these moments into durable arrangements: revised grazing protocols after a severe drought, revised water allocation after a flood, new community surveillance after a wildlife crime spike. The pandemic, despite its disruption, opened windows in several landscapes for digital infrastructure, remote monitoring, and direct producer-to-buyer relationships that proved durable beyond the emergency.

A third form was the **leadership change window**. The departure of a hostile official, the arrival of a sympathetic minister, the rotation of a regional commander, the election of a new mayor – each reset the negotiation. Projects that had over-invested in personal relationships with specific officials lost ground at every turnover. Projects that had cultivated relationships across the wider institution, including with permanent civil servants, were positioned to work with new leadership rather than to start again.

A fourth, less obvious form was the **opening created by a prior failure**. In several landscapes, an earlier intervention's collapse – a borehole that drained, a regulation that proved unenforceable, a market scheme that failed – created an opening for a different approach. The conditions that had made the original approach plausible were now visibly inadequate, and stakeholders were more receptive to alternatives. Projects able to read failure as opportunity, rather than as a sunk cost to be defended, gained traction.

Two enabling conditions ran through these examples. The first was **long institutional presence**. Partners with ten or more years in the landscape recognised opportunities earlier, because they could read shifts against a longer baseline. The second was **structural flexibility in project design and funding**. Projects locked into rigid logframes, fixed annual workplans, or detailed pre-agreed deliverables were repeatedly unable to act on opportunities that did not appear in their original results matrices. Where donor desk



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning
& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

officers permitted no-cost extensions, contract revisions, or budget reallocations in response to emerging conditions, projects were able to convert opportunities into outcomes. Where they did not, opportunities were observed and lost.

The portfolio supports the Playbook's claim that opportunity is a category that ILM design must take seriously rather than treating as serendipity. Sensing capacity, relational readiness, and structural flexibility together constitute the infrastructure of opportunity. (See the Op-Points section).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Positionality

The portfolio offers strong, if often implicit, evidence that what the Playbook calls positionality – the situated, partial, interest-bearing standpoint from which any actor (including the project itself) reads and acts on the landscape – is a structural feature of ILM that conventional design rarely surfaces. Across the 22 projects, the position from which a project, a partner, a team member, or a donor stood in relation to the landscape shaped what was seen, what was deemed important, what was considered possible, and what was overlooked. Positionality was not a lapse in objectivity to be corrected; it was a constitutive feature of every reading of every situation.

Several patterns recur. The first concerns **the positionality of consortia themselves**. The composition of a project consortium determined which competencies were strong and which were absent, which institutional networks the project could mobilise, which government doors opened readily, and which communities trusted the project from the outset. A consortium led by a long-present conservation NGO read the landscape through a conservation lens; a consortium led by an agricultural research organisation read it through a productivity lens; a consortium led by a humanitarian organisation read it through a vulnerability lens. None of these readings was wrong. None was complete. The positionality of the consortium pre-structured what subsequent analysis would find. Where consortia were aware of this and built complementarity into their composition deliberately, blind spots were partially compensated. Where they were not, the consortium's collective positionality became the project's analytic horizon.

A second pattern concerns **the positionality of individual team members**. Across the portfolio, the same landscape produced markedly different readings from different team members depending on their gender, ethnicity, age, language, professional background, and length of presence. Senior international technical leads read structural and ecological features; junior local staff read kin networks, micropolitics, and emerging tensions; women team members read gendered dynamics that male colleagues did not see; ethnic-majority staff sometimes did not register dynamics that ethnic-minority staff registered immediately. Projects that treated this variation as analytic resource – bringing different readings together rather than averaging them – produced richer situational understanding than projects in which a single dominant standpoint set the team's view.

A third pattern concerns **the positionality of donors**. Donor agencies are not neutral funders; they carry strategic priorities, geopolitical alignments, sectoral preferences, and methodological commitments that shape which problems they recognise and which solutions they will finance. The same landscape, presented to two different donors, generated different theories of change because the donors read the landscape from different positions. Projects that read their donors as positioned actors – with histories, interests, and constraints – engaged more effectively than projects that treated donor framing as a neutral starting point.

A fourth pattern concerns **the positionality of communities, which is plural rather than singular**. The conventional category of “the community” disguises positions that are often in active contention: between traditional authorities and elected officials, between long-settled residents and migrants, between men and women, between elders and youth, between landed and landless, between resident and absentee landholders, between IDPs and host populations. Projects that engaged “the community” through a single



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

channel – typically through traditional authorities or through visible community leaders – engaged a particular position within the community and missed others. Projects that engaged multiple positions explicitly, often through separate convenings before plenary deliberation, surfaced the internal heterogeneity that subsequent intervention design needed to account for.

A fifth pattern concerns **the positionality of governments**. National, provincial, district, and local government were rarely aligned in their reading of the landscape. National ministries read it through sectoral mandates; provincial authorities read it through political constituency; district staff read it through implementation feasibility; locally elected officials read it through electoral calculation; permanent local civil servants read it through career continuity. These positions were not always in conflict, but they were rarely identical. Projects that engaged “government” as a single actor were repeatedly surprised by internal disagreement; projects that read government as a configuration of differently positioned actors operated with more accuracy.

A final observation: **positionality applies to the Playbook itself, and to the programme that produced it**. The Landscapes for our Future programme was funded by a particular donor with a particular strategic framework, implemented through a particular set of partners with particular institutional histories, and reflected upon by a particular research team with its own theoretical commitments. The synthesis presented here is not a view from nowhere; it is a view from a definite position. The patterns identified are real, but they are patterns visible from this position, and other positions would surface other patterns. The Playbook is most useful where readers treat it not as authoritative description but as one situated reading to be tested, contested, and complemented from their own positions.

The implication for ILM practice is that positionality is not a methodological problem to be eliminated through better procedure; it is a structural feature to be made explicit, mapped, and worked with. Reflexivity – the discipline of asking, repeatedly, *from where am I reading this, and what does that position predispose me to see and to miss* – is not an academic indulgence. It is, on the evidence of the portfolio, a practical condition for ILM that does not reproduce the blind spots of its own design. ([See the Positionality section](#)).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Power

Across the 22 projects, power was the variable most consistently present in implementation experience and most consistently absent from project design. Every project encountered power as a force shaping who was heard, whose practices counted, what was permissible, and what was rewarded. Almost none had analysed power as a variable to be characterised, mapped, and worked with from the outset.

The configurations encountered were diverse. In some landscapes, **traditional authorities** were the heaviest strand – chiefs, councils of elders, customary courts whose decisions effectively determined whether project activities could proceed at the village level. In others, **vested commercial interests** dominated: a single industry whose profitability depended on the practices the project sought to change. In still others, **organised illicit economies** shaped the territory in ways that could not be openly discussed but conditioned every interaction – drug routes, illegal logging networks, wildlife trafficking, irregular mining. **Religious institutions** controlled access to populations in some contexts and blocked entry to others. **Military or transitional governments** dissolved elected councils mid-implementation in at least two cases, removing the very structures through which the project had been engaging.

Two further patterns deserve emphasis. The first is the recurrent finding that **government turnover** is a more serious threat to continuity than any external shock. Projects that had built their relationships around elected officials lost them at every electoral cycle; projects that had invested in permanent civil servants, technical staff and decentralised institutions weathered transitions better. The second is the consistent observation that **marginalised groups – women, youth, internally displaced persons, migrant pastoralists, ethnic minorities – were the last to be consulted and the first to be excluded** when project compromises were made. This is not because project teams intended exclusion, but because the architecture of consultation rewards those who already have voice. Power's most reliable signature is who gets to speak.

Two further observations cross the portfolio. The first is that **corruption is everywhere and nowhere**. It is mentioned cautiously in nearly every project's reflective material, rarely named in public-facing documents, and almost never analysed as a structural feature of the system rather than as the conduct of individual bad actors. The Playbook's framing – corruption as a symptom of power configurations rather than a moral failing – finds support in the portfolio. Where projects engaged with this honestly, they were better positioned to design around it; where they did not, they were repeatedly surprised by the same dynamics.

The second is the existence of what one project team called '**beneficiaries of disorder**' – actors whose interests were served by the absence of the integration, peace, or rule of law that the project sought to build. Such actors were rarely overt opponents; they participated in workshops, signed declarations, and accepted training. Their resistance was expressed through delay, through informal de-prioritisation, through the quiet preservation of the status quo. Naming this dynamic, rather than treating it as project underperformance, is essential to designing interventions that account for it.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

The portfolio is consistent with the Playbook's central claim: power is not a context within which ILM operates, but a substance that ILM must engage. Projects that understood this from the outset – usually because of long institutional presence in the landscape – were better placed than those that discovered it only when the design encountered the first immovable interest. ([See the Power section](#)).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Practices and the MMCs bundle

The portfolio offers extensive evidence that practices – the recurrent, situated activities through which landscapes are made and remade – are the appropriate locus of intervention, and that the MMC framing (materials, meanings, competencies) is a useful diagnostic for why practice change succeeds or fails. The evidence is largely implicit: few projects designed around MMCs explicitly, but the conditions under which their interventions consolidated or unravelled are consistent with what the framing predicts.

Several cases illustrate what happens when an intervention reads a practice through a single MMC lens. In one wetland landscape, a campaign against an aquatic plant framed it solely as an ‘invasive species’ – a *meanings* intervention. The plant, however, served real material purposes for poorer households (fodder, soil stabilisation, livelihood income) and supported competencies (harvesting, processing, marketing) that had built up over decades. Removing the plant without addressing what would replace it materially or what those competencies would be redeployed toward produced limited compliance and rapid reinvasion. In another case, a tree-planting initiative in a dryland setting was being rationally interpreted by participants as a route to commercial timber rather than as ecological restoration. At one site, a farmer was planting project seedlings within an existing agroforestry plot, planning to remove food crops by year three as the canopy closed. The intervention was producing a land use change, not a restoration – and was potentially displacing food production. Without attending to the material implications (food security) and the meanings of the land (productive asset versus restoration site), the foment’s effects diverged from its intention.

A third case involved a certification scheme adopted as the organising concept for a conservation project. The logic was that reducing input costs for smallholders would reduce the incentive to extensify into wildlife habitat. But the materials analysis was incomplete: cheaper inputs enable *more* farming, not less, because the financial barrier to expansion has been lowered. The competency dimension was addressed (training was provided) and the meanings dimension partially addressed (premium market positioning). The materials dimension worked against the objective. The habitat the project sought to protect continued to decline.

The most effective interventions, by contrast, addressed all three MMC elements simultaneously – often intuitively rather than by design. A nocturnal wildlife-spotting tourism initiative shifted meanings (animals more valuable alive), provided materials (income, equipment), and built competencies (wildlife identification, hosting skills) in a single integrated design. Agricultural intensification programmes that combined new techniques (competencies) with irrigation infrastructure (materials) and contractual arrangements reframing land use (meanings) produced more durable practice shifts than those targeting a single element. Savings groups paired with material inputs and peer learning consistently outperformed cash-only or training-only equivalents.

A further pattern is that **landscapes with a single dominant practice or value chain** simplify the intervention design substantially. Where one economic activity organises most actors’ livelihoods – cocoa, groundnut, cattle, mangrove fisheries – the MMC analysis can be conducted with greater precision and the convergence of stakeholders is more readily achieved. Landscapes with multiple competing practices – mining, pastoralism, smallholder agriculture, conservation, tourism – require parallel MMC analyses for each,



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

and the integration challenge is correspondingly larger. This is not an argument for picking simpler landscapes; it is an argument for recognising that practice complexity is itself a design variable.

Finally, the portfolio confirms that **practices are bundles, not behaviours**. Interventions framed as awareness-raising, sensitisation, behaviour change, or capacity building tend to address one MMC element while leaving the others intact. The practice persists because the bundle persists. Where projects produced durable change, they did so by working on the bundle. ([See the Practices section](#)).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Sensing

The portfolio offers consistent evidence that what the Playbook calls sensing – the structured, ongoing, multi-source attention to what is happening in the landscape – is both essential to ILM and inadequately resourced in conventional project design. Sensing was happening across the portfolio, but mostly informally, dispersed across team members, and rarely captured in a form that could be built upon.

The most consistently effective sensing was conducted by **partners with long institutional presence**. Where a lead implementing partner had been in the landscape for ten or more years – sometimes thirty – they read change against a baseline that no incoming project could match. They knew which villages had which tensions, which officials could be relied upon, where the boundaries of customary authority lay, which seasonal patterns were normal and which signalled trouble. This depth of contextual reading was the single most valuable sensing asset across the portfolio. It was also the most fragile: it travelled with individuals rather than institutions, and was lost when staff rotated, retired, or moved on.

A second pattern is the **role of communities themselves as primary sensors**. Where projects had built genuine relational trust, communities reported emerging issues – wildlife incursions, illegal cutting, water quality changes, intra-community tensions, encroachment by outsiders – to project teams as a matter of course. This community-derived sensing was often the earliest signal of system change, predating formal monitoring data by months. Where the relationship was transactional rather than relational, this sensing channel did not function. Trust, in this sense, is sensing infrastructure.

A third pattern is the **utility of multi-sourced, triangulated sensing**. Several projects combined community reporting with ranger patrol data, satellite imagery, market price tracking, weather records, and joint operations command centre data on incidents. Where these streams were brought together – even informally, in a single team meeting – patterns emerged that no single stream revealed. Where they were kept in separate silos, each stream produced partial signals that did not aggregate into intelligence. The technology required for this kind of triangulation is generally available; the organisational practice of doing it is rarer.

A fourth pattern is the **importance of sensing structural and global conditions**, not only local ones. Several projects were affected by changes whose origins lay far outside the landscape: commodity price collapses, donor policy shifts, regional security developments, pandemic-related restrictions, regulatory reforms in capital cities. Project teams that read national newspapers, attended ministry meetings, monitored international commodity markets, and maintained relationships in capital cities anticipated these changes. Project teams that focused entirely on landscape-level signals were repeatedly surprised by them. The Playbook's "circles of explanation" – landscape practices nested within proximate, intermediary, structural, and global regulation – finds support in this evidence.

Two further observations are worth noting. The first is that **sensing of negative outcomes was systematically under-resourced**. Project monitoring frameworks captured intended outputs and outcomes; they rarely captured unintended consequences. A



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

water point that drew elephants and outsiders, a school borehole that doubled student numbers, a tree-planting initiative that displaced food crops, a successful community enforcement operation that produced a state-led inventory rather than community management – each of these consequential dynamics was sensed by project teams but had no formal home in the monitoring system. They were captured in conversations, reflective notes, and retrospective interviews – and consequently were under-recognised in real time.

The second observation is that **sensing is undermined by its own findings**. Several projects encountered evidence that their theory of change was inadequate, that an intervention was producing perverse effects, or that an actor configuration had been misread. Acting on this evidence often required logframe revisions, partner reconfigurations, or redirected expenditure that the project's structures did not easily permit. Sensing, in such cases, generated discomfort without producing change. This is the Playbook's argument for proposition logging in another form: sensing requires a vehicle for its findings.

The portfolio supports the Playbook's claim that sensing is a continuous, instrumented, multi-source activity rather than a baseline-and-endline exercise. ([See the Sensing section](#)).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Stakeholders and actors

The portfolio offers consistent evidence that the conventional distinction between ‘stakeholders’ (those with an interest) and ‘actors’ (those whose practices constitute the system) matters for how interventions are designed, and that reading stakes through the MMC bundle reveals attachments that conventional analysis misses.

Many projects produced a stakeholder map at inception. These maps typically catalogued government agencies, NGOs, private sector entities, and ‘communities’ as a single undifferentiated category. The maps were generally accurate as far as they went, but they shared a common limitation: they identified who had a formal interest, not whose practices actually shaped the landscape. The result was that consultation, training, and platform participation were directed at the visible interests, while the practices that needed to gain a system heading shift remained organised by actors who appeared lower down the map or not at all.

Across the portfolio, **the actors whose practices most directly shaped the landscape were also those least visible in conventional analysis.** Pastoralist herders moving across multiple jurisdictions, smallholder fishers operating informally, charcoal producers working at the edge of legality, migrant agricultural labourers, women managing kitchen gardens and post-harvest processing, youth excluded from formal landholding, internally displaced persons settling in marginal lands – these were repeatedly the actors whose decisions cumulatively determined whether the landscape’s trajectory continued or shifted. Where projects worked directly with these actors, change followed; where projects worked only through the formal stakeholder map, change stalled.

A second pattern is that **stakes are not reducible to financial or political interest.** Reading stakes through the MMC bundle illuminates this. Materials stakes – the conventional financial investments, infrastructure, and resource access – were generally well captured. Meanings stakes – the landscape as homeland, as the place where ancestors are buried, as the ground of ethnic identity, as symbolic of national progress – were rarely surfaced in formal analysis but often turned out to be decisive. A pastoralist’s stake in rangelands is not primarily economic but existential. A traditional authority’s stake in a forest is not primarily about timber revenue but about jurisdictional standing. Competencies stakes – the landscape as the place where one’s skill has meaning – were almost never captured in conventional mapping but explained why some actors resisted alternatives that appeared materially superior. A skilled charcoal producer faces not only income loss when the practice is curtailed but the loss of the territory in which their competency has currency.

A third pattern is the recurrent observation that **trust between projects and communities was often transactional rather than relational.** Projects that arrived with deliverables to dispense built a stakeholder configuration in which communities engaged as recipients rather than as actors. Where partners had been present in the landscape for ten or more years, the relationship had a different quality: communities engaged as co-investors in an ongoing relationship, with both expectations and obligations on both sides. The depth of this distinction was rarely captured by conventional stakeholder analysis but consistently explained variation in implementation.



PART 1 Introduction

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

PART 2 Concepts

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

PART 3 Practice

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

PART 4 Investment

PART 5 Evidence

PART 6 Glossary

A fourth observation, present in nearly every project, is that **horizontal stakeholder dynamics** – between ethnic groups, between long-settled and migrant populations, between IDPs and host communities, between sub-clans, between recent and historic land claimants – were often more consequential than the vertical relationships between communities and government. Common amongst projects were efforts to develop relations between the project itself and stakeholders that were deemed consequential in the stakeholder analysis. This is, of course, important – but the key variable, relations between stakeholders – was often neglected. It is the latter that will endure after project ending. Conventional stakeholder analysis treats ‘the community’ as a single point on the map. The reality was almost always plural, contested, and internally differentiated.

The implication for ILM practice is that stakeholder mapping is a continuous, MMC-informed activity rather than a design-phase task. Who counts as a stakeholder, what their stake consists of, and how that stake is changing as the system shifts – these are questions to be returned to, not settled. The portfolio bears this out. (See the [Stakeholders](#) section.)



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

[Systems & complexity](#)

Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

[Integration](#)

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Systems thinking and complexity

The portfolio offers no direct evidence on systems and complexity, in the sense that almost no project framed itself in these terms at design stage, used systems vocabulary in its reporting, or drew on complexity science as an explicit theoretical resource. The evidence is therefore necessarily implicit: it consists of the patterns observed across the portfolio that are difficult to account for within linear, input–output, project-as-machine framings, and that become legible when read through systems and complexity concepts.

Several patterns are difficult to explain without reference to system properties. The first is the **non-proportionality of inputs and outcomes**. Across the portfolio, projects with comparable budgets, similar designs, and broadly similar partner configurations produced strikingly different results. Some modestly resourced projects in difficult settings produced durable outcomes; some well-resourced projects in apparently favourable settings produced little. The variation was not random; it tracked features such as long institutional presence, the embeddedness of structures the project worked through, the alignment of the surrounding regulatory environment, and the disposition of key individuals at critical moments. None of these variables operates linearly. Their interaction produces emergent outcomes that no single input determines. This is consistent with what complexity science calls non-linearity: small differences in initial conditions and in interaction patterns produce disproportionate differences in trajectory.

A second pattern is the **emergence of integration in practice**. Few projects had an explicit theory of integration at design stage; most produced integration outcomes – sometimes substantial – through accumulated activity that gradually built relational infrastructure. Joint patrols, shared training, co-managed nurseries, multi-stakeholder budgeting and value chain coordination cumulatively produced an integrated configuration that no single activity had specified. Integration, in this sense, was not designed; it emerged. The Playbook’s positioning of integration as a system state, into which a configuration passes through accumulated interaction rather than by directive, finds support in this evidence.

A third pattern is the **importance of context over intervention**. Several projects discovered that the same intervention – a savings group, a water user committee, a value chain support package – produced quite different effects in different contexts within the same landscape, let alone across landscapes. The intervention was not the variable; the context into which it was introduced was. This is consistent with the Playbook’s framing, drawn from complexity science, that durable change typically requires changing the context in which behaviour occurs rather than changing the behaviour directly. Where projects worked on context – regulatory frameworks, market access, infrastructural conditions, deliberative venues – practice changes that had previously failed sometimes consolidated. Where projects worked only on behaviour, the context reasserted itself.

A fourth pattern is the **inadequacy of the project’s variety relative to the system’s variety**. Several projects encountered situations in which their available responses were too narrow to match the range of conditions they had to deal with. A logframe with twenty indicators is not equipped to manage a landscape with hundreds of contingencies. A project team of fifteen cannot personally engage with hundreds of villages. A donor instrument with one annual reporting cycle cannot keep pace with conditions that



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

change weekly. The portfolio repeatedly demonstrates Ashby's principle in operation: a regulating system must possess at least as much variety as the system it regulates, and where it does not, regulation fails. Successful projects typically achieved this not by expanding their own variety indefinitely but by working through more varied institutional configurations – community-based structures, decentralised partnerships, distributed authority – that collectively held the variety the project alone could not.

A fifth pattern is the **shift from monocentric to polycentric governance**. Several projects found that interventions designed to operate through a single authority – a ministry, a council, a project management unit – were brittle. When that single authority lost capacity, changed priorities, or was replaced, the intervention collapsed. Interventions that distributed authority across multiple loci – community institutions, district structures, sector platforms, traditional authorities, private sector actors – were more resilient. Each locus could fail without bringing down the whole. This is a polycentric configuration in operation, and the portfolio supports the Playbook's positioning of the shift from monocentric to polycentric governance as a system-level objective for ILM.

A sixth pattern is the **persistent surfacing of unanticipated consequences**. A water point that drew elephants and outsiders, a school borehole that doubled student numbers, a tree-planting initiative that displaced food production, a successful community enforcement effort that produced state-led inventory rather than community management – these are the signature of complex systems, in which interventions interact with conditions the design did not anticipate to produce outcomes the design did not specify. Projects that treated such surprises as failures of design produced limited learning. Projects that treated them as the system speaking back – as information about how the system actually operates – produced substantial learning. The Playbook's emphasis on sensing, on proposition logging, and on disposition toward surprise is consistent with what the portfolio reveals.

A seventh pattern is the **path-dependent character of outcomes**. The trajectory of each project was substantially shaped by early decisions whose consequences only became visible later: which partners were enrolled, which villages were prioritised, which government office became the primary interlocutor, which value chain became the entry point. Once these choices were made, the project's options narrowed; reversing them was costly and often impossible. This path dependency is a system property: present possibilities depend on past commitments in ways that the planning model does not adequately recognise. Projects that read their early decisions as path-shaping rather than as merely operational engaged subsequent decisions with more care.

A final observation: **the portfolio confirms the inadequacy of the project as a unit of analysis**. The phenomena the Playbook is concerned with – practice change, integration, power configurations, opportunity, ripple, embeddedness – operate on timescales and at spatial scales that exceed the project. They are visible only when the project is read as one episode in a longer system trajectory. The most useful analytic frame is not the project but the landscape over time, with projects as one class of intervention among many that contribute to its trajectory. The Playbook's positioning of ILM as a continuous, system-engaged practice rather than as a series of discrete projects finds substantial support in this evidence. ([See the Systems Thinking and Complexity section](#)).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Unstated intent

The portfolio offers consistent, if necessarily indirect, evidence that what the Playbook calls Unstated Intent – the interests, agendas, and objectives that actors pursue without naming them in formal documents or public discussion – is a structural feature of the systems in which ILM operates, and that projects which acknowledge it perform better than those which do not.

Several forms of unstated intent recurred across the portfolio. The first is **the divergence between formal mandate and operational interest within government agencies**. Ministries with conservation mandates sometimes derived their operational interest from commercial concessions; agencies with regulatory authority sometimes depended on the regulated industry for personnel and budget; technical departments sometimes served as patronage vehicles for the political party in power. None of this was stated. All of it shaped what was possible. Projects that read mandates as a guide to behaviour were repeatedly surprised; projects that read operational interest, however indirectly, anticipated more accurately.

A second form is **the divergence between consortium documentation and partner strategy**. Consortium proposals presented coherent shared objectives. Partner organisations pursued their own institutional interests in parallel: building country presence, qualifying for future funding, demonstrating particular methodologies, securing contracts with specific ministries, positioning for organisational succession. These interests were not necessarily at odds with the project's stated objectives, but they shaped which activities received attention, which partnerships were prioritised, and which compromises were acceptable. Projects in which partners had explicit conversations about their respective institutional interests at the outset operated with less friction than those in which these interests remained tacit.

A third form is **the divergence between donor framing and donor practice**. Donor documentation presented coherent strategic frameworks. Operational behaviour at desk officer level reflected a wider set of pressures: budget execution targets, compliance audits, political sensitivities, internal restructuring, individual career considerations. The same donor could behave very differently across two projects depending on which desk officer was assigned. Several projects reported that understanding the desk officer's institutional position – not just the donor's stated strategy – was essential to securing flexibility, no-cost extensions, and substantive engagement. None of this was discussed openly.

A fourth form is the **operational reality of corruption** as a structural feature of the systems projects worked within. Mentioned cautiously in nearly every project's reflective material, named in almost no public-facing document, and rarely analysed as a systemic feature rather than as the conduct of individual bad actors, corruption nonetheless shaped which permits could be secured, which routes were safe, which officials could be relied upon, and which interventions would be permitted to succeed. A useful typology distinguishes **predatory corruption** (extraction by those in position to extract), **facilitative corruption** (payments that lubricate access to services or permits), **collusive corruption** (negotiated arrangements between regulators and regulated), and **structural corruption** (the systemic capture of institutions by particular interests over time). Each calls for different responses. Treating all corruption as a single phenomenon – a moral failing of individuals – obscures both its variation and its tractability.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

The Playbook's framing of corruption as a symptom of power configurations rather than as deviance is supported by this evidence.

A fifth form is the **existence of beneficiaries of disorder** – actors whose interests are served by the absence of the integration, peace, or rule of law that the project seeks to build. Such actors were rarely overt opponents; they participated in workshops, signed declarations, and accepted training. Their resistance was expressed through delay, through informal de-prioritisation, through the quiet preservation of the status quo. Naming this dynamic, rather than treating it as project underperformance, is essential to designing interventions that account for it.

A sixth form is **the unstated intent of projects themselves**. Projects too have purposes that do not appear in their formal documentation: institutional positioning for the lead partner, methodological demonstration for the technical lead, organisational learning for the donor, career development for the team, country-presence for the international NGO. These purposes are not illegitimate, but they shape design decisions in ways that the formal logic of the project does not acknowledge. The Playbook's emphasis on positionality and reflexivity finds support in the evidence: the project is itself an actor with unstated intent in the system it is intervening in.

The implication for ILM practice is that unstated intent is not an aberration to be eliminated but a structural feature to be read. The portfolio bears this out: projects that acknowledged unstated intent – their own and others' – operated with greater realism than projects that took the formal documentation at face value. ([See the Unstated Intent section](#)).



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Team design and leadership

The portfolio offers rich evidence on what makes consortium and team configurations work, and the consistent message is that **team design is a substantive variable, not an administrative one**. Variation in implementation outcomes across the portfolio was substantially explained by who was on the team, how the team was assembled, and how authority was distributed within it.

Several patterns emerge. The first is the importance of **prior partnership history**. Where consortium members had worked together before – on previous projects, in previous programmes, or in standing institutional relationships – the project moved faster, communication was more candid, and disagreements were resolved without escalation. Where consortium members had no prior relationship and were assembled to meet donor requirements, the first year was often consumed by the work of becoming a team – establishing trust, clarifying roles, calibrating expectations, learning how to disagree productively. In at least one case, the consortium had been donor-imposed, with no prior history between the lead and the second partner, and significant time was lost to coordination overhead. Existing relationships are a hidden subsidy in project performance.

The second pattern is **long landscape presence as a team asset**. Lead partners with ten or more years in the landscape brought a depth of contextual knowledge, relational capital, and reputation that no incoming team could replicate. Where the lead partner had this depth, even modestly resourced projects produced substantial results. Where the lead partner was new to the landscape, even well-resourced projects struggled. The implication is not that incoming partners cannot succeed, but that they need to invest deliberately in building what longer-presence partners already have – or to enter into genuine partnership with longer-presence local organisations rather than treating them as sub-grantees.

The third pattern is the **distribution of expertise within the team**. The most effective teams displayed high levels of **polymathery** and human-to-human capabilities, as well as interdisciplinarity. Skills were distributed across multiple individuals rather than concentrated in one or two people. They also combined local staff with deep landscape knowledge, national staff with policy reach, and international staff with technical specialism and donor relationships. Teams that were dominated by a single competency – typically ecological or technical – read landscape conditions narrowly and missed signals outside their domain. Teams without senior local staff with policy reach found their access to government limited. Teams without international or technical specialism were sometimes unable to engage credibly with donors. The composition is not formulaic, but the absence of any of these elements consistently produced gaps.

The fourth pattern is the **role of women, youth, and embedded community staff** in team performance. Several projects' most effective sensing, conflict mediation, and trust-building was conducted by team members who lived in or near the landscape and shared its languages, kin networks, and daily rhythms. These staff were often junior in the formal hierarchy and underpaid relative to their contribution. Their value was disproportionately high and their retention was disproportionately important. Projects that recognised this and invested in their development, retention, and promotion produced more durable relational outcomes than those that treated such staff as field labour.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

The fifth pattern is the **simplification effect of a dominant landscape activity**. Where the landscape was organised around a single dominant economic activity – cocoa, for example – team design was easier: a single value chain expertise was central, a single set of stakeholders was primary, a single regulatory frame was relevant. Where the landscape contained multiple competing activities – mining, pastoralism, agriculture, conservation, tourism – team design needed to be correspondingly more diverse, and the coordination cost of integrating multiple expertises was significant. The Playbook should acknowledge that landscape complexity is itself a team-design variable.

A further observation is the **transaction cost of compliance**. Several teams reported that finance, procurement, and reporting absorbed disproportionate time relative to substantive activity, particularly in the first and last quarters of each year. Larger teams handled this load with dedicated staff; smaller teams absorbed it through senior technical leads, with consequent loss of substantive presence in the landscape. Donor requirements that appear administrative are, in their cumulative effect, a determinant of how much time the team spends on the landscape itself.

Finally, the portfolio confirms that **succession planning is rarely adequate**. Projects depended on a small number of individuals – country leads, key local conveners, technical specialists – whose departure would substantially compromise continuity. Few projects had explicit plans for what would happen if these individuals left. Where transitions occurred, they were managed reactively, often at significant cost. Team design needs to consider not only who is on the team now, but how the team would survive predictable departures. ([See the Team Design section.](#))



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Evidence from practice: Foments

The portfolio is rich in evidence of foments – small, situated experiments that tested whether a different practice was possible – even though few projects used the language of experimentation, hypothesis or trial. Foments appeared instead under headings such as innovation, demonstration, pilot, livelihood activity, or value chain intervention. The Playbook’s reframing is therefore largely a matter of recognising what was already happening and giving it a vocabulary that supports its more deliberate use.

The forms encountered were varied. **Material foments** – physical infrastructure introduced to test whether a practice would shift in response – were widespread. They included biofactories producing biofertilisers and biopesticides at low cost; electric fencing for human–wildlife conflict reduction; small-scale water harvesting and storage; solar-powered irrigation; demonstration plots for agroforestry, intercropping, or improved varieties; nurseries for indigenous timber and fruit species; alternative fuel stoves; mobile veterinary services; and improved post-harvest infrastructure. Each of these introduced a new material element whose adoption – and adaptation – could be observed.

Competency foments – situated training that introduced new techniques in conditions where their relevance could be tested – were equally common. They included field schools in regenerative practice, peer learning visits between communities working on similar problems, joint patrols that built ranger and community capacity simultaneously, and on-farm demonstrations led by farmers themselves. Where competency foments were paired with material foments, adoption rates and durability appeared higher.

Meaning foments – interventions designed to test whether a different framing of a resource, an animal, a place, or a practice could take hold – were less common but often the most consequential where they occurred. Examples included nocturnal wildlife-spotting tourism that reframed wildlife as more valuable alive than dead; certification schemes that reframed extensive farming as a market premium rather than an outdated method; co-management arrangements that reframed protected areas as community assets rather than state enclosures; and savings groups that reframed collective financial discipline as a route to individual aspiration. Meaning foments were particularly important where the practice in question was tied to identity rather than to immediate material benefit.

Institutional foments – small experiments in how decisions were made, by whom, with what authority – appeared in several projects under headings such as community conservancies, water user committees, wildlife management areas, joint forest management, or village land use plans. Where these structures were inherited from prior programmes, they consolidated quickly; where they were assembled from scratch, they often remained dependent on project facilitation.

Three patterns ran through the portfolio. The first is that the most effective foments **addressed materials, meanings, and competencies together** rather than treating them as separable. A new technique without a new material configuration, or a new piece of infrastructure without a new framing of what it was for, tended not to consolidate. The second is that **foments need protection**. Several projects introduced promising practices that did not survive the project because the surrounding regulatory,



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

market, or political environment continued to reward the original practice. Foments are not standalone instruments; they require either accompanying changes in the wider system or a deliberate plan for how the foment is meant to spread, change context, or fail informatively. The third is that **foments often produced unanticipated consequences**, both positive and negative – a school borehole that doubled student numbers, a water point that drew elephants and outsiders, a tree-planting initiative that displaced food crops. Foments work, in other words, by surfacing the unexpected; the disposition required to learn from them is as important as the foment itself.

The Playbook's framing of foments as deliberate, instrumented, and learnable extensions of what is already happening across the portfolio finds strong support in the evidence. [\(See the Foments section\).](#)



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices
Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent
Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points
Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

GLOSSARY

The following terms constitute the Playbook's core vocabulary. Each entry provides a short definition and a reference to the section where the term is elaborated. Terms in bold within definitions refer to other glossary entries.

A

Accumulator (power): an actor or **strand** that concentrates regulatory force, directing it one-way (A→B) rather than sharing it. Contrasts with **sharer**. See the [Power](#) section.

Adaptivity: the capacity of an intervention to modify itself in response to system change, emergent conditions, and surprise. Comprises **trialling**, **diffusion**, learning structures, and **agility**. Adaptivity is the only navigation strategy that **complexity** permits. See the [Adaptivity](#) section.

Agility: the team's psychological capacity to release attachment to previous approaches when evidence points elsewhere. Without it, the other three dimensions of **adaptivity** can be perfectly designed and still fail. See the [Adaptivity](#) section.

Alt-heading: the alternative system trajectory that the intervention works towards – always provisional, always subject to revision as **sensing** deepens. See the [Alternative Heading](#) and [TOC](#) sections.

Amplifying feedback: a feedback loop that reinforces a disturbance, making it grow. A successful **foment** that triggers amplifying feedback is one whose effects spread beyond the original **interaction space**. Contrasts with **dampening feedback**. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.

Appreciative inquiry: a strengths-based approach to engagement that starts from what is working and builds forward, rather than beginning with problems. Used in the

Playbook as a **sensing** approach. See the [Sensing](#) section.

C

Capability: the degrees of freedom available to a practitioner within the regulatory context they inhabit – what they are free to do, as distinct from what they are skilled to do (**competency**). Draws on Sen's capability approach. See the [Practices](#) section.

Cascade: a sequence of changes in which a shift in one **strand** or **interaction space** triggers shifts in others, propagating through the system. Cascades are what the intervention hopes to provoke but cannot guarantee. See the [TOC](#) section.

Circles of explanation: a spatial framework for organizing **sensing**, adapted from Blaikie and Brookfield's chain of explanation. Concentric rings represent actors positioned by regulatory range: **landscape practices** at the centre, surrounded by **proximate**, **intermediary**, **structural**, and **global regulation**. See the [Sensing](#) section.

Collectivist state: the integration state in which regulatory capacity is distributed across multiple actor groups, governance occurs through **deliberation**, and **heading** emerges from exchange rather than imposition. See the [Integration](#) section.

Competencies: the skills, knowledge, and know-how that enable a **practice** to be performed and reproduced. One of the three elements of the **MMC** framework. See the [Practices](#) section.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Complexity: the condition of a system in which outcomes emerge from the interaction of multiple agents following local rules, making the system's behaviour non-linear, unpredictable in detail, and irreducible to its components. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.

Container: in Eoyang's CDE model, the boundary or identity that holds agents together – what defines who is in the system and who is not. One of three conditions for self-organization. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.

D

Dampening feedback: a feedback loop that absorbs a disturbance, returning the system towards its previous state. Many **foments** are absorbed by dampening loops – which is why **ferments** approach the **interaction space** from multiple angles. Contrasts with **amplifying feedback**. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.

Deliberative system: a constellation of arenas (formal and informal, designed and spontaneous) whose collective effect is genuine deliberation, even though no single arena achieves it alone. See the [Compromise](#) section.

Difference (CDE): in Eoyang's CDE model, the distinctions between agents that create tension and drive self-organization – differences in power, knowledge, interest, or practice. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.

Diffusion: one of the four dimensions of **adaptivity**: dispersing many small, interconnected **foments** across the landscape rather than concentrating effort in a single locus, limiting exposure to any single failure and multiplying opportunities for **emergence**. See the [Adaptivity](#) section.

Diversity: the variety of perspectives, experiences, knowledge

bases, cognitive styles, and methodological approaches present within a team or system. A precondition for reading **complexity** well, a functional requirement of **resilience**, and a property the **mosaic** team structure deliberately cultivates. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) and [Team Design](#) sections.

Dual task: the requirement that an intervention address both regulatory space (shifting who regulates whom) and practice change (shifting what people do) simultaneously. One without the other yields either an opening that nothing fills or effort that snaps back. See the [TOC](#) section.

E

Embeddedness: a team design principle: the quality of **sensing**, trust, and **foment** effectiveness all depend on how deeply the team is embedded in the landscape over time. See [Team Design](#), Principle 6.

Emergence: the appearance of system-level patterns that cannot be reduced to or predicted from the properties of individual agents. [Integration](#), **heading**, and **governance** are all emergent properties. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.

Epistemic integration: the integration of different ways of knowing – scientific, technical, experiential, customary, embodied – within an intervention team and across the **interaction spaces** the team works. Distinct from institutional or sectoral integration; a precondition for reading **complexity** from more than one standpoint. See the [Team Design](#) section.

Exchange (CDE): in Eoyang's CDE model, the connections through which agents interact – information, resources, influence, stories. The richer the exchange, the more self-organization is possible. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

F

Feedback loop: a circular causal pathway in which an output of a process becomes an input back into it. Loops are either **dampening** (absorbing disturbance) or **amplifying** (reinforcing it). The principal mechanism through which complex systems generate behaviour over time, and through which **regulation** operates. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.

Ferment: the coordinated collection of **foments** designed to interact – approaching an **interaction space** from multiple angles. See the [Foments](#) section.

Foment: a discrete, designed micro-intervention introduced into the system to stimulate a response. Targets **strands** by dampening, amplifying, or redirecting their regulatory effect. Always accompanied by an explicit **proposition**: if we do X, we believe Y will happen, because of Z. See the [Foments](#) section.

G

Give: the elasticity or flex in a system – places where the system is not locked solid and where modest pressure can produce movement rather than being absorbed or repelled. Where **opportunity points** are found. See the [TOC](#) section.

Governance: the emergent regulatory effect produced by the interaction of all actors with regulatory capacity in a landscape – state, customary, corporate, religious, civil society, household. Not the monopoly of government and not designable as an input. See the [Governance and Institutions](#) section.

H

Heading: the direction and trajectory the system is currently moving – the composite effect of all **strands**. Not the same as a goal or a vision; heading is what the system is doing, not what anyone wants it to do. See the [TOC](#) section.

Heterarchy: a configuration in which regulatory authority is distributed laterally across multiple loci rather than concentrated vertically. The **collectivist state** approximates a heterarchical condition. Contrasts with hierarchy. See the [Power](#) and [Integration](#) sections.

I

Inbetweenness: what passes between system elements (**regulation**, exchange, **strand** crossings) matters more than the elements themselves. [Integration](#), fragmentation, and **heading** are all properties of inbetweenness. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.

Integration: the shift from one-way regulatory dominance (AB) towards bidirectional regulatory exchange (AB) between **strands** in **interaction spaces**. The Playbook's overarching objective. See the [Integration](#) section.

Interaction space: the conceptual space where two or more **strands'** regulatory fields overlap and exert mutual (usually asymmetric) force on each other. The landscape is the primary interaction space; it may extend far beyond the landscape's geographic edge. See the [TOC](#) section.

Interconnections: the relationships through which **strands**, agents, and **practices** regulate each other. The Playbook's analytical attention is on interconnections rather than on the things they connect. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning & evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

L

Landscape practices: the practices that directly constitute landscape condition – farming, herding, fishing, building, extracting. Located at the centre of the **circles of explanation**. See the [Sensing](#) section.

Leadership: an emergent capacity to redistribute power, mediate trade-offs, and hold deliberative space without dominating it. Distinct from the position power of office holders, and not necessarily concentrated in a single person – in the **collectivist state** it takes the form of a distributed leadership ecology. See the [Leadership](#) section.

M

Materials (MMC): the physical things, infrastructure, tools, and resources that enable a **practice** to be performed. One of the three elements of the **MMC** framework. See the [Practices](#) section.

Meanings (MMC): the significance, symbolism, value, and social identity attached to a **practice** – what it means to do this, what it would mean to stop. One of the three elements of the **MMC** framework. See the [Practices](#) section.

MMC (meanings, materials, competencies): the framework through which the Playbook analyses **practices**. Every practice is constituted by a bundle of meanings, materials, and competencies; changing one without attending to the others produces unintended consequences. Draws on Shove, Pantzar, and Watson. See the [Practices](#) section.

Mosaic: a team structure in which multiple dispersed teams work simultaneously in different **interaction spaces** across the landscape, coordinated by a curation function (Team E). See [Team Design](#).

O

Opportunity point (op-point): a condition of regulatory exchange in an **interaction space** where a well-designed **foment** can shift what the interaction produces. Six categories: asymmetric dominance, regulatory incoherence, latent reciprocity, regulatory weakening, regulatory redirection, convergent light strands. See the [Op-Points](#) section.

P

Polymathery: a team-design quality: comfort moving between domains of knowledge and practice, sufficient breadth to recognize when a different discipline is relevant, and the relational capacity to draw on others' expertise without ego. A precondition for reading **complexity** well. See the [Team Design](#) section.

Positionality: the signals that an intervention team sends through its composition, conduct, and institutional form – embodied (who you are), enacted (what you do), and existential (how you are received). See the [Positionality](#) section.

Power vista: one of three maps produced through **sensing**: a representation of who regulates whom, at what range, through what mechanisms, and with what effect. Produced primarily through Net-Map. See the [Sensing](#) and [Intervention Design and Implementation](#) sections.

Practice: the socially organized, materially mediated, meaning-laden configuration within which behaviour occurs – constituted by **meanings, materials, and competencies** (MMCs). Both regulated by other **strands** and regulatory of other strands. See the [Practices](#) section.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background

A walk through the tea

Landscapes

Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power

Governance & institutions

Leadership

Unstated intent

Systems & complexity

Adaptivity

Foments

Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation

Team design

Positionality

Sensing

Alternative heading

Stakeholders

Monitoring, learning

& evaluation

Compromise

Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

Practice map: one of three maps produced through **sensing**: key practices unpacked through **MMCs**, showing which elements are internally generated and which are externally regulated. Produced through the MMC analysis worksheet. See the [Sensing](#) and Intervention [Design and Implementation](#) sections.

Proposition: the explicit causal hypothesis attached to each **foment**: if we do X, we believe Y will happen, because of Z. Treated as a test, not a prediction. See the [Foments](#) section.

R

Regulation: the outward influence that a **strand's** practices exert on other strands – continuous, not episodic. The Playbook's central analytical category. See the [TOC](#) and [Power](#) sections.

Relationalism: the ontological position that social phenomena (actors, **practices**, landscapes) are constituted by relations rather than existing prior to them. The conceptual basis for the Playbook's emphasis on **inbetweenness** and **interaction spaces**. See the [Power](#) section.

Resilience: the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize without losing its essential function or **heading**. Depends on **diversity** and on **heterarchy**: polycentric, multi-stranded systems are resilient; monocentric, homogeneous ones are brittle. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.

Ripple: the initial propagation of a disturbance outward from the point where a **foment** is released. Ripples may be absorbed by **dampening feedback** or amplified into **cascades**. See the [TOC](#) section.

S

Sensing: the continuous, deliberate, relational practice of reading a system you are embedded in. Not data collection. Interpretive, ongoing, and action-oriented. Comprises observing, listening, asking, mapping, interpreting, trialling, attending to absence, attending to time, and attending to yourself. See the [Sensing](#) section.

Sharer (power): an actor or **strand** that distributes regulatory capacity rather than concentrating it – facilitating $A \square B$ exchange rather than $A \rightarrow B$ dominance. Contrasts with **accumulator**. See the [Power](#) section.

Strand: an actor group's set of **practices** sustained over time. Strands have weight (heavy or light) depending on the regulatory force they exert, and contribute to system **heading**. See the [TOC](#) section.

Strand map: one of three maps produced through **sensing**: actor groups, their practices, estimated weight, and regulatory relationships between them. Assembled cumulatively through sustained sensing, not by a single method. See the [Sensing](#) and Intervention [Design and Implementation](#) sections.

Systems: configurations of interacting elements whose collective behaviour cannot be reduced to the behaviour of the parts. Landscape systems are **complex** systems: open, adaptive, and continuously self-organizing. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.

Systems heading: the composite trajectory of a system, produced by the regulatory interaction of all its **strands**. See **heading** and the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.



[PART 1 Introduction](#)

Background
A walk through the tea
Landscapes
Our Theory of Change

[PART 2 Concepts](#)

Practices

Power
Governance & institutions
Leadership
Unstated intent

Systems & complexity
Adaptivity
Foments
Opportunity points

Integration

[PART 3 Practice](#)

Design & implementation
Team design
Positionality
Sensing
Alternative heading
Stakeholders
Monitoring, learning
& evaluation
Compromise
Trade-offs

[PART 4 Investment](#)

[PART 5 Evidence](#)

[PART 6 Glossary](#)

System states (integration): the Playbook distinguishes four states along the integration spectrum: fragmented, compromising, collaborative, and **collectivist**. See the [Integration](#) section.

Systems thinking: an analytical approach that focuses on the relations between elements, the **feedback loops** that generate behaviour, and the **emergent** properties that arise from interaction. The Playbook's chosen analytical frame, in preference to assemblage theory, because it describes-in-order-to-intervene and holds political-economy at the centre of the analysis. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.

T

Tipping point: a threshold at which a small additional change produces a disproportionate and often irreversible shift in system **heading** or state. Difficult to predict and easier to recognize in retrospect – but attentive **sensing** can detect approach to one. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.

Trialling: one of the four dimensions of **adaptivity**: treating actions as **propositions** rather than commitments. **Foments** are released, observed, modified or abandoned based on what emerges, not defended as sunk costs. Distinct from experimentation, which presumes controlled variables. See the [Adaptivity](#) section.

U

Unintended consequences: the second- and third-order effects of an intervention that were not anticipated in its design. In a **complex** system, unintended consequences are guaranteed; the discipline is to **sense** them, treat them as information, and adjust accordingly. See the [Systems and Complexity](#) section.

Unstated intent: the gap between an actor's stated purpose and their actual operating logic – what they say they are doing versus what their practices actually produce. A diagnostic category, not a moral judgement. See the [Unstated Intent](#) section.

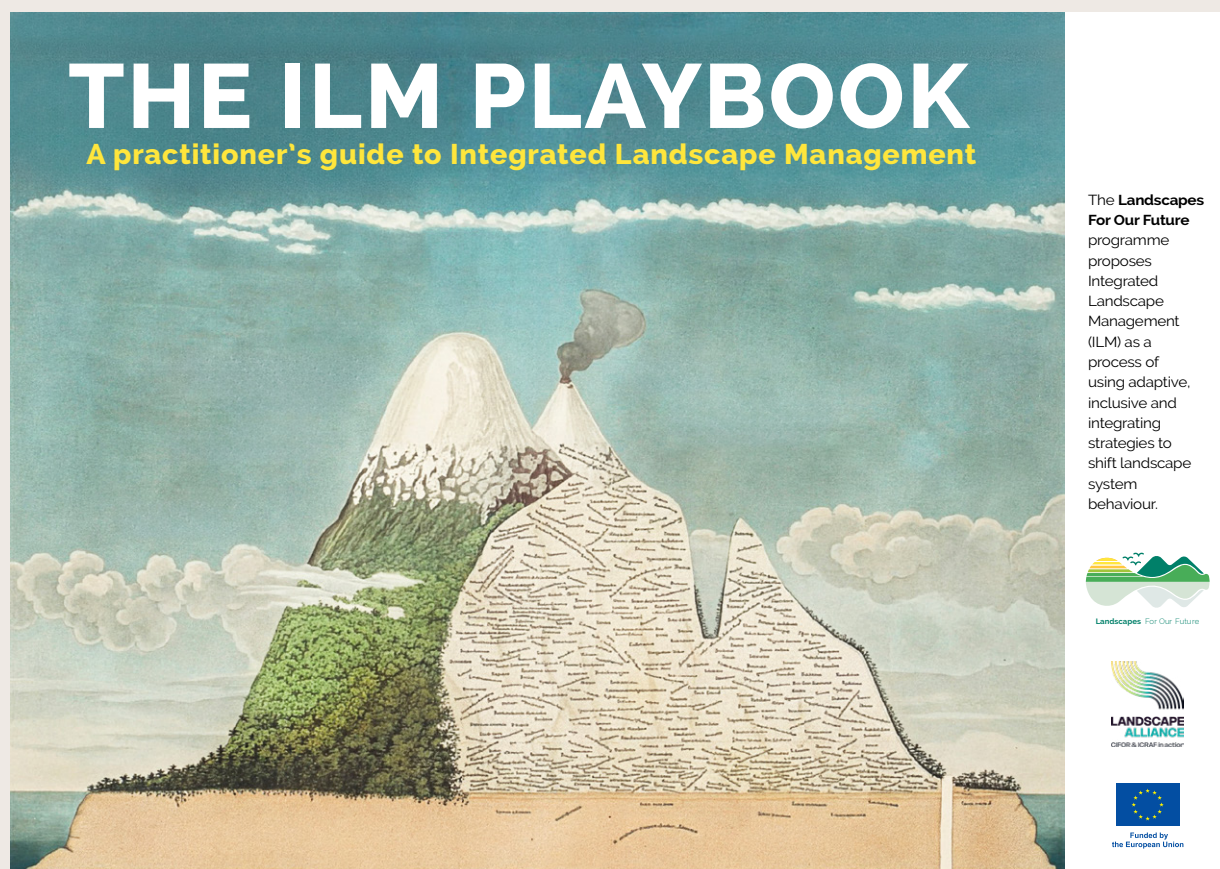
W

Whirlpools: as an intervention progresses, implementation moves through a series of 'whirlpools' of action and reflection, in which each cycle feeds into the next: reject, learn, start again; or pursue, learn, and adapt. See [Adaptivity](#) section.

Explore the interactive version

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 this **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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