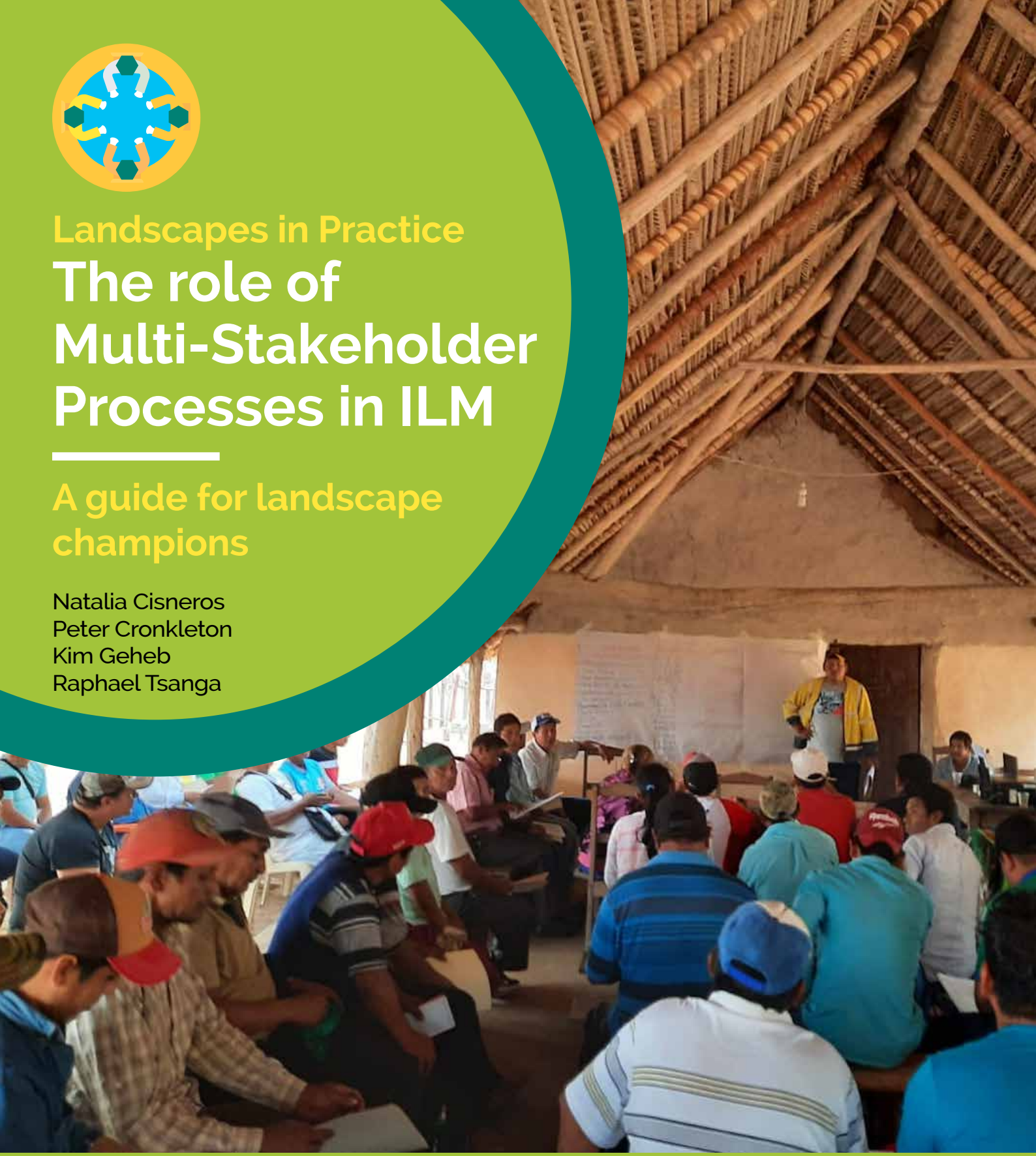
Landscapes in Practice

The role of Multi-Stakeholder Processes in ILM

A guide for landscape champions

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Landscapes in Practice is a series of practitioner guides to facilitate implementation of landscape approaches. The series is supported by the European Union's Landscapes For Our Future programme, which supports 22 projects across >30 countries in the Global South, proposing Integrated Landscape Management as a process for fostering co-created sustainability and resilience in landscapes through adaptive, inclusive and integrating strategies.
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Key messages

- Landscapes involve multiple stakeholders with distinct interests, different levels of influence and unequal power.
- Integrated Landscape Management entails promoting collaboration among stakeholders, negotiating trade-offs and mediating conflict to work towards shared goals.
- Facilitation of multi-stakeholder processes (MSPs) is challenging because relationships, interests, and power dynamics are context-specific and continually evolving.
- Effective multi-stakeholder engagement depends in part on facilitation: the deliberate work of deciding who needs to be involved, surfacing interests that might otherwise stay unspoken, and managing shifting relationships and power dynamics as a process unfolds.
- An MSP is broader than any single multi-stakeholder forum (MSF) or platform. Instead, it is a process that could unfold through bilateral conversations, working groups, community meetings, and informal channels, with different actors involved at different stages. In some circumstances, structured forums or platforms can institutionalize parts of an MSP, but they are not always necessary for effective ILM.

Why multi-stakeholder processes matter in ILM

Integrated Landscape Management (ILM) involves engagement with multiple stakeholders with distinct interests and unequal power through processes of collaboration, negotiation of trade-offs, and mediation of conflict among them. A landscape typically includes a wide range of stakeholders such as conservation agencies, government ministries at multiple levels, local and Indigenous communities, private companies, smallholder farmers, and traditional authorities. Often some hold overlapping claims to the same territory. These stakeholders' interests frequently diverge, and at times directly conflict – a conservation mandate, a livelihoods strategy, an extraction concession, and a land-tenure claim can each pull in a different direction over the same piece of land.

Their power to act on these interests is similarly unequal and can take different forms: legal authority to grant or withhold permits, financial resources to sustain a position over time, political access to decision-makers, control over land or natural resources, and cultural or historical legitimacy that others recognize even without formal standing. Power also operates in less visible ways: confidence and fluency in speaking up in a formal setting, familiarity with the language, format, or conventions through which a process is conducted, and whether a stakeholder has previously been heard or dismissed in similar settings. Indigenous representatives, in particular, may hold strong legitimacy and knowledge yet still face significant barriers to being heard on equal footing, whether because of language, unfamiliarity with a process's norms, or a history of not being listened to.[1]

A stakeholder strong in one dimension may be weak in another – a ministry may hold legal authority but lack local legitimacy, while a community may hold deep legitimacy but little formal decision-making power. This is why power must be read before engagement is designed.

These stakeholders do not necessarily interact with one another as a matter of course: each may operate through its own institutional channels and at its own scale, often with limited visibility into how its decisions constrain the options available to others. No single stakeholder's mandate is sufficient to reconcile these overlapping claims on its own. ILM provides an approach to addressing them across sectors.

An MSP creates structured interaction in which otherwise separate interests and competing

claims can be deliberated, trade-offs negotiated, and learning and collective action supported. An MSP is broader than any single forum (MSF) or platform. Instead, it is a process that could unfold through bilateral conversations, working groups, community meetings, and informal channels, with different actors involved at different stages. In some circumstances, structured forums or platforms can institutionalize parts of an MSP, but they are not always necessary for effective ILM.[2]

Bringing these stakeholders into a shared space does not, on its own, produce collaboration. Without effective facilitation, stakeholders with the most power, strongest channels to decision-makers, or greater experience navigating formal processes may dominate, while others go unheard or opt out entirely – reproducing, rather than addressing, the imbalances that made coordination necessary in the first place. Facilitation can help ensure that genuinely divergent interests are surfaced and negotiated rather than papered over or decided by default.

Facilitating MSPs is challenging because stakeholder relationships, interests and power dynamics are context-specific and continually evolving. Effective facilitation therefore requires understanding who the relevant stakeholders are, what interests and power they hold, and how they relate to one another, then reassessing these dynamics as the process unfolds.

A stakeholder's willingness to negotiate, the legitimacy accorded them by others and the leverage they can exercise are rarely fixed. Facilitation must therefore engage directly with power: who convenes a process, whose interests it serves and whose knowledge counts are part of what facilitation must manage.

Facilitation is the deliberate work of managing how stakeholders engage with one another: deciding who needs to be involved and in what sequence, surfacing interests that might otherwise remain unspoken, translating between stakeholders who do not share a common vocabulary or frame of reference, and creating conditions in which disagreement can be voiced rather than suppressed.

Much of this work happens before stakeholders are in the same room, through informal and one-on-one engagement that builds trust, and



continues throughout the process. During deliberation, it also requires judgement about when to intervene to ensure a quieter stakeholder can contribute and when to allow stakeholders to work through disagreements themselves.[3]

Several questions can guide facilitation in ILM:

- What concrete decision or trade-off requires collective deliberation?
- Whose authority, knowledge, or consent is necessary for that decision to be legitimate and effective?
- What institutions exist to structure engagement, and where does legitimacy already reside?
- At what scale can meaningful change occur?
- What kind of facilitation does the process require?

A formal MSF can structure and institutionalize parts of an MSP, but effective engagement does not require a formal forum. Convening is itself an exercise of power, and a convener with a stake in the outcome cannot simply assume neutrality but must recognize and manage its own position and interests. Without careful design and facilitation, an MSF can reproduce power imbalances and stakeholder fatigue as easily as address them.





From platforms to processes: a broader view of engagement

Formal multi-stakeholder forums or platforms are intentionally created, sustained spaces for dialogue and joint decision-making among diverse actors. Where repeated engagement is needed, they provide a standing space to return to.[4]

Research identifies the conditions under which multi-stakeholder platforms generate meaningful outcomes: clear purpose, decision-making authority, inclusive representation, and sustained resourcing – conditions that are often assumed rather than deliberately built. The key question for ILM is not whether to create a forum, but how to design engagement that is purposeful, appropriately scaled, and responsive to the decisions at stake.[5]

Multi-stakeholder platforms are widely used in integrated landscape initiatives, but a formal platform can be counterproductive when mandated without genuine conditions for participation. Comparative research also shows that informal, locally rooted arrangements can resolve conflict and build community coordination effectively, even where they lack the higher-level standing needed to influence policy.[6]

Forums and platforms are not a panacea. Where power imbalances, exclusion or unclear decision rules undermine the underlying process, a formal structure will not fix them. Stakeholder fatigue is often a warning sign: meetings continue without a concrete decision to anchor them, so participation becomes an obligation rather than a route to resolution. A forum should serve the process, not substitute for it.

Participation alone is a weak predictor of influence on decisions. What matters more is how deliberative spaces connect to authority, how power shapes whose knowledge enters them, and whether the process is tied to decisions that participants can influence.[7]

Power is not simply a variable to manage alongside an MSP; it shapes who can convene, whose knowledge counts and what outcomes are possible. Convening is itself an exercise of power. A convener perceived to have a stake in the outcome may struggle to hold that role credibly, as Box 1 illustrates.[8]

Dialogue and deliberation are also different. Dialogue can build understanding, while deliberation requires participants to confront trade-offs and be willing to change their position in light of argument and evidence.[9]

Practices inside the process matter too: who speaks, whose knowledge counts as evidence and whether disagreement is voiced or absorbed into consensus. Changing formal structures without attending to these habits can reproduce the dynamics the process is intended to change.[10]

Box 1. Chovoreca, Paraguay: From platform to process

The municipal land-use planning process in Bahía Negra, known as the Plan de Ordenamiento Urbano y Territorial (POUT), included a roundtable bringing together stakeholders with competing interests. According to the project team, WWF Paraguay's conservation mandate meant that it was not always perceived as a neutral facilitator. This was one of several factors contributing to the process stalling; the issue remained unresolved at the time of the learning visit.

Through the CERES project, WWF Paraguay and its partners redirected effort towards securing title to Cerro Chovoreca Natural Monument. A working group brought conservation partners and national authorities together around this specific task, supporting the transfer of title to the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development in 2024.

For the protected area's management planning, an external facilitator supported a participatory process involving Ayoreo communities. Fieldwork incorporated knowledge of sacred sites and historical land use. Coordination combined field visits, targeted meetings and informal communication, including WhatsApp groups.

The management plan received ministerial approval. These achievements offered another route for collaboration, without resolving the difficulties affecting POUT. The experience illustrates how collaboration can continue through different working groups and facilitation arrangements while a broader planning process remains stalled.[11]



Practical lessons for practitioners

The five diagnostic questions introduced on page 3 organize the practical lessons below for practitioners, programmes and donors.



What concrete decision or trade-off requires collective deliberation?

Start with purpose, not structure. MSPs that lack a concrete, answerable decision at their centre risk becoming forums for general dialogue without consequence. Where stakeholders are genuinely best served by a single, well-resourced platform with a broad mandate, that platform may be the right tool. The question is whether its mandate is concrete enough to sustain the engagement it demands (Box 1). A clear decision also gives programmes something meaningful to monitor: process quality, legitimacy and influence on decisions matter more than simply counting forums or meetings.[12]

Stakeholder fatigue often signals overlapping forums with unclear or redundant purposes. A process-oriented approach favours fewer, purposeful spaces anchored in clear decisions.[13]



Whose authority, knowledge, or consent is necessary for that decision to be legitimate and effective?

Map whose authority, knowledge and consent matter before deciding how to convene. A convener's perceived impartiality is not fixed; it must be earned and sustained relative to the decision at hand. Research on deliberative platforms shows that neutrality is understood differently in practice, and that facilitation credibility should be assessed in context. Where a convener cannot credibly demonstrate impartiality, an external facilitator can be an appropriate design choice. Donors and implementing organizations also exercise power through the agendas and participation they support, so transparency is required from those financing and facilitating engagement as well as from local actors.[14]



What institutions already exist, and where does legitimacy reside?

Build on what exists rather than automatically creating parallel structures. A new platform starts without the accumulated trust, established norms, and track record that an existing institution may already have – advantages worth weighing before assuming a new structure is necessary.[15]

Equally important is connecting existing institutions. MSPs can bridge actors who govern the same territory through different mandates – conservation, agriculture, water or land tenure – but may pursue parallel or conflicting objectives. This coordination function can reduce fragmentation without replacing existing institutions.[16]



At what scale can meaningful change occur?

Match the scope and duration of the process to the decision. A broad, open-ended mandate invites high-stakes contestation that makes neutrality difficult to sustain; a narrower one provides a clearer basis for determining when the process has achieved its purpose (see Box 1).

Forums and working groups should be allowed to dissolve once their purpose is met rather than be maintained as standing structures with nothing left to decide. Institutionalization – embedding collaborative practices in durable governance arrangements – is distinct from process effectiveness. Informal arrangements may work well in the near term yet remain vulnerable to staff turnover, political change or the end of funding. The practical question is what needs to endure, and in what institutional form.[17]

Not every issue requires the same actors or scale of engagement. Some trade-offs are best negotiated locally; others require provincial or national alignment. Processes can therefore be nested, flexible and issue-specific rather than built around a single standing forum. Each should be designed around the decision it serves, and programme designs should leave room for governance arrangements to adapt.

What kind of facilitation does the process require?

Invest in facilitation capacity and sustain it over time. Skilled mediation and negotiation are core ILM capacities, not optional extras. Research on multi-stakeholder partnerships treats facilitation as a distinct professional skill requiring deliberate design and investment. Sustained local presence matters too: facilitators embedded in a landscape can build the trust needed to shape engagement around stakeholders' stated needs rather than an imposed agenda.[18]

Conclusion

What determines whether an MSP works is not the presence of a platform but the quality of the process it serves: facilitation suited to a shifting context, forums used only where they earn their place, power relations named rather than assumed away, and a realistic view of what needs to endure. The challenge for ILM practitioners is to build processes that are purposeful, appropriately scoped and honest about the power relations they will inevitably reproduce or disturb. Getting that right, in our experience, is what separates a platform that exists from a process that works.



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