No standard route to integrated landscapes

What four Latin American cases reveal about applying ILM in different contexts



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Prepared by Peter Cronkleton, Natalia Cisneros and Dominique le Roux

Key messages

- **Four cases from Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia and Paraguay provide a bounded regional comparison.** They do not represent all 22 projects; they show how the same ILM dimensions took different forms across different Latin American settings.
- **There was no universal entry point.** Water connected actors in Bolivia and Ecuador; ecosystem functionality and trust-building organized work in Colombia; legal and institutional footholds became the starting point in Paraguay.
- **Inclusion meant more than inviting stakeholders to a platform.** Progress depended on recognizing rights-holders, addressing unequal power, facilitating participation and embedding processes in institutions regarded as credible.
- **Platforms mattered only when they changed decisions, practices or institutions.** Formalization was an important gain in several cases, but institutionalization extended beyond legal recognition to whether collaborative functions, capabilities and resources became embedded in governance systems – showing institutionalization as a process rather than a label.
- The shared methodological lesson is to **understand the context before acting, learn from both resistance and progress, and adapt general principles to local conditions** rather than replicate institutional models.

Introduction

Integrated Landscape Management (ILM) is often described through recurring dimensions: identifying and engaging stakeholders; promoting multi-stakeholder processes; developing a common landscape vision or direction; institutionalizing governance mechanisms; managing adaptively and iteratively; and developing context-specific technical and policy solutions.[1] The dimensions are useful, but they can become a checklist if detached from the conditions that give them meaning. These dimensions were the programme's original analytical frame. *The ILM Playbook*[2], developed subsequently in response to learning, regrounds them in systems thinking, power analysis and practice theory, offering a deeper account of why these dimensions matter and how they interact.

Four case studies from the Landscapes For Our Future (LFF) programme show why context matters. They examine watershed governance in Bolivia's Chiquitanía, water security and páramo conservation in Ecuador's high Andes, ecological and institutional reconnection in Colombia's Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta and governance formation in Paraguay's remote northern Cerrado. Each faced a different combination of ecological pressure, institutional reach, history, rights, livelihoods and power.

The analytical value of looking at these four cases lies in comparing how ILM plays out in landscapes that differ sharply in ecology and governance. The comparison helps reveal how the same ILM dimensions take different practical forms, where common patterns emerge and where transferring lessons requires caution. The cases provide insights into specific experiences, rather than representing Latin America, the wider landscapes covered by the projects or the LFF programme as a whole. Other programme outputs address the wider LFF portfolio, including projects in Africa and Asia.

How the cases were read

The four case studies were developed through document review and interviews with project teams and partners, then organized around the same six ILM dimensions. This creates a common analytical frame, but the underlying evidence is not uniform. Some statements describe formal instruments or documented outputs; others reflect participant interpretation of trust, legitimacy, learning or likely durability. The synthesis therefore treats the cases as comparative, theory-generating evidence rather than as a causal impact evaluation.

That distinction is especially important for institutionalization. Following Schoneveld et al., we use the term to mean embedding ILM rules, values, processes and practices within formal and informal institutions so that collaborative planning and decision-making can continue beyond a project. Formal recognition may be one important step, but it is not sufficient on its own: administrative, financial and technical capabilities, links across scales, information flows and sustained relationships also matter. Institutionalization is therefore a process of increasing embeddedness and continuity, not a binary claim that a project either did or did not create a durable institution.[3]

Four landscapes, four starting conditions

In Bolivia, the Paisajes Resilientes project worked across the Paraguá, San Martín and Zapocó watersheds in the Chiquitanía, where fires, deforestation, water scarcity and competing land uses crossed municipal, departmental, Indigenous and sectoral boundaries. Existing governance structures were present but fragmented. Water security offered a reason to strengthen sub-watershed committees and connect their work to planning instruments, monitoring systems and financial mechanisms.[4]

Four landscapes at a glance

Case	Starting condition	Entry point	Principal shift
Bolivia	Fragmented authority across large watersheds	Water security and existing sub-watershed committees	Dialogue connected to plans, shared data and finance
Ecuador	Páramo conservation perceived as competing with livelihoods	Water security for households and production	Community–government alignment around a Water Protection Area
Colombia	Ecological disconnection, fragmented mandates and low trust	Water governance, restoration and practical co-design	Formalized water-governance structure and locally tested livelihood solutions
Paraguay	Remoteness, unequal power and limited sustained public presence	Legal title, management planning and credible facilitation	Institutional footholds and a more legitimate coordination process

The cases share an analytical frame, not a common blueprint.

In Ecuador, the Paisajes Andinos project worked in Simiátug, where a high-altitude páramo regulates water for households, farming and downstream users but was under pressure from grazing, cultivation and fire. Conservation had previously been perceived as competing with livelihoods. Water scarcity reframed the issue: protecting the páramo could be discussed as a condition for production, food security and household well-being rather than as an external restriction.[5]

In Colombia, the Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta was already covered by multiple environmental designations and institutional mandates, yet ecological connectivity and relationships among institutions and communities were fractured. Infrastructure, agro-industrial expansion, pollution, overfishing, armed conflict and displacement had affected both the wetland and the social fabric. The practical challenge was not simply to create another formal body, but to rebuild trust and reconnect water governance, restoration and livelihoods.[6]

In Paraguay, the CERES project operated in a highly remote part of the northern Cerrado with sparse sustained public institutional presence, powerful ranching interests and Ayoreo rights and cultural ties to the territory. An initial land-use planning process stalled. The project had to sequence its ambition differently, starting with formalizing protected-area boundaries, then progressing to land titling, management planning, sustained operational presence and a more credible facilitation arrangement.[7]



Lesson 1: Start from a concern actors cannot solve alone

The most effective entry point was not an abstract appeal to integration. It was a concern that made interdependence tangible.

In Bolivia and Ecuador, that concern was water. The same river or páramo connected actors who otherwise understood the landscape through separate mandates and interests. Water created a reason to coordinate without erasing difference: Indigenous communities, producers, water boards and public authorities could see that none controlled the whole system.

In Colombia, ecosystem functionality and water governance played a similar role, but trust had to be rebuilt through visible practice. Community co-design of a machine for removing macrophytes and participatory trials of modified blue-crab traps translated technical claims into experience. The significance was not only the technology. Seeing results created evidence around which fishers and technical institutions could adjust practices.

Paraguay demonstrates the limit of assuming that a shared ecological objective is enough. Biological corridors were technically compelling, but the original dialogue space could not carry the disagreement and WWF Paraguay was not regarded as impartial.

The project shifted to a more achievable institutional sequence: support the title transfer and management planning for Cerro Chovoreca, clarify roles and use external facilitation. The shared concern became actionable only when the interaction space was legitimate enough to hold it.



Lesson 2: Inclusion is about rights, power and the cost of participation

All four cases identified broad stakeholder sets, but the decisive issue was how actors entered the process and whose knowledge and rights could affect decisions.

In Ecuador, the project used a consultative process based on free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) with Waranka Kichwa communities and ultimately engaged 16 of 17 communities. It adapted participation arrangements as women's responsibilities became clearer, including childcare spaces, schedule adjustments and community finance initiatives. Inclusion was designed into the practical conditions of participation rather than measured only by attendance. In the Playbook's terms, power is not simply a background condition to acknowledge; it is a primary force shaping whose practices prevail and therefore the direction the landscape takes.

In Paraguay, Ayoreo participation added knowledge of sacred sites, historical land use and cultural and spiritual values, enhancing the legitimacy of management planning. The case also shows why language matters: remoteness and limited state presence must not be described as an empty landscape. Institutional absence is not human or

historical absence. Rights-holders with little formal power may carry the highest stakes in a landscape and cannot be treated as one interest group among many.

In Colombia, the long presence and technical credibility of Colombia's Marine and Coastal Research Institute (INVEMAR) made it a bridge between artisanal fishing communities and public institutions.

In Bolivia, stakeholder analysis went beyond listing organizations to examine influence, interests and institutional relations, while sub-watershed units created more manageable spaces for participation. Across the cases, facilitation and relationship-building were not overheads surrounding delivery; they were part of the delivery infrastructure.

Lesson 3: A platform matters only when it changes what happens

Multi-stakeholder spaces were common, but their institutional weight differed. This is consistent with the programme's later guidance on multi-stakeholder processes: the process is broader than any single forum, but forums matter when they help carry functions that affect decisions and can be embedded in more durable arrangements.[8]

Bolivia offers the clearest movement from platform to policy. Sub-watershed processes informed departmental and municipal planning; the Integrated Environmental Monitoring System (SIMA) was transferred to the Santa Cruz departmental government; two municipalities recognized it as an official information-management tool; and a university centre became its technical arm. The case also describes a water fund and a credit line for sustainable, deforestation-free livestock production.



Ecuador linked existing conservation agreements and multilevel roundtables to the Simiátug Water Protection Area and formal agreements with parish, municipal and provincial governments. The case describes a legally recognized framework and a designated management committee, while noting that the management plan required further approval. This distinction matters: creation, formal recognition, operational capacity and long-term financing are separate stages of institutionalization.

Colombia shows why formalization is an important institutionalization gain without being the whole story. The Territorial Water Council received formal recognition from the Ministry of Environment and brought six Territorial Water Boards into a shared governance structure. Its fuller institutionalization nevertheless remained unfinished. That gave a locally legitimate multi-stakeholder process formal standing in the public system. On the broader definition used here, however, institutionalization also depends on whether the Council's functions, capabilities, resources and cross-scale relationships remain embedded and usable over time. Formalization is therefore a milestone in institutionalization, not its endpoint.

In Paraguay, informal coordination through targeted meetings, verbal agreements and messaging groups helped move a complex legal process, after which decisions were formalized through official instruments. Informality and formality were complementary: one allowed actors to work; the other anchored agreed functions and authority.

Lesson 4: Adaptation is method, not deviation

None of the projects followed a straight implementation line.

In Paraguay, the team did not force a stalled land-use planning process or a corridor strategy that was not yet politically feasible. It redirected effort, engaged external facilitation for management planning and accepted partial forms of reconnection with ancestral lands when permanent presence was not possible. The value of the case lies as much in what was revised as in what was completed.

Colombia's crab-trap experience is a compact example of release, observe and adjust. When fishers altered the first design to maximize immediate catch, the project suspended use and tested the proposition collaboratively. Evidence that releasing smaller crabs could increase the average size of crabs caught supported voluntary adoption. The intervention changed because the first response revealed that technical functionality had not become a locally meaningful practice. Read through the Playbook's materials–meanings–competencies (MMC) framework, the first design addressed materials and competencies – a better trap and training in its use – but not the meanings governing fishing practice, especially the priority placed on maximizing immediate catch. Only when the proposition was tested collaboratively and the evidence altered how fishers understood the practice did behaviour change.

Bolivia divided a very large geography into sub-watershed units, concentrated intensive governance work in selected areas and expanded leadership activities when demand emerged. Ecuador similarly moved from a broad conservation concern to a water-protection mechanism after exchanges, workshops and local comparison of legal options. Across the cases, adaptation was disciplined by a continuing direction, stakeholder feedback and observable system response – not by abandoning accountability.

Implications for practice, policy and research

For practitioners, the cases suggest beginning with sensing – the continuous, deliberate and interpretive practice of reading the landscape system in which an intervention is embedded – rather than with a preselected platform or technical package.[9] It is relational and ongoing, not a one-off exercise in data collection. Identify the material interdependencies, rights, power relations, existing institutions and credible conveners that make an entry point possible. Budget for participation, translation, facilitation and local presence as implementation functions. Across all four cases, outcomes were also shaped by team design: the mix of institutional positioning, local presence, technical capability and facilitation capacity influenced what teams could sense, convene and change.

For donors and national institutions, the cases support phased and adaptive funding with explicit decision gates. Calls can define public objectives, territories, rights and safeguard requirements while leaving an inception period in which the system boundary, causal problem and intervention package are refined. Accountability should record what was tried, how actors and the landscape responded, what changed and why, alongside financial, legal and safeguard compliance.

For researchers, the four cases offer propositions rather than universal conclusions. Shared water concerns often created productive entry points, but not automatically; institutional presence could support coordination or coexist with fragmentation; and formal recognition could coexist with unresolved questions of capability, resourcing or continuity. Comparative work should therefore distinguish direct evidence, practitioner interpretation and claims of causality, and should examine countercases as carefully as apparent success.

The main lesson for applying these cases elsewhere is not to copy Bolivia's committees, Ecuador's protection area, Colombia's council or Paraguay's working group. It is to ask what function each arrangement performed, why it worked in that setting, and what equivalent function a different landscape would need.

For policy actors, the comparison also suggests that integration should be judged by function. Useful questions are whether information moves between levels, whether affected groups can influence decisions, whether mandates and budgets align, whether conflicts can be negotiated and whether practices change without transferring costs to less powerful actors. The institutional form that carries those functions may be a committee, legally area, council, data platform, working group or a combination; the form should follow the landscape rather than become the programme's starting template.

What these cases suggest for other landscapes

A shared concern Start from a shared concern that actors recognize and cannot address alone.	**A legitimate interaction space** Create a place where rights, stakes, power and practical decisions can meet.
Adaptive learning Treat action as a proposition; read resistance and partial progress as evidence.	**An institutional home** Embed useful functions, authority, capability and resources – not merely a platform name.

Carry the function and design principle into a new setting, not the institutional form itself.

Conclusion

Taken together, the four Latin American cases show ILM as a practice of purposeful variation. The dimensions recur, but their sequence, institutional form and degree of completion do not. Progress began with water in two landscapes, with trust and practical experimentation in another and with legal and institutional footholds in the fourth. It depended repeatedly on credible relationships, power-aware inclusion, adaptive learning and some route from temporary project action into institutions able to persist. Water was productive as an entry point not because it is inherently more integrative, but because its physical flow makes upstream–downstream interdependence tangible: actors who might otherwise never see one another's influence can see how their decisions affect others.

That is the value of a bounded regional comparison. It makes common patterns visible without pretending that one model travels intact. Integrated Landscape Management becomes transferable when it is understood as a way of reading and intervening in complexity – not as a standard package of platforms, plans and activities.

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Notes

1 Geheb 2024.
2 Landscapes For Our Future Central Component 2026.
3 Schoneveld et al. 2024.
4 Cronkleton et al. 2026a.
5 Cronkleton et al. 2026b.
6 Cisneros et al. 2026c.
7 Cisneros et al. 2026b.
8 Cisneros et al. 2026a.
9 Landscapes For Our Future Central Component 2026.

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