



# The 4 Returns Framework in Practice



A GUIDEBOOK FOR HOLISTIC  
LANDSCAPE RESTORATION



Cover Images (top):  
The Natural Zone and Combined Zone  
on Antonio Maurandi's farm in Spain.  
Photography: Gabriela Hengeveld,  
Commonland.

Cover Images (bottom):  
Pratima Chandrawanshi inspecting  
the blossoming cauliflower in her  
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# A 4 Returns guidebook

PREFACE BY WILLEM FERWERDA  
Founder, Commonland

Nature is stronger than many of us will ever understand. The intricate natural systems that we are part of are robust in their ability to adapt. For billions of years, nature has found ways to change and evolve because life constantly mutates, harmonises, and moves forward. In the so-called Anthropocene, in which humanity faces numerous self-inflicted challenges, the natural world is changing, and we – as a human species – must adjust and acclimatise to the emerging circumstances. In the period ahead, we need to balance the needs of the economy with those of the ecological systems that sustain all life. We need to work hard to mitigate and adapt to the environmental changes coming our way.



Restoring our degraded landscapes is precisely about being able to adapt. And, thankfully, as a species that is part of nature, we humans have inherited nature's adaptability. It's also about our ability to think holistically: to consider the whole living system instead of pulling it apart. Holistic landscape restoration provides a way to make the most of our innate adaptability by placing it within a holistic perspective. Bringing everyone in a landscape together to ask, "How can we co-create a better future for the whole ecosystem we're all a part of?", draws out our natural adaptability and helps us to see the bigger picture. It enables us to lay the foundations of a thriving future, which includes the relationship with ourselves, each other, and the nature of which we are part of.

However, as holistic landscape restoration is about complex systems, it takes a lot of time and effort. It can be challenging for people living in degraded landscapes to know where to start, and for those outside the landscape to understand the on-the-ground realities. For holistic landscape restoration to be effective, you need a generic guiding framework. This is why I felt the need to develop the *4 Returns Framework* 12 years ago. The aim of the *4 Returns Framework* is to bring people together to create a shared long-term vision and inspire focused action. It is a practical, holistic approach to integrated landscape management and restoration,<sup>①</sup> designed in a way that everyone can understand. Offering a common language that bridges divides, it enables people to form long-term cross-sector partnerships, identify local drivers of land degradation, create a shared vision for large-scale landscape restoration, start acting, and monitor results.

The holistic nature of the *4 Returns Framework* encourages people to zoom out, listen to each other, and figure out their place in the picture. This allows anyone, including farmers, governments, conservation organisations, community groups, entrepreneurs, investors, businesses, and others, to get involved with restoration projects in their landscape. The framework's generic and specific indicators to measure progress over time support a tailored approach that can be used in any landscape.

Over the past three years, the *4 Returns Framework* has been evolved and enriched through our partnership with Wetlands International and the Landscape Finance Lab. Now, after more than 12 years of experience using the *4 Returns Framework*, we're launching the first edition of a *4 Returns guidebook* — a resource to help you implement a holistic landscape restoration approach. This guide is based on the insights our partners have gained through practically applying the *4 Returns Framework* in diverse contexts. It traces the lessons learnt:<sup>②</sup>

- ➔ In Southeast Spain, where a handful of farmers met in 2013 to discuss holistic landscape restoration, which has since led to a vast restoration initiative within a one-million-hectare landscape with a 2050 vision now set for the entire Iberian Peninsula
- ➔ In Southwest Australia, where a network of landscape conveners, farmers, conservationists, and Aboriginal people are working together on restoration and landscape stewardship
- ➔ In the Netherlands, where since 2016, a growing network of 180 active farmers, nature organisations, companies, and citizens has accelerated the transition to a regenerative peat meadow landscape
- ➔ In the Baviaanskloof and Langkloof landscapes in South Africa, where since 2014 regenerative companies and NGOs have been driving large-scale ecological rehabilitation with a community-based and business-driven approach
- ➔ In the Kabirdham district in India, where Commonland teamed up with the local government, local communities, and a diverse group of organisations to support community well-being, nature conservation, and sustainable economic development using the *4 Returns Framework*
- ➔ In five landscapes in Argentina, India, Tanzania, Guinea Bissau, and Scotland, from 2021 to 2024, Wetlands International, Commonland, and the Landscape Finance Lab refined the *4 Returns Framework* and carbon finance methodology in close collaboration with local partners
- ➔ In numerous other landscapes that have adopted the *4 Returns Framework*, with further cases listed in this guidebook

Through these on-the-ground insights, this guidebook presents the experiences of our local partners and land-based actors who are implementing the *4 Returns Framework*.

Whether you're working as a farmer or conservationist on the ground, at an NGO, or as a community leader or business entrepreneur, the first edition of this guide can serve as your companion to understand what it takes to launch a holistic landscape partnership. Through a series of chapters, you'll learn how to design and implement a holistic landscape vision with a group of local stakeholders, with the 5 Elements — the process steps for holistic landscape restoration — as your guideposts.

I hope this guide gives you a clear path to rise to the challenges facing you and your community. By reading this guidebook, you become part of a growing global movement of farmers, entrepreneurs, conservationists, business owners, civil servants, and financiers, working towards a holistic landscape restoration “industry”. An industry based on a worldview that will heal, one that adapts to changing circumstances, finds resilience in natural processes, and is founded on holistic systems that let nature lead. This movement, growing from both the bottom up — through local community actions — and from the top down — through company and governmental changes — gives me confidence that future generations will start to find nature-oriented solutions normal. Hopefully, this movement will become a groundswell that can no longer be stopped.

My thanks to the community of 4 Returns practitioners, conveners, and supporters — the farmers, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, conservationists, scientists, investors, and financiers — whose insights are the backbone of this guidebook, and to the editorial team and contributors for presenting this valuable collection of lessons.

Willem Ferwerda  
Founder, Commonland



① Integrated landscape management (ILM) is an approach to addressing our planet’s land use, climate change, food security, and water access challenges. The 1000 Landscapes for 1 Billion People initiative accelerates ILM using the *4 Returns Framework*. Learn more about it on [landscapes.global](https://landscapes.global)

② Learn more about these landscapes and the partners driving the initiatives at [commonland.com/landscape-overview](https://commonland.com/landscape-overview)



Brian inspecting the honeybush plants  
in the combined zone, Langkloof,  
South Africa. Photography: Reblex  
photography, Commonland.





# Introduction





In a world on the brink of ecological collapse — with the intertwined threats of climate change, biodiversity loss, and rising socio-economic inequality — we need to rethink our relationship with nature urgently. Nature is the foundation upon which societies are built and it provides the basis of our survival and that of all other species. To bring us back from the brink, we must revive and regenerate the natural world.

When people pull together, we can regenerate ecosystems at scale to enhance livelihoods, counteract climate change, and stop biodiversity loss. We need to act now, which is why the *UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration*, launched in 2021, is a rallying call for the protection and revival of ecosystems on every continent and in every ocean.

To make this happen, now more than ever, we need new models to drive people to restore and protect the natural ecosystems they inhabit. Since 2014, a growing movement of local and international organisations across the world have been implementing one such model — the *4 Returns Framework*.

This guidebook shares the lessons learned from more than a decade of testing the *4 Returns Framework*, to help you get started, move faster, overcome common hurdles, and create greater impact with your landscape initiative. We need all hands on deck to help transform societies away from degrading towards restoring nature.

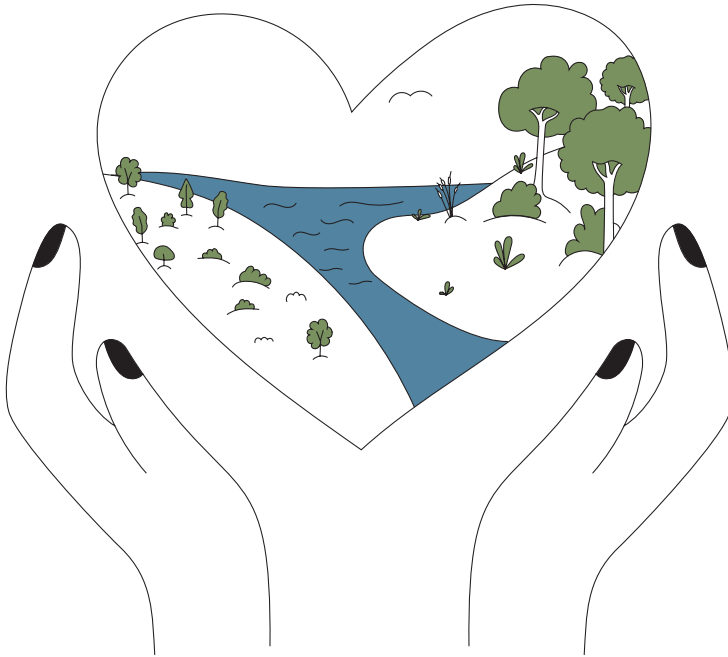
### **What does holistic landscape restoration mean?**

Holistic landscape restoration is an approach to restoring landscapes which offers more than just ecological benefits. Landscapes become more climate-resilient, as well as more socially and economically prosperous. By bringing people together to restore their landscape, it can build social cohesion and capital among and between communities, as well as serving as the backbone of thriving local and regional economies. And because it benefits multiple sectors and stakeholder groups, holistic landscape restoration can contribute to a more resilient and sustainable future in line with global climate and nature targets.

### **What is the 4 Returns Framework?**

An approach to restoring landscapes holistically, the *4 Returns Framework* enables anyone — no matter their background — to understand how to go about restoring their local ecosystem with other people. By giving everyone a seat at the table, the *4 Returns Framework* aims to generate benefits for all stakeholders in a landscape, whether they are individual people, the communities they are part of, the natural ecosystems they inhabit, or the businesses that rely upon the ecosystems for raw materials. Benefits to all stakeholders can be monitored with the indicators of the *4 Returns Framework*, tailored to landscape specific

monitoring needs. The results can then be utilised to showcase progress to actors inside and outside the landscape, such as local businesses and farmers, or policy makers, financiers, and governments.



### **How to use this guidebook**

There are six sections in this guidebook, starting with *Foundation*, which explains the *4 Returns Framework* in more depth, with tips for getting started. The remaining sections are each dedicated to one of the 5 Elements of the *4 Returns Framework*. The 5 Elements help make holistic landscape restoration practical. A host of tools, methods, and other resources are provided to help you dive deeper and apply the knowledge to your own landscape initiative. Each section ends with a number of lined pages that you can use to take notes and reflect.

In practice, the 5 Elements are not usually implemented in a step-by-step order. So, this guidebook is not meant to be read from cover to cover. Feel free to jump into those chapters that are most relevant to you. Each section's introduction will navigate you towards the information, tools, and resources that you need.

The guidebook does not aim to be a blueprint, guaranteeing certain outcomes — every landscape is unique after all! Rather, it provides advice, sharing principles and experiences, without prescribing what you should do. To benefit from the guidance, you will have to apply the tools and principles according to the needs of your landscape.

The use of “we” in this guidebook refers to Commonland. However, the knowledge within it has been gained from the collective experiences of a global network of landscape restoration practitioners who have been testing and learning with the *4 Returns Framework*. We see this as a collective achievement. Furthermore, the guidebook is enriched with the knowledge, tools, and methods developed in our partnership with Wetlands International and the Landscape Finance Lab.

As the number of people adopting the *4 Returns Framework* is growing worldwide, so is our collective knowledge about this approach. This is the first time we have shared our insights in a guidebook and there will be opportunities for improvement in future versions. Please send your suggestions, questions, ideas, or other remarks, so that we can consider them for updates, to: [info@commonland.com](mailto:info@commonland.com).

This guidebook can be found online on the 4 Returns platform: the knowledge platform for the 4 Returns community. This is also where many of the tools and resources are published. The online guidebook will be updated more regularly.<sup>1</sup>

1

Find the full guidebook at [4returns.commonland.com](http://4returns.commonland.com)

2

This refers to the *Everyone a Changemaker* approach developed by Ashoka, Commonland’s collaborating partner in Europe. Learn more on [ashoka.org](http://ashoka.org)

### **Who is this guidebook for?**

Everyone can be a changemaker,<sup>2</sup> with the right knowledge, skills, and attitude! So, if you want to get involved in holistic landscape restoration using the *4 Returns Framework* — and take others along on the journey — this guidebook is for you. Perhaps you work at a landscape restoration project, or on climate or nature finance at a local, national, or international NGO or government, or you might be a community activist or social entrepreneur. In this guidebook, “landscape restoration practitioner” refers to any individual or organisation that works on (holistic) landscape restoration and is typically based locally in that landscape. It may also be relevant to those who fund or invest in holistic landscape restoration and are interested in learning more about the practical side. And, finally, if you’re not engaged in an established landscape initiative, but are interested in learning about it, this guidebook is also for you!



## THE 4 RETURNS FRAMEWORK: HOW DID IT START AND WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Willem Ferwerda, a former IUCN Netherlands Director and an experienced tropical ecologist, developed the 4 Returns in 2012 from a realisation that to achieve sustainable, on-the-ground change, a long-term, large-scale, and community-driven approach to nature restoration was needed. He was inspired by the *Ecosystem Approach* — a strategy endorsed by the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP5) in 2000 for managing land, water, and living resources in an integrated, sustainable, and fair way. Inspiration also came from a meeting in 2009 with John D Liu, a Chinese American filmmaker who documented the rehabilitation programme on the Chinese Loess plateau in his documentary *Hope in a Changing Climate* (2009).<sup>3</sup> Willem worked with Liu on the documentary series *Green Gold 1* (2012)<sup>4</sup> and *Green Gold 2* (2014).<sup>5</sup> The *4 Returns Framework* was first published by the IUCN Commission Ecosystem and Erasmus University in 2012 and updated in 2015. One of the first lectures on the *4 Returns Framework* was held in Qatar in 2014, on the second international forum of the IUCN Commission on Ecosystem Management.<sup>6</sup>

In 2013, Willem founded Commonland with the aim to test and use the *4 Returns Framework* at scale through local landscape partnerships. Our first long-term partnerships were established in Spain, South Africa, the Netherlands, and Australia between 2014-2016. In 2019, a partnership was set up in India. Through these partnerships, we've learnt many lessons, gained inspiration, and accumulated evidence. We now support partners in more than 20 countries worldwide to restore landscapes — and we keep learning with them every day! The *4 Returns Framework* has been developed further based on implementation and experimentation in all these landscapes. You can find out more about our landscape partnerships on our website.<sup>7</sup>

The *4 Returns Framework* is now being adopted by a growing movement of local and international organisations. Since 2021, Wetlands International has embraced this approach, emphasising the role of wetlands as connectors between different zones in any landscape. The Landscape Finance Lab has also adopted the approach and, in partnership with Commonland and Wetlands International, has developed and tested the *4 Returns Framework* further. Since 2022, the 1000 Landscapes for 1 Billion People (1000L) initiative — convened by EcoAgriculture Partners and co-led with the Rainforest Alliance, Commonland, Conservation International, the United Nations Development Programme, and Tech Matters — has been working to accelerate integrated landscape management

<sup>3</sup> Find the documentary on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), search for: *Hope in a Changing Climate*

<sup>4</sup> Find the documentary on [www.vpro.nl](https://www.vpro.nl), search for: *Green Gold John Lui*

<sup>5</sup> Find the documentary on [www.vpro.nl](https://www.vpro.nl), search for: *Green Gold 2: Regreening the Desert*

<sup>6</sup> *Proceedings of the Second International Forum of the Qur'anic Botanic Garden*, page 121-135. Find it on [portals.iucn.org/library](https://portals.iucn.org/library), search for: *Proceedings of the Second International Forum*

<sup>7</sup> Visit our website [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Landscape Partnerships*

8

Find out more about the Presencing Institute on [presencinginstitute.org](https://presencinginstitute.org)

9

The five organisations are the Global Canopy Programme (GCP), EcoAgriculture Partners, the Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

10

The Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), EcoAgriculture Partners, the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), GmbH on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF), the Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Tropenbos International, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Bank as part of its support to the TerrAfrica Secretariat, WWF, and the *UN Decade for Ecosystem Restoration*.

11

Dudley, N., Baker, C., Chatterton, P., Ferwerda, W.H., Gutierrez, V., Madgwick, J., 2021. *The 4 Returns Framework for Landscape Restoration*.

12

[panda.org](https://panda.org), search for: *Landscape Elements*

using the *4 Returns Framework*, with tools, finance, and connections. Commonland also has a longstanding relationship with the Presencing Institute,<sup>8</sup> which supports people all over the world in using *Theory U* for awareness-based systems change.

In recent years, we have set up regional learning networks that offer people who are restoring landscapes the opportunity to find support, learn together, and mutually share their on-the-ground experience. The Bioregional Weaving Labs Collective and Ubuntu Labs combine *Theory U* and the *4 Returns Framework* into one integrated learning programme for local changemakers. The effort and commitment of all these communities and partnerships have allowed the *4 Returns Framework* and knowledge base to be what it is today.

The 5 Elements of holistic landscape management were first identified in the *Little Sustainable Landscape Book*, based on the practical experience of five organisations<sup>9</sup> and endorsed by 15 organisations,<sup>10</sup> in 2015. These are now an integral part of the *4 Returns Framework*, as mentioned in the *UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration* publication in 2021 created by Wetlands International, the Landscape Finance Lab, and Commonland.<sup>11</sup> They were later named the “5 Elements”<sup>12</sup> for the sake of consistency. Since 2022, the 1000L initiative has also adopted the 5 Elements as part of the *4 Returns Framework*, as laid out in the *Integrated Landscape Management Practical Guide* published in 2022.

# Process

## 5 Elements

Our landscape restoration process consists of 5 Elements.

- 
- Establish a **landscape partnership**
- 
- Develop a **shared understanding**
- 
- Build a **landscape vision and plan**
- 
- Take **collective action**
- 
- Carry out **monitoring and learning**
- 

# Impact

## 4 Returns

Our landscape restoration framework delivers 4 types of returns to the landscape and its stakeholders.



### Return of inspiration

Increased connection to the landscape, motivating stewardship



### Social returns

Bringing back jobs, social connections, and effective governance for more resilient communities



### Natural returns

Healthier ecosystems: soil, water, and biodiversity



### Financial returns

Long-term economic resilience and prosperity for communities and businesses



# Landscapes

## 3 Zones

For successful landscape restoration we distinguish, restore, and connect 3 types of zones.

### Natural Zone

Regenerating a landscape's ecological foundation by restoring nature and increasing biodiversity

### Combined Zone

Combining sustainable economic production and ecological regeneration through holistic activities like regenerative agriculture and sustainable aquaculture

### Economic Zone

Delivering sustainable economic productivity through dedicated areas for value-creating activities, such as processing



# Time

## 20+ Years

Successful systematic landscape restoration takes one generation, or 20+ Years.



A minimum of 20 Years, or one generation, is needed to successfully implement large-scale integrated landscape management.

A place for notes

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing notes.

# Foundation



## RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND METHODS

The *5 Elements Scorecard* by the Landscape Finance Lab, 2021 developed in 2021, is an assessment that can reveal the potential for developing a holistic landscape approach in your area. It will identify key entry points for getting started on your journey.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *5 Elements Scorecard*

This is where your 4 Returns journey starts. In this section, you'll learn more about the foundation of this guidebook: the *4 Returns Framework*. In the chapter *(The 4 Returns Framework)*, we explore the need for holistic landscape restoration and the solution that the *4 Returns Framework* provides. Following this, we deep-dive into the themes that make up the 4 Returns in the chapter *(Unpacking the 4 Returns)*. We share stories that show the diverse ways in which landscape activities can create real impact. Finally, the chapter *(How to get started)* offers inspiration for your first steps. Stories here reveal that getting started can differ widely in different contexts. We also explore a range of mindsets that fit well with a 4 Returns approach – for you to take on the rest of your journey.

# The 4 Returns Framework

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- ➔ Landscape degradation is at the root of multiple crises facing the world. That's why landscape restoration holds significant potential as a source of solutions.
- ➔ The *4 Returns Framework* helps bring a variety of stakeholders to a shared understanding of holistic landscape restoration.
- ➔ The *4 Returns Framework* includes the 4 Returns, 3 Zones, 20+ Years, and the 5 Elements for implementation.

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## Why landscape restoration?

Landscapes are fundamental to our existence. They provide us with food, water, clean air, materials, a balanced climate, and more. These are known in technical terms as ecosystem services.

Without ecosystem services, we cannot survive. Degraded landscapes make communities vulnerable to risks such as flooding, drought, fires, invasive species, and landslides. Farmers lose production while jobs and business opportunities dry up. Social fabric becomes more fragile. People lose pride and hope in their landscapes and may decide to leave for the city. Globally, this drives instability, displacement, and conflict.

The challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to halt landscape degradation and transform it into landscape restoration, leading to an entirely new landscape restoration industry. This is far from easy. Landscape degradation continues to accelerate, eroding our systems of life support. According to the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), land degradation negatively impacts 3.2 billion people worldwide.<sup>1</sup> According to the *UNCCD Global Land Outlook*,<sup>2</sup> humans have already transformed more than 70% of Earth's land area, causing unparalleled environmental degradation and contributing significantly to global warming. Already disadvantaged and at-risk

<sup>1</sup> IPBES, 2018. *Summary for policymakers of the assessment report on land degradation and restoration of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany.

<sup>2</sup> UNCCD, 2022. *Summary for Decision Makers. Global Land Outlook*, second edition. United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, Bonn, Germany

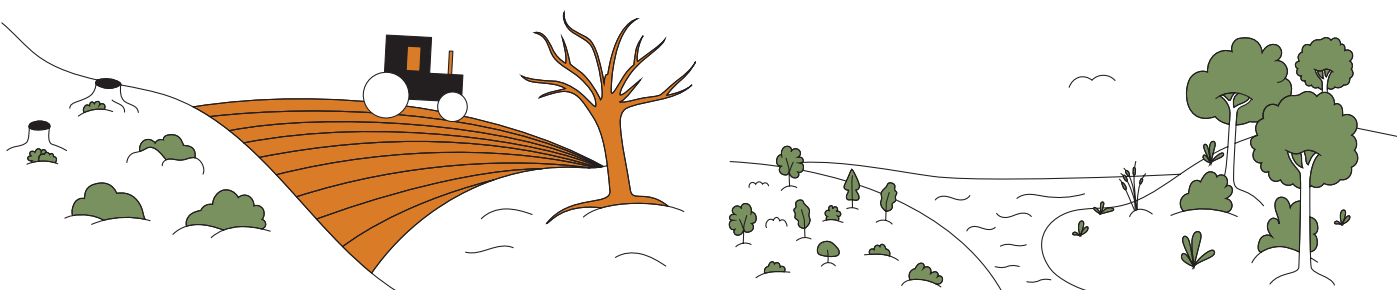
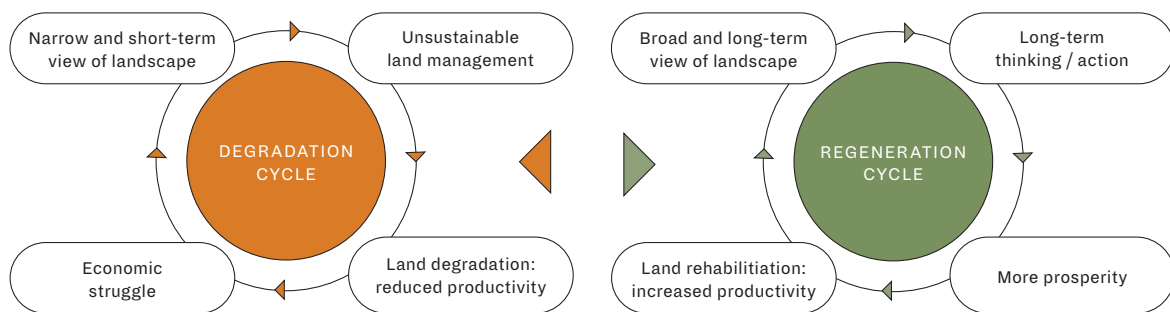
③  
 FAO, 2020. Find more on [fao.org](http://fao.org),  
 search for: *Desertification and  
 Land Degradation*

groups are disproportionately affected by the consequences of land degradation, drought, and desertification. The area of degraded land is increasing by 12 million hectares each year — about 32 soccer pitches per minute. ③

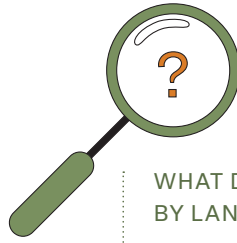
Many serious issues facing the world can be traced back to degrading landscapes. If climate change, biodiversity loss, food security, and mass migration are to be tackled at source, landscape restoration must be at the centre of the solution.

There are barriers to overcome if we are to reverse landscape degradation. To people, degradation appears slow compared with the length of a human life. It is complex because it is shaped by geological, ecological, climatic, cultural, spiritual, social, economic, and political forces. These issues make it difficult to pinpoint exactly where degradation comes from. This often leaves current landowners and land users in tricky situations, unable to leave the land, of which they perceive themselves as stewards, in a healthy state for future generations.

But just as landscapes can be degraded, they can also be restored. By “landscape restoration” we do not mean restoration to a state it was in the past. The landscape can never be the same again because humans and other lifeforms evolve and the interactions in the ecosystem are dynamic. Rather, we aim to restore the “functioning” of the landscape — ecologically, socially, and economically — so that it is resilient to future changes. That’s why the term regeneration is often used. We want to transform the cycle of degradation to one of regeneration. A regenerative landscape aligns human activities with the landscape and its ecosystems. The goal is healthy landscapes that benefit all — nature, people, community, and business.







#### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY LANDSCAPE?

A landscape is a socio-ecological system that consists of interconnected natural or human-modified land and water ecosystems. It is influenced by geology, climate, flora, fauna, and micro-organisms as well as historical, economic, socio-cultural, and political processes. Where water is the dominant feature, this can also be referred to as a wetland landscape. Where oceans are predominant, this can be referred to as a seascape.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Modified from *The Little Sustainable Landscapes Book*. Find on [globalcanopy.org](http://globalcanopy.org), search for: *The Little Sustainable Landscape Book*

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## The 4 Returns Framework

Landscapes play a wide range of roles in people's lives — as places to live, make a living or profit, or areas to cultivate or let flourish for their own sake. So, it's understandable that different groups of people have their own way of seeing the landscape and their own way of talking about it.

An important part of landscape restoration is bringing stakeholders together to share their views. They can come to appreciate each other's perspectives better and, eventually, realise that they have a shared interest in living and working in a healthy landscape.

To aid this process of alignment, the *4 Returns Framework* uses a common language that can be understood by anyone, no matter their background, who is collaborating with others to reverse landscape degradation.

## 4 RETURNS

The foundation of the *4 Returns Framework* lies in the recognition that land management focused solely on maximising profit per hectare ultimately leads to landscape degradation, manifesting as four distinct losses. Through holistic landscape restoration guided by the *4 Returns Framework*, these losses can be transformed into tangible returns benefitting all stakeholders involved. These 4 Losses are:

- Loss of purpose or hope
- Loss of livelihoods and social cohesion
- Loss of biodiversity, soil, and water
- Loss of economic value

By regenerating the landscape, we create 4 Returns:

- **Return of inspiration.** Increased connection to the landscape, motivating stewardship
- **Social returns.** Bringing back jobs, social connections, and effective governance for more resilient communities
- **Natural returns.** Healthier ecosystems: soil, water, and biodiversity
- **Financial returns.** Long-term economic resilience and prosperity for communities and businesses

We dive deeper into each of these returns in the chapter *Unpacking the 4 Returns* [page 33].



### RETURN OF INSPIRATION

Connecting people to the landscape and motivating them to care for nature: planting seeds of hope for a brighter future



### NATURAL RETURNS

Restoring biodiversity and soils for healthy and resilient landscapes: reviving nature



### SOCIAL RETURNS

Bringing back jobs, social connections, and effective governance: the building blocks of thriving, resilient communities

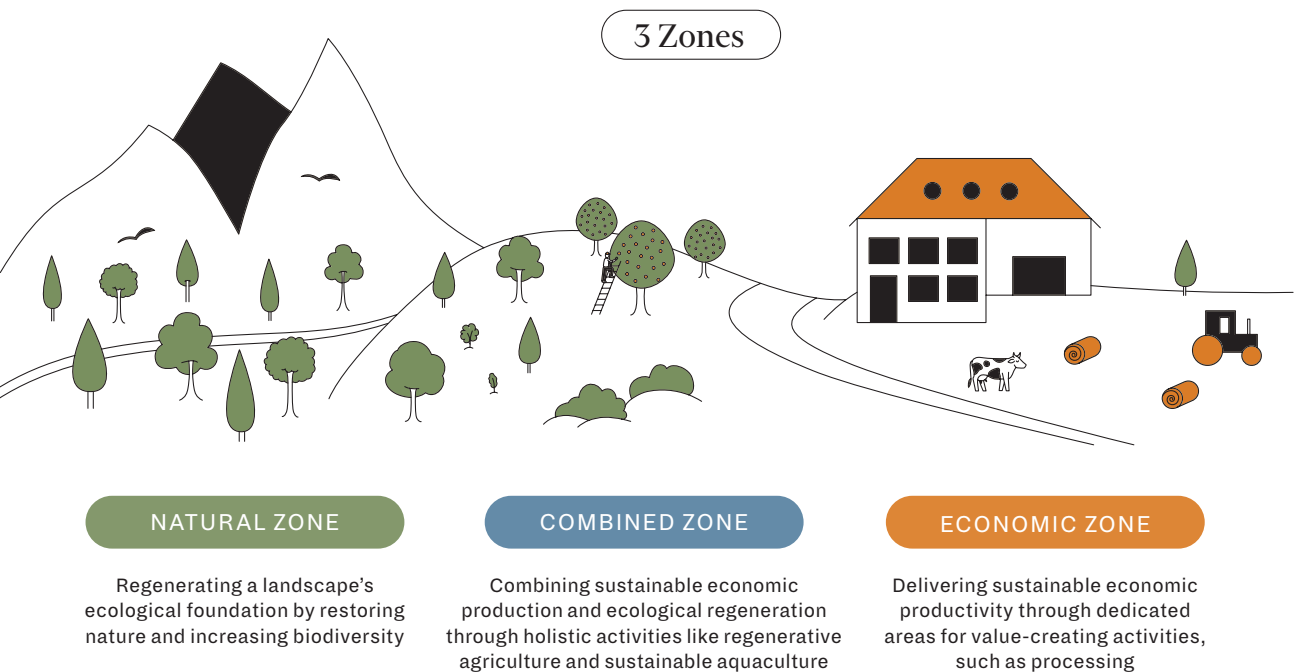


### FINANCIAL RETURNS

Creating long-term economic prosperity and resilience for communities via new business models and income streams

## 3 ZONES

We identify 3 Zones in a landscape to show stakeholders how the area's various purposes can co-exist. The 3 Zones are called natural, combined, and economic.



In **natural zones**, the aim is to conserve nature and, if necessary, to regenerate or rewild the ecological foundation by restoring native vegetation, natural habitats, and natural connectivity through wetlands and water flows. Natural zones provide resilience against climate change, droughts, floods, disease, and other threats. For many people, pristine nature also has a religious or spiritual meaning. In many natural zones, you will find protected areas or national parks, as well as places where rewilding can take place. Natural zones also include ecological corridors to connect protected areas. Here the landscape goal is often to boost, protect, and connect the natural zones.

In **combined zones**, sustainable production and the regeneration of biodiversity and ecological functioning are combined. Here, natural, economic, and cultural ecosystems exist side by side. The combined zone is usually absent in a landscape because land use is often divided into either a natural zone, which needs protection, or an economic zone, which needs maximum return on investment per hectare. The goal in this zone is to shift to regenerative production systems, such as regenerative agriculture, agroforestry, rotational grazing, polyculture plantations, paludiculture (farming on rewetted peat), and sustainable aquaculture-mangrove systems.

**Economic zones** deliver sustainable economic productivity, with dedicated areas for value-adding activities such as processing. They are typically highly transformed parts of the landscape, such as industrial and urban areas, where hard infrastructure prevails. The goal is often to reduce pollution, boost local economic activity, and keep expansion in check.

All 3 Zones can have a place within a landscape and are interdependent. Recognising the zones helps to create a better shared understanding of their influence on the landscape and what it needs to thrive. As a tool, it can be used to identify the zones of future initiatives. The 3 Zones can be applied to farms as well as at landscape scale. Wetlands connect the 3 Zones through water flowing above and below ground.

The chapter *Defining the landscape* [page 105] explains the 3 Zones approach in detail.

## 20+ YEARS

Transformation of a landscape needs long-term thinking and action. A minimum of one generation, or 20 Years, is a realistic time to successfully implement large-scale landscape restoration with all stakeholders. From an ecological point of view, 20 years is short. This duration stretches beyond traditional funding and planning cycles of two or three years. Thinking on a scale of 20+ Years opens a pathway to multigenerational thinking. It shows what activities are worth doing, even if they do not pay off in the short term. It shifts the focus of policymakers, funders, communities, and businesses to the kind of timescales the land needs to be restored.



While a long-term view is always necessary, some returns can be achieved early in the process. For example, it is possible to inspire people and deliver social benefits to local communities within the first few years of a landscape programme. Because every context is different, it is not realistic to prescribe strict timelines for specific steps in the process. The timelines in this guidebook are drawn from the experiences of landscape restoration practitioners implementing the 4 Returns and serve as inspiration.

20+ YEARS

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## THE 5 ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

Now that you know about the 4 Returns of holistic landscape restoration, the different zones, and the long-term thinking required, it's time to learn about getting started.

You will need to engage people and inspire them to collaborate towards a shared goal, which might seem daunting at first. The 5 Elements will support you in doing this successfully. They are the crucial phases and benchmarks that guide landscape restoration practitioners through the process of putting holistic landscape restoration into practice with the *4 Returns Framework*.

### Element 1

Establish a landscape partnership. At the core of all these steps are the partnerships that are fostered.

### Element 2

Develop a shared understanding. Building a shared frame of reference for decision making

### Element 3

Build a landscape vision and plan. Setting a desired future state and translating it into an action plan

### Element 4

Take collective action. Think big, start small, act fast with activities that deliver lessons and impact.

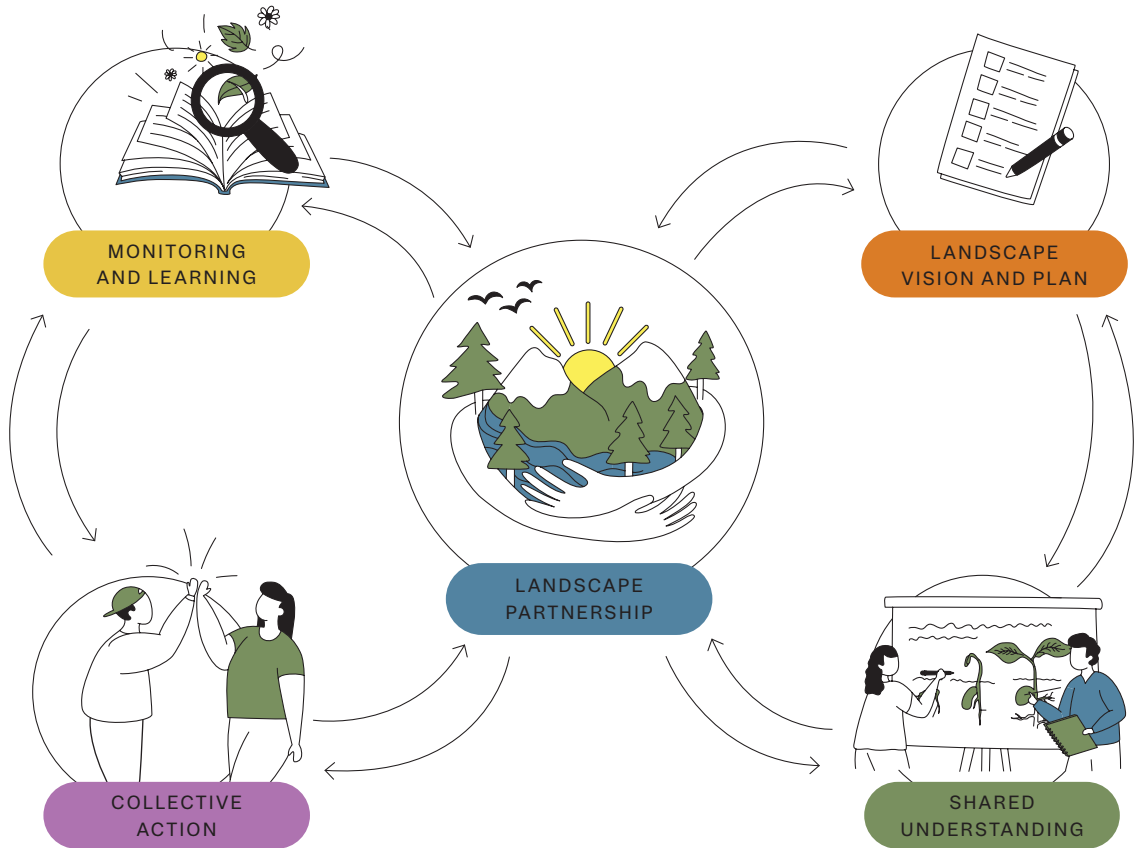
### Element 5

Carry out monitoring and learning. Reflect, learn, and adapt.

The 5 Elements create a structured approach to landscape restoration. Every element is important, and they depend on each other for success. They help explain the journey towards achieving the 4 Returns over the long term. They make it easier to align the landscape planning process with what is going on in the landscape already, guided by clear outcomes. They also facilitate learning and exchange with other landscape restoration initiatives.

The 5 Elements are described here in a logical order, but they are rarely followed one after the other. It's fine to circle back and repeat phases whenever necessary. Holistic landscape restoration is a continuous process, which is why we here depict the 5 Elements as an infinity loop with the landscape partnership taking central place.

## 5 Elements

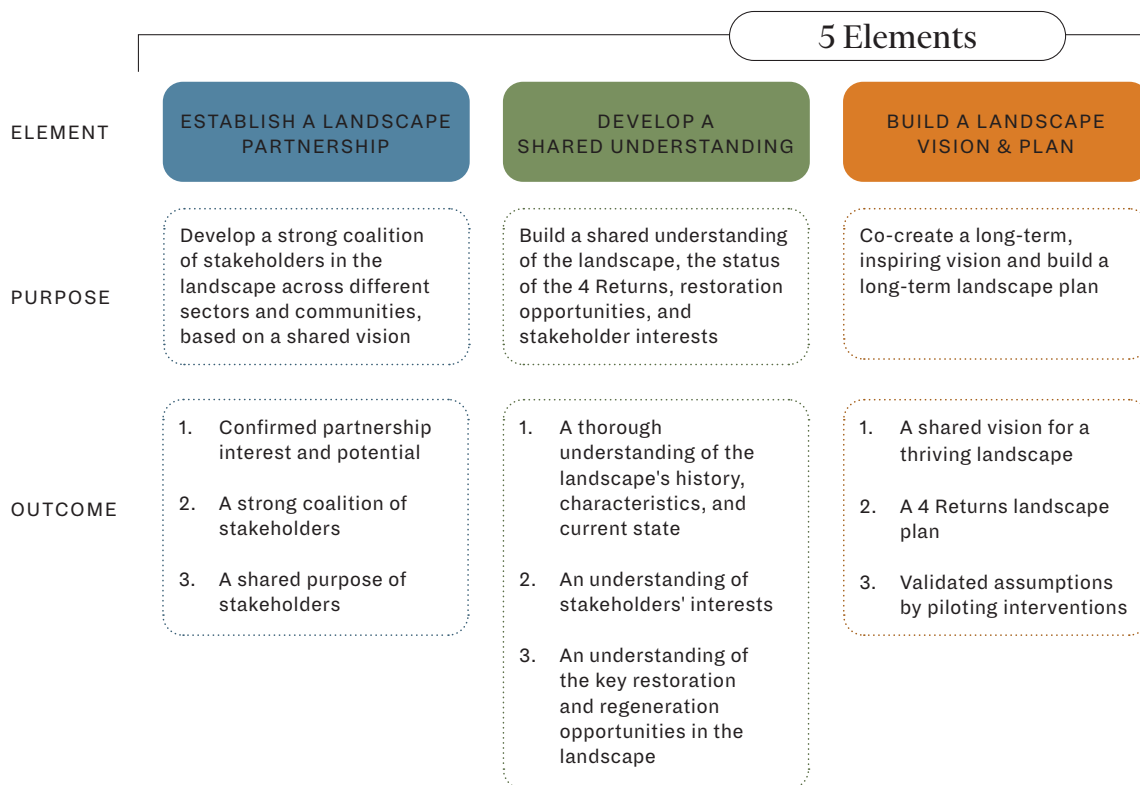


### Applying the 5 Elements in the landscape

All 5 Elements deserve adequate attention and investment. From a business-as-usual point of view, taking action is the most crucial step because it delivers results, which justifies the continued existence of the landscape partnership. Taking action follows the vision and action phase. These two elements tend to attract most attention and funding. Developing a shared vision and collective plan, however, requires a strong landscape partnership in which stakeholders align their interests with a shared understanding of the state of the landscape, and what needs to change. A landscape partnership that is fragmented and lacking coherent vision will struggle to implement holistic restoration activities and deliver the 4 Returns impact. Establishing a strong foundation requires investment in skills, funding, and time — areas that are often overlooked. Impact and learning may be addressed in reports to funders, but it is also important to learn from experience and continuously adapt. Overall, the ability to deliver the 4 Returns impact in the long-term, in a rapidly evolving context, depends on addressing all 5 Elements and their clear outcomes.



In this guidebook, you will find advice and practical methods to support the implementation of each element. For each element, we explore the purpose, suggested methods, and envisaged outcomes. Some methods and tools can be used to support more than one element. For example, the 4 Returns diagnosis helps stakeholders to create a **shared understanding** (Element 2) and will also be a solid foundation to inform the **vision and planning** (Element 3).



### Getting ready

You can check the status of your initiative with the 5 Elements Scorecard. This assessment can reveal the potential for developing a holistic landscape approach in your area. It will identify key entry points to getting started on your journey. It is helpful to use the scorecard at the beginning of engagement with two to five key partners in a landscape. It might highlight that while a stakeholder mapping process has been conducted, a multi-stakeholder partnership is yet to be set up, for example. Such a partnership will be essential to maintain momentum for restoration and build an economy around regenerative practices in the long term. Each landscape will have specific considerations and entry points along the 5 Elements. Understanding these can help landscape partners to develop the most appropriate plan for holistic landscape restoration.

↓ The 5 Elements, their purpose and main outcomes.

## 5 Elements

### TAKE COLLECTIVE ACTION

Coordinate implementation of the landscape plan and develop a long-term finance and business development plan

1. Implemented interventions of the 4 Returns landscape plan
2. A landscape investment portfolio to attract finance and investments
3. Regenerative businesses involved or developed

### CARRY OUT MONITORING & LEARNING

Evaluate the 4 Returns impact in the landscape, reflect on lessons learned, and (if needed) adjust the landscape plan

1. A monitoring and evaluation plan for adaptive management and accountability
2. Communication of impact and lessons learned to inspire others and mobilise further support

4 Returns in 5 Zones



### LEARN MORE

Find out how to use the 5 Elements Scorecard on the 4 Returns platform.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: 5 Elements Scorecard

Learn more about the 4 Returns Framework:

*The 4 Returns Framework for landscape restoration.* UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration Report published by Commonland, Wetlands International, the Landscape Finance Lab, and IUCN Commission on Ecosystem Management. (Dudley, N., Baker, C., Chatterton, P., Ferwerda, W.H., Gutierrez, V., Madgwick, J., 2021).

→ [commonland.com/publications](https://commonland.com/publications), search for: 4 Returns Framework for Landscape Restoration

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## From framework to practice

How do we put the *4 Returns Framework* into practice? This guidebook aims to show how the framework and related tools and processes can be applied across various contexts to support holistic landscape restoration.

Throughout the text, you'll find references to *Theory U*, a social transformation framework for systems changes. There are many helpful methodologies for social transformation and stakeholder engagement processes. Commonland has found *Theory U* particularly helpful in the context of landscape restoration because it is designed for achieving transformative outcomes. How *Theory U* and the 4 Returns work together is described in the chapter *Creating spaces of belonging* [page 84]. It also highlights other tools and processes for stakeholder engagement, including the *Mutual Gains Approach*.

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## What's next?

We are about to dive deeper into each of the 4 Returns. What do they consist of, and how can they be applied in practice?

Healthy soil in the Dutch Peat  
Meadows. Photography: Tom Baas,  
↓ Commonland.



# Unpacking the 4 Returns

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- For each of the 4 Returns, themes can be distinguished.
- The returns interact with each other and strengthen each other. The interaction map on page 33 shows these interactions.
- The themes of the return of inspiration are awareness, behavioral change, and connection to the landscape.
- The themes of social returns are knowledge and skills development, strong networks, social equity and governance, employment and better working conditions, and community resilience.
- The themes of natural returns are: area being conserved and restored, ecosystems and biodiversity, soil, water, and carbon.
- The themes of financial returns are business development, mobilisation of finance, access to sustainable markets and favourable market conditions, land user and business profitability, and household income.

Through holistic landscape restoration, we can transform the four major losses resulting from landscape degradation into the 4 Returns resulting from a healthy landscape and thriving community. This is possible in any landscape around the world. How it is achieved, however, depends on context. It can be challenging to know where to focus your action and how to measure results. This chapter breaks down each return and shows how they interact. Inspirational stories from diverse landscapes bring the theory to life.

Note that most of the stories in this chapter were shared by Commonland's partners in 2022. With each subsequent cycle of impact reporting, we build our knowledge.

## Based on real experience

We have identified the themes of each of the 4 Returns based on interviews with 4 Returns landscape restoration practitioners in 2023. The table below shows an overview of the themes and sub-themes, and they are explained further in this chapter. The chapter *Monitoring the 4 Returns* [page 274] details how to monitor these themes.

In the table below, “output and outcome” refer to themes where a practitioner has a direct effect. “Impact” is a practitioner’s ultimate aim, but here, external factors come into play too.



↑ Themes and subthemes of the 4 Returns.

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## A web of effects

Looking at all the possible themes, a landscape restoration practitioners may start anywhere by setting up businesses, doing restoration work in the landscape, or inspiring land users to change their behaviour. But the real magic happens when activities are combined because the different returns interact and strengthen each other. By working holistically, the whole impact will be greater than the sum of its parts. So, instead of focusing on the effect of one theme, we need to look at the interactions between them all.

The different returns strengthen each other.  
By working holistically, the whole impact will  
be greater than the sum of its parts.

Simplifying the interactions between the 4 Returns and with the activities of practitioners can help us understand how change occurs in a landscape and how working towards different returns should enhance landscape impact. The interaction map shows how different aspects of each return interact. Please note that this map of interaction simplifies the reality on the ground. There are many other factors that influence the landscape, and there are many assumptions that are not explicit in the map. The value of the map, however, is that it allows us to imagine how the 4 Returns strengthen each other and how holistic work is different from focusing on just one or two issues.

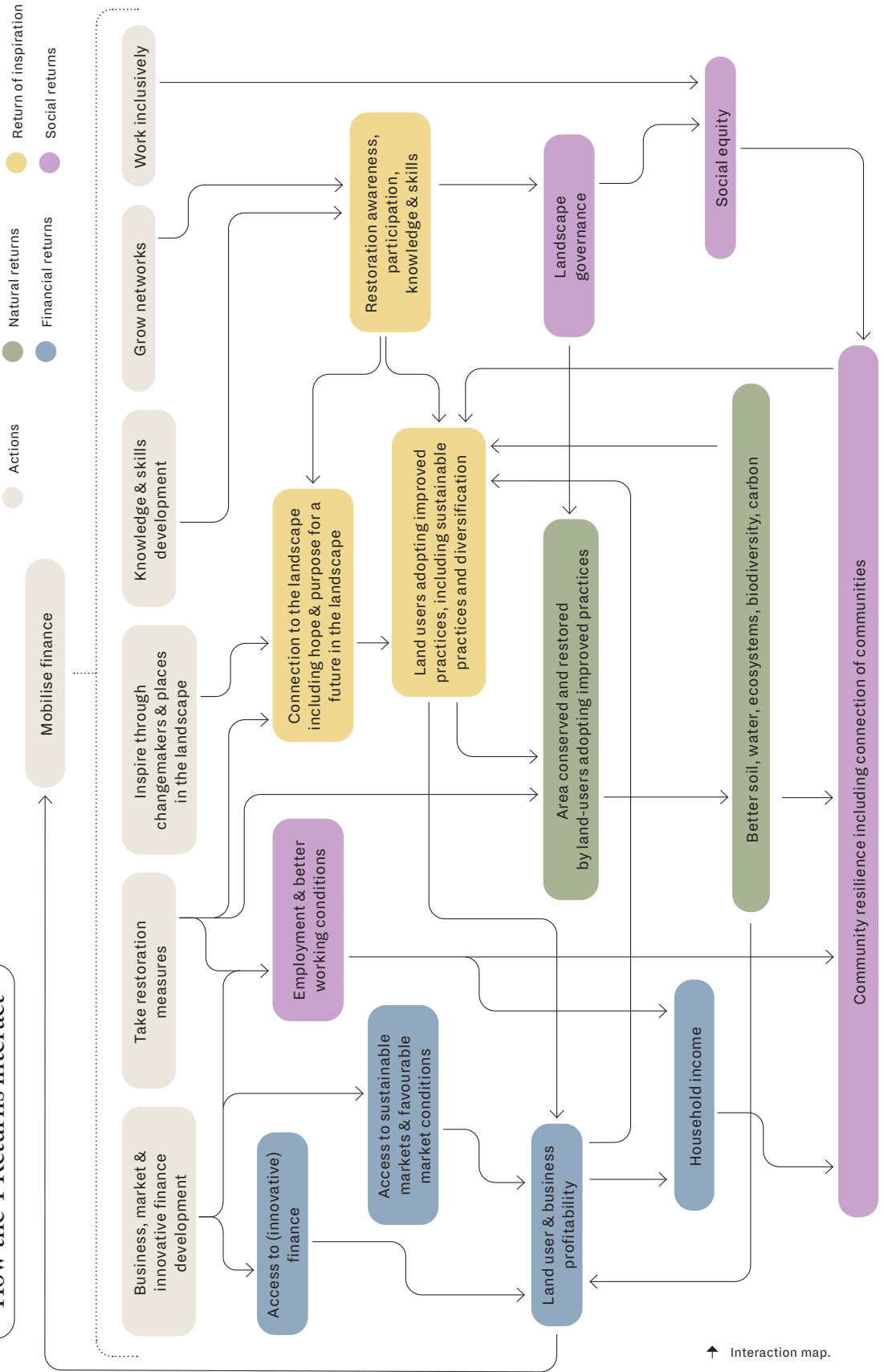
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### HOW TO READ THE INTERACTION MAP

The grey blocks categorise any activity that a practitioner could implement in the landscape. From each activity, arrows lead to different blocks reflecting the themes. The themes also interact with each other. You also see feedback loops. The most important feedback loop is when positive effects occur on any return in the landscape. This motivates land users to adopt improved practices.

Each arrow represents an assumption about how we expect change to happen. Following the arrows reveals a possible pathway to impact, for example: restoration work can create jobs that increase household incomes. This should improve household resilience, also increasing the resilience of communities facing adverse events. In a more resilient communities, we assume that land users would be more likely to appreciate the benefits of sustainable practices and adopt them on their land. Land managed with improved practices will strengthen natural returns, making both the landscape and the community more resilient. This feedback loop shows how each restoration activity can lead to replication, multiplying its effects.

# How the 4 Returns interact



↑ Interaction map.



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## Return of inspiration

When a landscape is degraded, people may stop noticing its beauty, lose pride in their roots, lose their connection to nature, and stop caring for the land. Place and culture are important parts of many people's identity, so identifying with a landscape that is being degraded can cause distress and even loss of identity.

Landscape restoration initiatives can help bring back a sense of hope and pride to local communities. The *4 Returns Framework* is set apart from other approaches to landscape restoration by the inclusion of inspiration. It may also be the return that is most elusive or difficult to explain.

What is inspiration? Linguistically, inspiration relates to our connection to the spirit (inspire, spirit, and spiritual come from the same linguistic stem). The Oxford Dictionary defines inspiration on an individual level as “the process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something, especially to do something creative”. It's personal but it is something everyone can experience and so it is also universal.

The return of inspiration can take the form of:

- ➔ Individual inspiration. People stimulated to do something with a deep motivation, sparking creativity to take on something new
- ➔ Collective inspiration. A group of people experiencing inspiration, creating a collective vision, and being committed to act on this

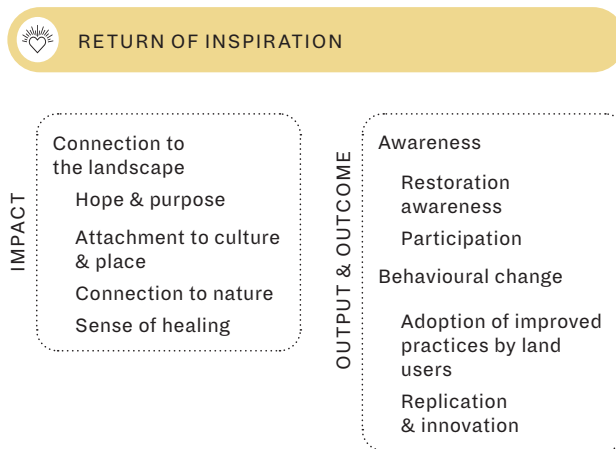
Both individual and collective inspiration create psychological effects, such as a sense of connection to the landscape, purpose, hope, place, cultural attachment, meaningfulness, and healing.

In the context of holistic landscape restoration, we define the return of inspiration as an increased connection to the landscape, motivating stewardship.

“Inspiration has a personal component (to be inspired inside, inspired to do something creative) but it can also happen at the community level (we can inspire each other as a group or as an organisation). So, the very first question to ask ourselves is: What inspires me?”

ASTRID VARGAS, Founder, Inspiration 4 Action, and Founding member, AIVelAI

BREAKING IT DOWN



Inspiration starts with **awareness**, or: knowing, perceiving, and being cognisant of something. This can be caused by sources of inspiration — places or people in the landscape which show that things can be done differently. They might embody cultural inspiration, including spiritual traditions such as honouring sacred places, holy trees, or rituals. In other cases, communication and organised events lead to restoration awareness and participation. Restoration awareness is essentially about individual and communal awareness of the whole, provoking a holistic approach to landscape restoration.

## LANDSCAPE STORY: AWARENESS

In the Altiplano Estepario landscape in Spain, Inspiration 4 Action<sup>①</sup> develops inspirational approaches through co-creation, collective leadership, art, and creative bottom-up initiatives. Its film, *Head, Heart, and Hands*,<sup>②</sup> which features voices of local changemakers, offers practical solutions to desertification and the decline of life in their landscape. Another project is comprised of large regenerative sculptures made from plants, which beautify the landscape, serve as an educational resource, restore the ecosystem, and, when planted in the community, strengthen the bonds between people. One example is AIVelAI 8000, which covers the area of three football pitches, and reproduces 8,000-year-old cave art in living form. Another is made of large hedgerows of aromatic plants arranged in the shape of a butterfly to feed butterflies. The sculptures are planned and planted by a group of organisations, Inspiration 4 Action, A Regenerar, the Alliance for Regenerative Education, and local schools and municipalities.

①  
Learn more on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Inspiration  
4 Action*

②  
Find it on [headheartandhands.site](https://headheartandhands.site)

A butterfly sculpture planted in the Altiplano Estepario landscape, by Inspiration 4 Action, A Regenerar, the Alliance for Regenerative Education, and local schools and municipalities.  
↓  
Photography: A Regenerar.



Another theme of the return of inspiration — connection to the landscape — is about the relationships people gain with the landscape, other people, and nature. These improve people’s well-being (see “benefits of inspiration” above). Connection to the landscape increases people’s motivation to care for it and to adopt better practices.

Subthemes of connection are:

- ➔ Inspired people feeling hope and purpose for the landscape again, and seeing a future for themselves in the landscape
- ➔ Greater attachment to the landscape and the culture, as well as a sense of pride in it
- ➔ A strengthened connection to nature that leads to individuals absorbing nature as part of their identity<sup>5</sup>
- ➔ A sense of healing which is experienced as improved mental or physical health due to restoration

<sup>5</sup> Schultz, P. W., 2002. *Inclusion with nature: The psychology of human-nature relations*. In P. W. Schmueck & W. P. Schultz (Eds.), *Psychology of sustainable development*. page 62-78, Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic.

### LANDSCAPE STORY: CONNECTION TO THE LANDSCAPE

In the Dutch Peat Meadows in the Netherlands, Wij.land has set up the Inspiration Route.<sup>3</sup> This cycle route connects people with the Peat Meadow landscape and its farmers by combining art, knowledge, and technology. The route guides cyclists to pioneering farms, farm shops, a bird-watching spot, and beautiful meadows, helping them reflect on the diverse ways in which they are connected to the landscape. Art installations can be seen along the way. There is also a connected soundscape and digital version of the route.

<sup>3</sup> Learn more on [wij.land/inspiratieroute](https://wij.land/inspiratieroute)

Cyclist riding through the Dutch Peat Meadow landscape, the Netherlands, 2021. Photography: Jeroen Schokker, Commonland.



A greater connection to the landscape and increased motivation to care for it, leads to the adoption of improved practices. This theme of the return of inspiration sees people changing the way they use land because of the environmental impact. Their practices or innovations are replicated by others in the landscape when they see the benefits over time.

#### LANDSCAPE STORY: LAND USERS ADOPTING IMPROVED PRACTICES

The Cape mountain zebra is the smallest of the zebra species. Known locally as quagga, the zebra is geographically restricted to the western and eastern Cape provinces in South Africa, but the species was driven to near extinction in the early 1900s. The last herd of quagga was removed from Baviaanskloof in 1972 to “pool” genetic resources in the Mountain Zebra National Park. In 2019, quagga were reintroduced to the Baviaanskloof Conservancy where private landowners work together to conserve the area’s ecological heritage.

Wild zebras in Baviaanskloof, South Africa, 2019.  
↓  
Photography: Justin Gird.



#### LANDSCAPE STORY: REPLICATION

In the Kabirdham landscape in Chhattisgarh, seven partners — Samerth Charitable Trust, Chhattisgarh Agricon Samiti, PRADAN, Foundation for Ecological Security, The Nature Conservancy India, the Network of Conserving Central India, and Commonland — are working towards empowering smallholders and Indigenous communities.<sup>④</sup> After taking part in an educational trip, a community member, Ramata Baiga, mobilised people back in his village, Kabri Pathra, to extinguish a forest fire. This success led community members to create a fire management plan in which they would be involved in preventing any future fires from getting out of control, which is a concern during the summer.

④  
Learn more on  
[commonland.com/landscapes/  
agroforestry-for-a-sustainable-future](https://commonland.com/landscapes/agroforestry-for-a-sustainable-future)

“Small steps of action together make one big step. These are reinforced by the inspiration of seeing the results halfway through already, seeing them with your neighbours, and evaluating that along the way. We find that very powerful”

LOTTE DUURSMa, Community & inspiration, Wij.land

+ LEARN MORE

According to the paper *Building Bridges for Inspired Action: On Landscape Restoration and Social Alliance*, published in 2023 in the journal *Ecological Solutions and Evidence*, not enough consideration is given to stakeholder engagement in landscape restoration. The paper offers insights on building social alliances based on the work of AlVeIAI in Spain.

→ [besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com](https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com),  
search for: *Building Bridges for Inspired Action*

*Measuring the Return of Inspiration* by Milena Engel introduces the Inspiration Pilot, Commonland's research project to answer fundamental questions about the return of inspiration.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Measuring the Return of Inspiration*

Read about our learnings, as AlVeIAI, Wij.land, RegenWA, Wide Open Agriculture, Living Lands, and Grounded reflected on ten years of working on the return of inspiration, in the story *5 Basic Ingredients for Return of Inspiration in Landscape Restoration* by Willemijn de Jongh.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *5 Basic Ingredients for Return of Inspiration in Landscape Restoration*

## Social returns

Our well-being is tied to that of our planet. Where ecosystems degrade, communities become vulnerable to extreme weather events, directly or indirectly affecting people's livelihoods. But where ecosystems thrive, communities thrive. So, restoration initiatives can only be successful when people also see improvements to their own lives alongside improvements to their landscapes.

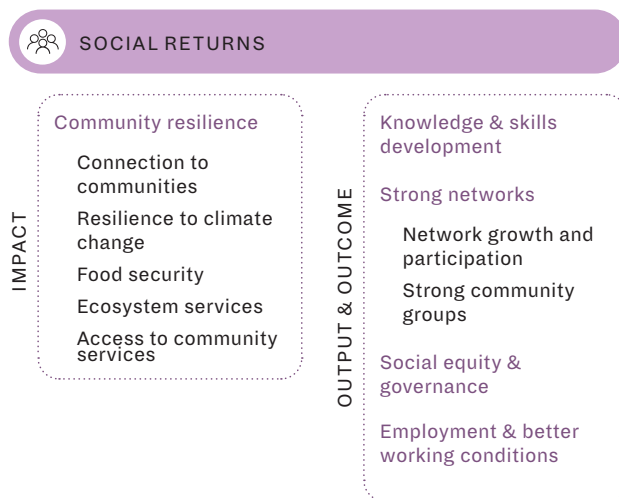
We define social return as strengthening communities in landscapes by increasing livelihood opportunities (for example, jobs), community engagement, and social resilience. Social return, as with the return of inspiration, affects individuals and the whole community.

### BREAKING IT DOWN

The ultimate social return is **community resilience** — the sustained ability of a community to use and interact with available resources in order to prepare for, respond to, withstand, adapt, and recover from adverse situations.<sup>6</sup> Community can mean different things in different landscapes. For some landscapes, it means specific groups, for others it can be a whole village.

6

Bosher, Lee; Chmutina, Ksenia, April 3, 2017. *Disaster Risk Reduction for the Built Environment*, page 32. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons. Find it on [wiley.com](http://wiley.com)





Community resilience has five themes, and we assume that when these improve, community resilience also improves.

They are:

- ➔ Connection of communities. Trust and familiarity among people
- ➔ Resilience to climate change. Increased ability of the community to tackle issues caused by climate change, making community members more resilient, self-sustaining, and autonomous
- ➔ Food security. Everyone in the community always has physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food, that meets their dietary needs and food preferences, for an active and healthy life.<sup>7</sup>
- ➔ Improved ecosystem services. Benefits provided by nature, for example, fresh water (categorised as provisioning), mangroves as a buffer for storms (regulating), and lakes used for cultural events (cultural services)
- ➔ Access to community services. These are services that are not linked to the natural environment, but that indirectly support the cause of the landscape action plan, such as housing, electricity, waste management, infrastructure, healthcare, education, and sanitation

<sup>7</sup> World Food Summit, 1996. Find it on [fao.org](http://fao.org), search for: *An Introduction to the Basic Concepts of Food Security*





## LANDSCAPE STORY: CONNECTION TO THE LANDSCAPE

A machinery bank<sup>⑤</sup> was launched in the Altiplano Estepario landscape in Spain in 2022 with the support of Fund De Roeper. Using the bank's machinery saves farmers money and allows them to employ new techniques, such as clearing green cover, shredding pruning waste, and adding organic matter. The bank is attracting new members to the AlVelAl farmer's association, allowing it to reach more traditional farmers for the first time. AlVelAl can spread awareness of regenerative practices. Meetings at which farmers discussed how to manage the bank created more interaction and cooperation.

⑤ Watch the video on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), search for: *Banco de Maquinaria Compartida*

Maikel Lara on his farm.  
Altiplano Estepario, Spain,  
2022. Photography: Gabriela  
↓ Hengeveld, Commonland.



Other themes connected to social returns are about working towards community resilience where a practitioner has a direct effect (see the “output and outcome” level of the themes and subthemes of the 4 Returns graphic). Knowledge and skills development helps to strengthen the abilities of individual community members in activities, such as nature restoration and regenerative farming practices.

In line with this, *strong networks* are about maintaining, stimulating, creating, or facilitating learning or business networks related to regenerative or improved practices of restoration. It is also about participation in these networks, and whether they

consist of interconnected and engaged people. We also consider the added value these networks have to strong community groups if, for example, they are trusted and support them with tools, trainings, or financial resources.

#### LANDSCAPE STORY: STRONG NETWORKS

Wij.land works with social entrepreneurs in the Dutch Peat Meadow landscape, focusing on land rehabilitation. Currently, 18 entrepreneurial businesses are part of the network. Wij.land organised six business-focused events after which five of the 86 participants received funding to scale up their activities. The funding total was €42,500. The network offers entrepreneurs opportunities to learn from each other, and Wij.land hopes it will develop the market for regenerative products. Last year, one of the entrepreneurs, Grutto, an online consumer platform for regenerative meat products, organised an information day for start-ups, who learned about setting up regenerative businesses and participating in fair markets.

Employment and better working conditions are also an indicator of social return. Jobs could be counted as a financial return because they provide incomes to individuals, strengthening their economic position. However, providing jobs also has a profound effect on communities because livelihood opportunities build people's resilience, knowledge, and skills, and contribute to self-esteem. So, while income is captured under financial return, employment is best positioned under social return.

#### LANDSCAPE STORY: EMPLOYMENT AND BETTER WORKING CONDITIONS

The Boola Boornap Nursery in Southwest Australia supplied 750,000 seedlings to the carbon industry and land restoration projects in 2022. The nursery employs 25 Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, some of whom have had limited employment in the past. Flexible hours allow the workers to fulfil cultural and familial obligations. The nursery offers a good working environment with a friendly atmosphere.

The Boola Boornap Nursery in Southwest Australia that supplied seedlings to the carbon industry. Photography: the Noongar Land Enterprise Group.



Landscape restoration practitioners ensure social equity by organising activities that are inclusive and initiatives with diverse representation. They consider whether women, young people, and Indigenous Peoples have an equal voice in decision-making in the community, and check that the benefits of restoration activities are distributed fairly. For example, does the revenue from carbon credits generated by local people go to community members? For holistic landscape restoration to be effective, social equity and inclusive governance are important, partly because Indigenous Peoples have extensive knowledge of sustainable ecosystem management practices. Related to this, landscape governance means having a supportive governance structure that enables natural capital to flourish. This includes secured tenure rights to land, a land use plan, or a coherent policy and legal framework supporting conservation and restoration development across sectors. It is also about improved transparency, responsibility, accountability, and inclusive design and participation.

#### LANDSCAPE STORY: SOCIAL EQUITY

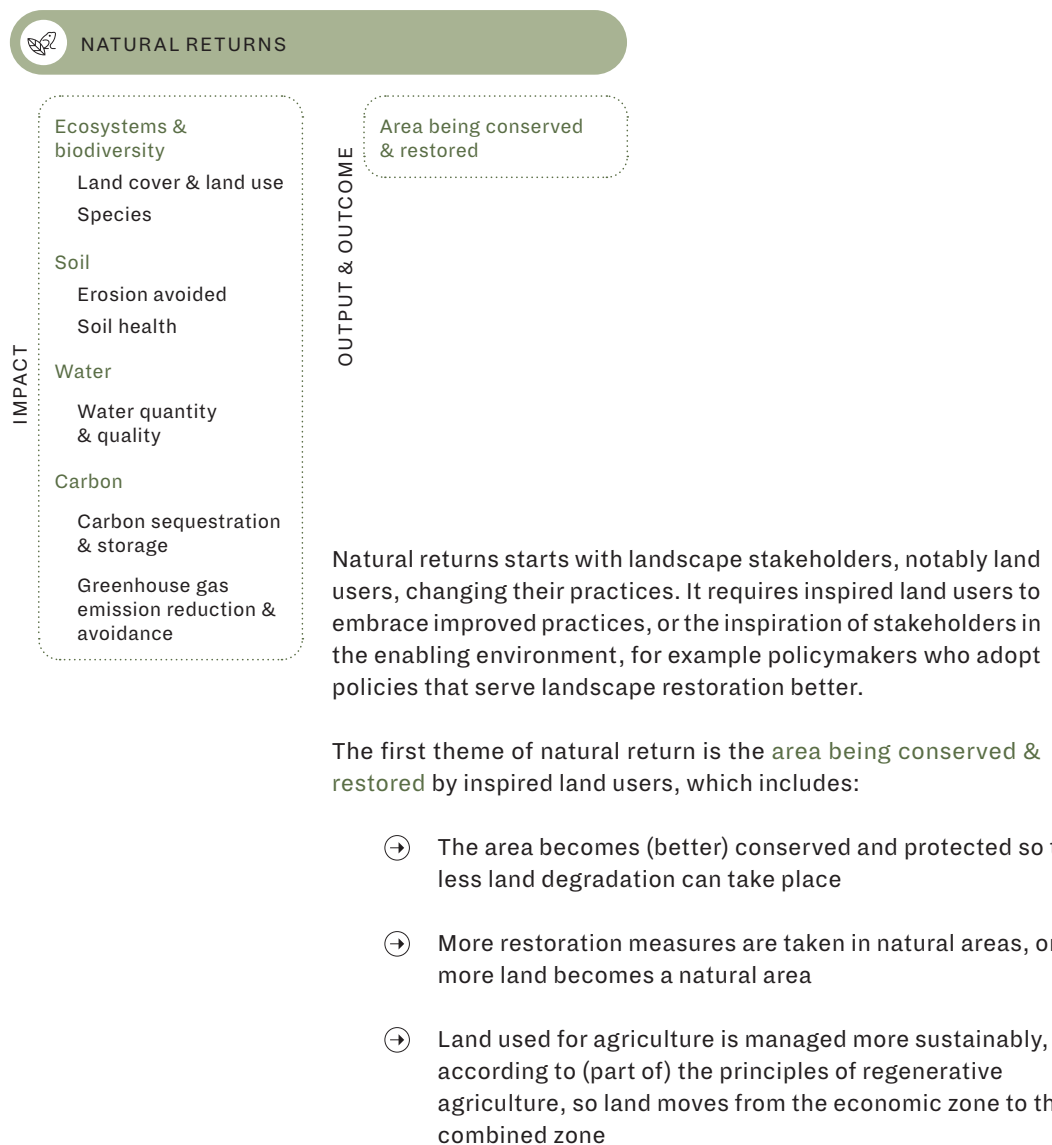
DanjooKoorliny (DK)<sup>®</sup> is a large-scale, long-term, systems-change project created by Indigenous Australian elders and leaders as we move towards 2029 (200 years of colonisation in Perth). The project brings people together in Noongar country, throughout Western Australia, nationally, and around the world. DK's annual highlight is a festival to celebrate Aboriginal culture. In 2022, there were more than 700 participants, including many non-Indigenous Australian people and government representatives. As a result, the government is developing better relationships with the Indigenous Australian community, and members are more involved in developing policies. DK partners with the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation to plan better management of water. It is also involved in reconciliation initiatives with many government departments, bringing a deeper Aboriginal perspective to issues that affect community and society.

©  
Find out more on  
[danjookoorliny.com.au](http://danjookoorliny.com.au)

## Natural returns

Natural returns are defined as healthier ecosystems, most notably soil, water, and biodiversity. The health of an ecosystem relates to how resilient it is to shocks. According to UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a resilient landscape can sustain the desired ecological functions under changing conditions and despite multiple stressors and uncertainties. All life on Earth benefits from natural returns, but because humans are well served by the other returns, the focus of this return is on flora and fauna.

### BREAKING IT DOWN



## LANDSCAPE STORY: AREA BEING RESTORED

It may seem counterintuitive, but in the Langkloof landscape in South Africa, Living Lands is removing trees rather than planting them. Plant species from other continents that were introduced in the 19th or 20th centuries have spread across the landscape. Eucalypts, black wattle, and pine species have taken hold in the fynbos (healthland) ecosystem, dominating and outcompeting native species. Because they are fast-growing, their intensive water use dries out the land, causing further ecosystem damage. Clearing invasive alien species is labour-intensive and requires an understanding of the local ecosystem. The thickest patches are often hard to reach by vehicle. Alien plants are often cleared by chopping and applying herbicide, or by a controlled burn. Other methods are bio-control — introducing targeted diseases or fungi, or intensive grazers such as goats. Having a locally applicable farm management plan and updating it over time is important, particularly due to unwanted new growth. As alien invasive species are cleared, indigenous vegetation is slowly coming back.

After the conservation and restoration process has begun in an area, we expect different ecological effects to make an impact at a landscape scale. In the table above, ecosystems and biodiversity refer to the status of ecosystems and species in a landscape. This addresses the types of ecosystem present and whether quality is improving or maintained. These include wetlands, vegetation cover, and diversity of species. Wetlands merit specific attention because they connect different zones in a landscape through water flows above and below ground. Healthy wetlands are high in carbon and biodiversity, can buffer water in times of flooding, and release water during drought.

## LANDSCAPE STORY: BIODIVERSITY

In Chhattisgarh, India, a seed ball festival saw 8,000 seed balls dispersed to increase vegetation cover into the forest. The festival, in 2022, was started locally and coordinated by Samerth. Participants, including schoolchildren, collected and dried herb and tree seeds, and threw the seed balls back in the forest. Germination of seeds was 65%, but due to cattle and competition with invasive species, 35% survived. The festival was repeated in 2023.

8

Adopted from The Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils (ITPS) organized by the FAO Global Soil Partnership.

Other factors of natural return — soil, water, and carbon — can differ between landscapes and even sites within a landscape. Soil is defined as the ability to sustain the productivity, diversity, and environmental services of terrestrial ecosystems.<sup>8</sup>

Its subthemes are:

- ➔ Avoided erosion. Avoiding the sealing, crusting, and compaction of soil
- ➔ Soil health. The same definition of soil (above), including organic matter, infiltration and permeability, and diversity of soil organisms

#### LANDSCAPE STORY: AREA BEING RESTORED

Wij.land’s work to enable and mobilise farmers in the Dutch Peat Meadows has resulted in a total of 2,338 hectares under improved management since the project began in 2016. These hectares include the land on which the 188 farmers pilot regenerative practices. They also comprise land used for projects experimenting with worm compost tea (a tea made of vermicompost that is rich in beneficial microbes), manure quality, and alternative grazing regimes. Wij.land, together with NIOO (Dutch Institute for Ecological Research), monitors the impact on the land under soil improvement measures to investigate whether the expert advice leads to improved soil quality. Initial results are promising, showing increases in fungi and bacterial communities. However, measuring this kind of success and interpreting such data remains a challenge. There is a need for simpler soil analyses.

9

UN Water, *Water Security and the Global Water Agenda*. Find it on [unwater.org](http://unwater.org)

Water is defined as the capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to enough water of good quality for the preservation of humans and nature.<sup>9</sup> The quality of water is measured by the presence and sources of pollution.

Carbon is distinguished between carbon sequestration and storage in soils and vegetation, and the reduction and avoidance of carbon emissions. It has strong links to other subthemes, such as vegetation growth and soil organic matter. Find examples of carbon sequestration and emission reduction in the chapter *Carbon finance* [page 207].

## Financial returns

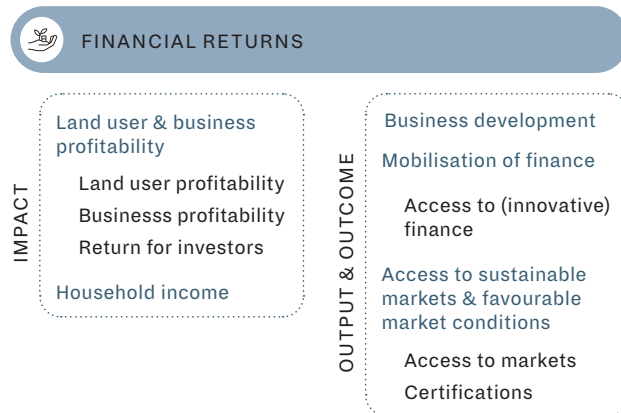
We define financial return as long-term economic resilience and prosperity for communities and businesses.

Economic prosperity comes from more income and financial value for stakeholders in a landscape, including community members, farmers, businesses, and investors. From a business perspective, income is determined by costs and benefits, and therefore profitability. From a household perspective, this is income versus expenses.

Financial returns need to be viewed in the long term, especially at the beginning. When starting holistic landscape restoration, it takes time and investment before the returns are generated and positive cash flows can be identified. For example, setting up new businesses and creating markets can be challenging and time-consuming. Farmers who are transitioning to regenerative production must invest in their soil and practices before gaining a return.

Learn more about the importance of long-term, trust-based landscape finance in the chapter *Landscape finance* [page 187].

### BREAKING IT DOWN



Financial return impacts **household income**. This reflects the financial gain for households, communities, and land users — such as farmers, foresters, fishers, the tourism sector — that is due to restoration, and regenerative, sustainable practices. The income can follow from job creation, linked to social return, or profitability.

Land user and business profitability is another impact of financial return. It relates to business size, costs, and revenue. We distinguish profitability for three types of stakeholders:

- ➔ Land users. Farmers, foresters, fishers, the tourism sector, other land use practitioners
- ➔ Other businesses in the landscape further down the value chain (not land users) and value chains developed from regenerative practices
- ➔ Investors

Business profitability is not often the first impact seen in the landscape. It follows successful business development and access to finance and good markets. Business development is about developing, testing, and investing in ventures, either within an existing business or as a new enterprise.

#### LANDSCAPE STORY: BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Wide Open Agriculture (WOA) in Australia is piloting the sweet lupin protein isolate called Buntine Protein®. The lupins that are used to produce this new product are a core crop for sequestering nitrogen in the soil, which reduces the need for synthetic fertilisers, particularly nitrogenous fertiliser. Used alongside regenerative farming practices, this helps improve soil health as well as fight climate change. WOA has also won a government grant to develop a local manufacturing facility for oat milk. This will result in reduced emissions associated with transporting local rolled oats to Italy for production and back again as a finished product. It will also generate local employment opportunities at the oat milk production facility as well as contract business to associated local suppliers for packaging and transport.



➔ Ben Cole, Stuart McAlpine, and Anthony Maslin in a lupin field. Photography: Salty Davenport, Wide Open Agriculture.



Mobilisation of finance for landscape restoration initiatives comprises: raising investments in the landscape, for example from philanthropists or investors; creating access to (innovative) finance (mechanisms); and the ability to access, directly or indirectly, public or private fund transactions. Innovative finance involves mechanisms that channel diverse funds to implement activities for restoration, regeneration, or sustainable practices. This may include blended finance mechanisms, payment for ecosystem services, such as carbon credits, biodiversity credits, and price premiums for sustainable products.

#### LANDSCAPE STORY: ACCESS TO INNOVATIVE FINANCE

Wij.land is supporting 18 farmers with a tool that makes their costs and benefits more insightful as they transition towards intensifying their businesses. It has attracted more funding and partners to support more farmers. Wij.land also helps farmers access additional income streams by developing payment for ecosystem services schemes and by promoting entrepreneurial businesses that contribute to the acceleration of landscape restoration with the sale of regenerative products.

Finally, access to sustainable markets and favourable market conditions refers to the exchange of goods and services resulting from restoration, regenerative activities, or sustainable practices. This includes access to markets for regenerative production or development of restoration activities, as well as certification in the landscape and how that benefits landscape stakeholders.

#### LANDSCAPE STORY: ACCESS TO INNOVATIVE FINANCE

In Southwest Australia, Wide Open Agriculture (WOA) is offering a market to regenerative farmers, where they can offset their regenerative produce with a premium. This allows farmers to focus more on production than marketing. Demand for WOA's Dirty Clean Food brand and similar regenerative brands is growing, which boosts farmers' confidence in sustainable land management, strengthening their motivation and inspiration to continue.

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## Think and act 4 Returns

This detailed information about the 4 Returns equips you to “think 4 Returns” when designing solutions for your landscape. The power of the 4 Returns lies in their interconnectedness, which triggers positive change. Unpacking them into themes and sub-themes makes them tangible and applicable to different contexts.

Stories from a variety of landscapes underscore the transformative power of holistic restoration activities by which communities find renewed purpose, connection, and resilience to environmental challenges. These real-life examples show that while each landscape is different, the 4 Returns can be achieved everywhere by anyone. Together, we have the power to transform degradation into regeneration, loss into abundance, and despair into possibility.

Together, we have the power to transform degradation into regeneration, loss into abundance, and despair into possibility.

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## What’s next?

Now that you’ve learned the basics of the *4 Returns Framework*, you’re ready to act. But how to start? The next chapter will guide you in your first steps on your restoration journey.

# How to get started

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- There is no one way to get started with holistic landscape restoration. Often it starts with an existing conservation or restoration project from an NGO, or a small group of enthusiasts, and grows to a more comprehensive landscape partnership over time.
- If you haven't selected a landscape yet, you'll need to start with a scouting phase. This involves defining search criteria, researching options to create a shortlist, and visiting potential landscapes.
- Certain insights or mindsets have helped others use the *4 Returns Framework*. Take inspiration from these thought processes and opinions while designing and implementing your landscape programme.

So, you're ready to apply the *4 Returns Framework* to your landscape initiative. This guidebook will take you through all the steps to make that happen. But where to start?

This chapter offers you an inspirational starter kit. First, we explore how other people began their landscape restoration journeys. Then, we consider the scouting phase, and offer resources to learn more. Finally, we share mindsets that align with the 4 Returns approach to holistic landscape restoration. Every initiative is different, so take from this starter kit what you need, and leave what doesn't apply to you.



There are many entry points to holistic landscape restoration, each tailored to the unique context and goals of a project. Over the past decade, we've seen diverse examples of landscapes successfully integrating the *4 Returns Framework*. Sometimes the existing initiatives already had fertile soil to build from, and other times new organisations were launched. While most large landscape projects start as a conservation project, many other examples exist. From regenerative agriculture practices to community-driven reforestation efforts, the possibilities are vast. By drawing on these experiences, we can glean valuable insights and adapt strategies to suit your specific landscape's challenges and opportunities. Let's explore a few pathways, some hypothetical, but most based on real cases.

# There are many possible entry points to holistic landscape restoration.

Many restoration initiatives are associated with farming, whether they are started by farmers themselves, those that venture into new businesses on a pathway to regenerative farming practices, or by organisations and networks that aim to bring farmers together with other stakeholders. The starting point is often a realisation that the current model is degrading the landscape, leading to 4 Losses rather than 4 Returns, combined with a motivation to care for the land. People may be motivated by a desire to improve things for the next generation of farmers or to halt depopulation of rural areas. A period of acting on a small scale may be followed by the realisation that only a holistic approach, involving stakeholders beyond the farmer's community, will have an impact on the larger landscape. The *4 Returns Framework* can be helpful in situations where stakeholders' views are in opposition. It can then help facilitate a good engagement process.

A different starting point for landscape restoration may apply to the organisations that care for rare species which depend on a larger area of habitation than what's currently protected. The survival of the species may depend on the success of holistic protection measures that meet the need and aspirations of people using the land and in search of a vision to thrive in harmony with all elements of the larger landscape. A sense of pride and identity can be found when people feel connected to a vision for the landscape that expresses their own views about what makes the landscape unique. The scope of the partnership will shift from species conservation to a 4 Returns landscape vision carried by the stakeholders in the land. Similarly, some holistic landscape restoration initiatives get started next to a protected area when people realise that the successful management of a species needs to consider the dynamics of the larger landscape and should engage inhabitants of that landscape.

10 Learn more about the Bioregional Weaving Labs Collective, a growing assembly of 25+ international system-changing organisations, funders, and impact investors, initiated by Ashoka, co-led by Commonland and OpEPA, and grounded in a community of practice. Go to [shoka.org](http://shoka.org), search for: *Bioregional Weaving Labs Collective*

Entrepreneurs, change makers, and other bridge builders often act as initiators for holistic landscape restoration as well. The desire to have place-based impact in the most visible, tangible, and meaningful way can be a key driver for this group and can inspire others to take collective action. Across Europe, Ashoka fellows play a key role in bringing landscape restoration partnerships together in Bioregional Weaving Labs.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, funders and larger NGOs instigate holistic landscape restoration, bringing in experience and methods from other sources.

Another catalyst for holistic landscape restoration is water. Whether the challenge is water quality, scarcity, erosion issues, flooding, or upstream or downstream dynamics, this element often binds together stakeholders at landscape level. The complexity of improving dependencies on water are often expressed at a landscape level and watershed dynamics frequently help define boundaries to a landscape. The need and potential for seascape restoration is great. This guidebook is equally relevant to seascapes as it is to landscapes. The *4 Returns Framework* is being applied to seascape restoration increasingly around the world — whether in combination with island restoration, restoration of fishing grounds connected to nearby villages, or offshore.

Your initiative and context may resonate with these examples, or not at all. In any case, they may show that there are a wide variety of ways to advance your journey towards holistic landscape restoration.

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## SELECTING A LANDSCAPE

Perhaps you still need to seek out a landscape to kickstart your project. You may be engaged in a few landscape projects already and pondering where to work more holistically. In this case, a scouting phase is necessary, in which you'll need to understand partner interests and outline criteria.

The scouting phase involves defining search criteria, researching options to create a shortlist, and visiting potential landscapes. A key criterion should be a sense of urgency for restoration. Another would be the existence of local initiatives that mean you can reach scale faster by strengthening and building on existing work rather than starting from scratch. Other factors such as knowledge networks, stakeholder engagement, business dynamics, and restoration potential also play a crucial role. These criteria help in narrowing potential landscapes.

Field trips give you a chance to see things clearly, such as how engaged stakeholders are and the potential for restoration. By following this process, you can find the best-fit landscape and kickstart meaningful restoration efforts.

11

Find the tool on [4returns.commonland.com](http://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Quick-Start Guide to Scouting*

For help defining criteria to select a landscape for restoration, see the *Quick-start guide to scouting for a landscape*.<sup>11</sup> For an in-depth look at scouting, try the *Restoration Diagnostic*<sup>12</sup> developed by the World Resources Institute.

12

Find the tool on [4returns.commonland.com](http://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Restoration Diagnostic*



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## What's your mindset?

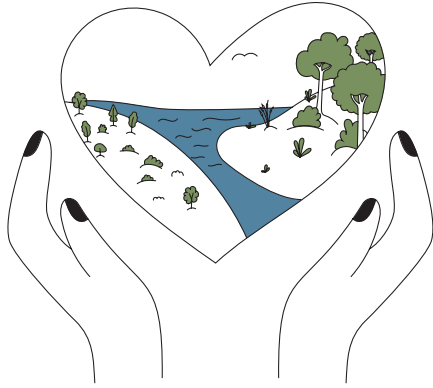
We've found that certain mindsets allow holistic landscape restoration initiatives to align particularly well with the 4 Returns approach. We are sharing them here to inspire you at the start of your journey. After reading them, take a moment to reflect on which mindsets resonate with you and which you'd like to take with you, or share with your colleagues or partners.

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### WORK WITH THE HEART, THE HEAD, AND THE HANDS

Working from a 4 Returns perspective is not just about ticking off the returns one by one. The 4 Returns is a common language that builds bridges across different perspectives and realities, combining the intelligence of the heart, the head, and the hands.

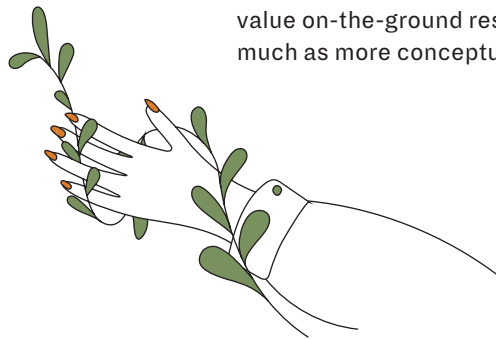
Many cultures nowadays mainly operate from a rational level. This leads us to neglect the other aspects of our being: the heart and the hands. This brings about a loss of potential because the intelligence of the heart and hands can unlock unique perspectives and abilities that we miss when we only use the head. Combining all aspects of our being — or as the Presencing Institute refers to it, our “three intelligences” — helps us to dream of and build a better future.



The **heart intelligence** helps us connect to nature, each other, and ourselves. We believe that we are connected to nature, not separate from it.

The **head intelligence** helps us to think and reflect. We value knowledge grounded in the scientific method and thorough analysis as the basis for a landscape strategy. Reflection helps us to keep learning from our experiences.

The **hands intelligence** relates to our practice-based approach. We are dreamers, but also doers. We value on-the-ground restoration as much as more conceptual work.



We use different methods to unlock and practice our heart and hand intelligences, such as 3D modelling and case clinics.

Learn more about these in the chapter *Creating spaces of belonging* [page 84].

---

## WORK WITH THE WHOLE SYSTEM

Landscapes are complex systems and should be treated as such. We look at multiple overlapping contexts in the landscape we want to restore, including the physical, chemical, biological, ecological, economic, and socio-cultural processes of a system. This is also known as a holistic approach.

In practice, it involves including a wide variety of stakeholders because they each bring unique perspectives. Just as biodiversity increases resilience of the ecosystem, in society we see that cultural, ethnic, and gender diversity contributes to resilience. To see the whole system, we need diverse perspectives, so it is important to ensure a diversity of voices including socio-eco-

conomic backgrounds, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, and ability. Diverse perspectives help us to pinpoint blind spots in our thinking and to develop solutions that address root causes.

Working with the whole system also involves realising a shared understanding of the landscape, its history, culture, and its current state, before acting. Without addressing problems holistically, symptoms may return, or new ones arise. Looking at the whole system means we can spot 4 Returns opportunities and create holistic solutions at scale.



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#### THINK AT THE LANDSCAPE SCALE

We are not only focused on nature conservation, agriculture, or sustainable cities, but on all landscape uses and their interactions. Zooming out to the landscape level, you see how different landscape zones fulfil different purposes of food production, living, recreation, habitat for biodiversity, and economic production.

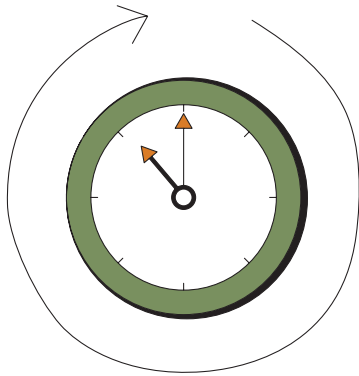
Thinking at the landscape scale connects isolated activities in different areas. This allows for ecological corridors, the connection of wetlands, and social cohesion. This can encourage and reinforce momentum for positive change.



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## COMMIT LONG TERM TO A LANDSCAPE

System transformation is slow. Ecologies, mindsets, and economies all take time to change track. Traditional three to five-year project cycles are too short to realise the benefits of land restoration. It takes persistence and adaptability, especially when times are tough. That's why we believe it takes at least a generation (20+ Years) to restore a landscape considering the many different local conditions.



20+ YEARS

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## TRUST IS KEY FOR JOINT ACTION

Landscape restoration is all about working with stakeholders. You cannot achieve anything if you do not have a foundation of trust among stakeholders. Trust is built slowly and destroyed quickly. Relationships need to be managed carefully because they can make or break a programme. Remember that trust is a primary consideration for all decision making.

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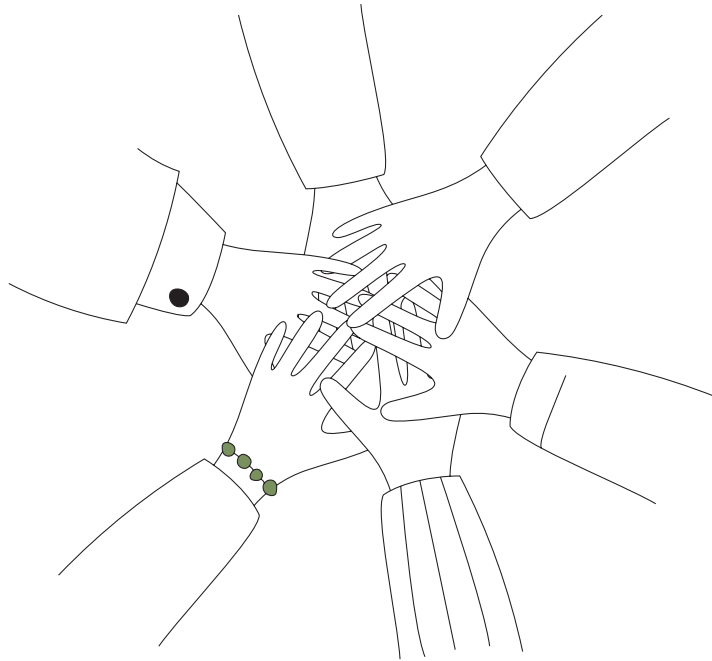
## BUILD ON EXISTING INITIATIVES

Local leadership makes solutions sustainable. Communities often know their landscape best and are in a much better position to say what will and won't work in their specific context. Plans and processes with locals in charge are better designed.

Building on existing initiatives and empowering local ownership is also important for the sustainability of outcomes. If local people don't feel ownership over planning, implementation, and results, no one will maintain these when the funding is finished. Local ownership needs to be embedded from the beginning and properly resourced in the long term to continue the work.

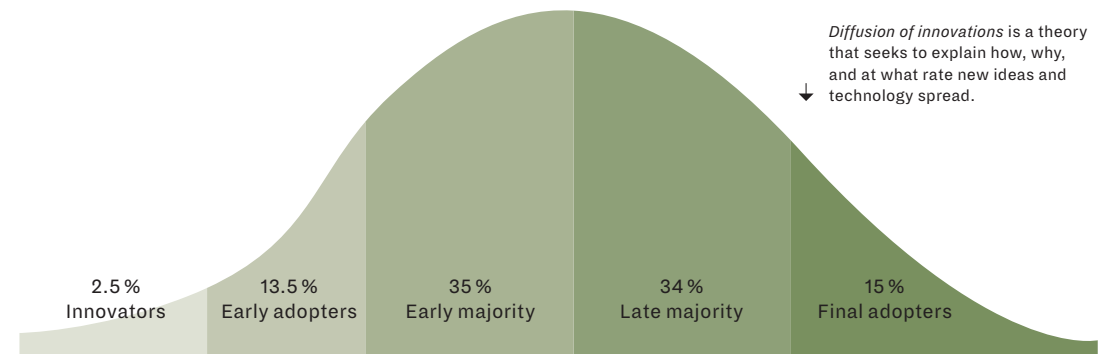
In many landscapes, there are already local initiatives that work on topics related to landscape restoration. It's usually not necessary to start something new. A lot can be achieved by connecting these existing initiatives and making use of policies to create bridges from local to regional to national to international, and vice versa.

Policies can play a crucial role in amplifying existing initiatives. They do this by providing frameworks (such as combined land use), resources (financial and capacity), and incentives (such as tax incentives or subsidies) that support and amplify local efforts.



## WORK WITH THE WILLING

In every landscape, you will find some front runners already organising regenerative initiatives, connecting their community, and bringing innovation. Most people, however, will resist change. In line with the theory of *Diffusion of innovations*, we've found it best to not try and get everybody on board from the get-go, but rather create focus on the innovators and front runners first. We bring together a "coalition of the willing" to strengthen their initiatives and develop examples that work. Slowly but surely, more stakeholders will see what is possible, feel inspired, and want to join.



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THINK BIG, START  
SMALL, ACT NOW

Multi-stakeholder processes towards long-term visions are complex, making it impossible to find the perfect action plan. “Analysis paralysis” happens when plans are endlessly fine-tuned but little progress is made. Perfect is the enemy of good.

We act upon the basis that we always know enough to start. We trust we will learn more along the way. So, think big but start fast with tangible projects that can be implemented quickly. If it works, great, we’ll do more of it. If it doesn’t work — that’s great too because we have learned something — we’ll do things differently next time. We can build trust either way if we show we are learning from what we are doing.

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LEARN, ADAPT,  
AND REPEAT

Landscape restoration is a repetitive process. The reality is too complex to predict. The 5 Elements are a process of implementing our work without fixing it in a linear approach. These elements build on the well-known cycle — design, build, test, and reflect. Partnerships are central to making the entire process work. Different elements come into play at various times. They are repeated without ever being finished.

Together with our partners, we keep reflecting, learning, and adapting.

Learn more about these in the chapter  
*Monitoring the 4 Returns* [page 274].





Handwriting practice lines consisting of 25 horizontal dotted lines.

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## What's next?

There are many entry points for applying the *4 Returns Framework* to landscapes, but you don't have to start from square one. You could draw from the wealth of experiences and useful mindsets cultivated by others.

While it's possible that one individual or organisation gets the ball rolling, a large-scale and long-term restoration effort needs to be held by a larger partnership of diverse organisations.

That's why the upcoming section on Element 1, *Partnership Building*, will explore strategies for nurturing and expanding fruitful partnerships that guarantee the systemic impact of your work.



# Establish a landscape partnership



The planet needs our help, and we need each other.  
Collaborating in a landscape partnership balances the  
strengths and requirements of all stakeholders.

A wide range of people and organisations from all walks of life need to pull together to tackle the challenges of large-scale landscape restoration. By establishing a landscape partnership, landscape stakeholders gain an essential platform where they come together. This multi-stakeholder partnership serves as an organising structure, facilitating governance and coordination among parties. It provides an inclusive space where stakeholders can share their unique interests, perspectives, and abilities. Over time, a strong coalition develops across different sectors and communities based on a shared vision. As trust grows, so does deeper engagement and collaborative action.

The chapter *Cultivating a lasting partnership* delves into the challenges and strategies for building resilient, long-lasting landscape partnerships. It emphasises the importance of a shared vision and how diverse landscape stakeholders contribute to resilience. The chapter also covers the significance of trust, celebrating differences, and handling conflicts. It looks at the evolution of partnerships over time, formalising structures, establishing effective teams, and scaling up impact through further collaboration.

The chapter *Creating spaces of belonging* introduces the processes needed for meaningful, inclusive, and participatory change in landscape restoration. It focuses on *Theory U*, a transformation framework created by Otto Scharmer, senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. *Theory U* works well with the *4 Returns Framework* because it is specifically suited to reaching transformative outcomes. It is also the method with which the *4 Returns Framework* has been tested over the past ten years. Other methods can be suitable as well. This chapter also looks at the *Mutual Gains Approach*, which is part of the *Consensus Building* process.



## RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND METHODS

The Partnerships Resource Centre by the Rotterdam School of Management offers a range of practical standalone tools to help practitioners navigate their partnership practices.

→ [rsm.nl](https://www.rsm.nl),  
Go to: *Faculty Research* → *Centres* →  
*Partnerships Resource Centre* → *Tools*

The paper *Creating spaces of belonging for large scale landscape restoration*, published by Commonland in 2022, combines the *4 Returns Framework* with *Theory U* to create enabling environments for lasting change through landscape restoration.

→ [commonland.com/publications](https://www.commonland.com/publications),  
search for: *Creating Spaces of Belonging*

*Theory U* is a change framework and a set of methodologies developed by Otto Scharmer to address global challenges.

→ [u-school.org](https://u-school.org),  
search for: *Theory U*

The *Mutual Gains Approach* is another method for structuring and easing multi-stakeholder, multi-issue negotiation processes.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Mutual Gains Approach*

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## ENVISAGED OUTCOMES

- ① **Confirmation of partnership interest and potential.** Before setting up a partnership, it is essential that everyone involved knows what it is about and why it's important. Partners should understand that they need each other to solve problems in the landscape.
- ② **A strong coalition.** It is key that landscape stakeholders draft a mobilisation strategy detailing how groups will be consulted and engaged. Typically, this involves implementing elaborate stakeholder engagement processes (for example, *Theory U* or the *Mutual Gains Approach*). Establishing a governance structure for the partnership is crucial for creating a structured and reviewable plan during the landscape planning process.
- ③ **Landscape stakeholders identified a shared purpose.** Achieving broad agreement on the need to transition the landscape from degradation to regeneration is essential for initiating a partnership. Ideally, the intention of the initial stakeholder group to collaborate is formalised in a letter of intent, a memorandum of understanding, or in a partnership agreement. This document may need adjustments when more stakeholders join the initiative.



↑ Women are an important stakeholder in the landscape.  
Photography: Tesu Media Lab, Commonland.

# Cultivating a lasting partnership

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- A diversity of partners creates resilience in the partnership, allowing each individual and organisation to work from their unique strengths.
- A compelling shared vision for landscape restoration is necessary for the partnership's success.
- The strength of the local team designing and implementing a landscape initiative determines its ultimate success.
- Long-term partnerships require long-term commitments and leadership.
- Partnerships thrive through both challenges and successes.
- Establishing defined and formalised partnerships with legal agreements is recommended because this can help structure, organise, coordinate, and govern efforts, maximising the efficacy of landscape restoration activities.



A strong landscape partnership is the fertile ground for a successful and long-lasting landscape restoration programme. In a landscape partnership, stakeholders engage in dialogue, learning, and the coordination of activities over significant timeframes. Here we consider the conditions, challenges, and opportunities for growing and nurturing long-term partnerships.

Key stakeholder groups in landscape partnerships are typically people living in the landscape, representatives from business and finance sectors, NGOs, associations, and governmental agencies. The springboard for a partnership often originates from a handful of front-running individuals or organisations within the landscape and the partnership grows gradually as additional stakeholders are mobilised.

There are costs associated with structured, organised, and governed partnerships, so we explore the need for funding in the chapter *Landscape finance* [page 187].

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## Resilience in the face of change and complexity

Landscapes are vast and complex systems, making it challenging to predict how changes will impact the entire ecosystem. When dealing with large landscapes (more than 100,000 hectares), gaining an overview of the complexities becomes more difficult because no single organisation can manage everything. Bringing together a variety of stakeholders creates a more resilient system where each organisation contributes, from a unique perspective, towards a shared vision. Each individual and organisation has a role to play based on its strengths and specialities.

If one stakeholder inadvertently disrupts the system, the network of diverse stakeholders can help it stay together, adapt, and recover. It's important to find a balance, however, because too much complexity can also have disadvantages. Having stakeholders with a shared reason for developing the partnership is crucial, so caution is required when bringing in additional parties.

As partners' understanding of each other deepens and they share responsibilities, this may create redundancies. But this overlap and redundancy — which could be seen as inefficiencies — are what instil partnerships with high-level adaptability and efficacy.

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## A shared vision

For the partnership to thrive, it must go beyond the individual objectives of each organisation and align them towards a shared vision. Establishing partnerships primarily for fundraising can bring long-term challenges. It changes the focus to monetary goals. This may lead to friction when adjustments are needed to create the desired impact. It is best to first align on the vision and mission of the partnership, connected to strategic goals, and only then consider financial impact.

A shared vision for landscape restoration is necessary for the partnership's success. The vision should be clear and compelling, but flexible. Conversations often begin around the return of inspiration — a key deliverable of the *4 Returns Framework* — and a commitment to long-term collaboration. The return of inspiration plays a significant role in opening people's hearts, fostering conversations about personal circumstances and considerations. The chapter *Creating a shared vision for the landscape* [page 142] goes into the intricacies of aligning on a shared vision.

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## Formalising partnerships

Partnerships often start as loose structures, but sometimes it's best to formalise them. In this section, we provide guidance on this process.

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### GOVERNANCE AND GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Creating a governance structure is an important step in formalising a partnership. It describes the roles, responsibilities, rules, and processes of a partnership's governance. It should support the shared vision, strategic goals, and values of the partners. Even if you don't design a governance structure consciously, one will still operate subconsciously. Being aware of this enables clearer agreements and reference points during disagreements.

Specifying what each member will not do can be just as important as detailing their responsibilities. Clarity on limitations can increase understanding of roles and boundaries. Jointly making and agreeing on a RASCI<sup>1</sup> (responsible, accountable, supportive, consulted, informed) matrix can be a great way to lay the basis for a governance structure.

We recommend learning more about the work of Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom. She was a renowned political economist recognised for her ground-breaking work on the governance of common-pool resources. She demonstrated that communities could manage shared resources effectively without external regulation. Ostrom identified eight design principles for sustainable



Learn more about RASCI on [railsware.com](https://railsware.com), search for: *8 Reasons to Use a RASCI Chart on Your Project*



Learn more about the resources from ProSocial World on [prosocial.world](https://prosocial.world)

resource management, emphasising the importance of local knowledge, cooperation, and decentralised and adaptive governance structures. To learn more about Ostrom's principles and how to apply them in practice, check out the tools, courses, and resources from ProSocial World.<sup>2</sup> They adapted Ostrom's principles into a practical process for guiding successful cooperation groups.

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## CONTRACTS AND AGREEMENTS

Documents and their legal status may differ between countries. The most common contracts and agreements for partnerships are:

- ➔ *Partnership charter or Letter of intent.* A document that outlines the shared vision of the partnership, not legally binding
- ➔ *Memorandum of understanding.* An agreement between parties outlining the purpose or goal following joint action; more formal than a letter of intent, but not legally binding
- ➔ *Collaboration agreement.* A legally binding agreement between parties

The governance structure should evolve over time, so it is advisable to review agreements periodically to check they are still suitable.

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## Landscape teams

The strength of the local team designing and implementing a landscape initiative determines its ultimate success. The team may consist of individuals from an organisation, as well as key partners in the landscape. Drawing a team from the community may foster local ownership, which accelerates realisation of the landscape vision.

In this section, we explain how to build up and empower strong teams for holistic landscape restoration, with clear roles and responsibilities, embedded in the local environment. Our guidance is drawn from the collective experience of Commonland's partners who have set up, managed, and developed strong teams in a variety of landscapes. It will help you select the right people for the job and prepare you for what to expect as your team's needs change.



Different people are needed as the landscape programme evolves. At the outset, the initiative will have limited resources, so it relies on the passion of the team. Positivity, drive, motivation, and enthusiasm are traits that cannot be learned. Look for these qualities in the people you hire. Core team members need to be flexible with their time and able to handle change and adversity well. Start small — two to five people are usually all that is needed at this stage.

“The beauty and the risk of a start-up are that everyone brings their ideals to it.”

BEN COLE, former Managing director, current Executive director, Wide Open Agriculture

Initial priorities are likely to be around developing relationships with farmers, building or connecting to a farmer network, conducting a landscape and stakeholder analysis (see the chapter *Defining the landscape* [page 105]), and creating pilot projects. So, you need people who can switch perspectives — from a farmer’s to a regional government worker’s, for example. Generalist skill-sets are most useful in the beginning.

Key roles at the start-up phase are:

- ➔ **Initiative coordinator.** Well-connected in the landscape and can inspire others; has strong project and programme management skills
- ➔ **Community mobiliser.** Preferably someone originally from the landscape who will bring all stakeholders together, support them in their change process, and match them with internationally proven solutions; skilled at building relationships of trust and inspiration
- ➔ **Knowledge broker.** Has good technical knowledge and the ability to translate and communicate it to stakeholders
- ➔ **Business case developer.** Improves existing business models and sets up new ones to power landscape restoration, needs an entrepreneurial mindset and experience in developing and sustaining businesses

For specialist expertise, it may be wise to hire consultants. You get access to their knowledge without putting them on a payroll. In the long run, consultants are more expensive than employees, but in this phase, their value is in their flexibility. This is a good option for a start-up that has an uncertain financial future or is in an exploratory stage.



As your initiative matures, roles will change. Some will be added, and others cut away. It's important to make these hard decisions early, especially in NGOs where key performance indicators and accountability might be less clear. Idealism tends to drop, and pragmatism starts to rise, as initial passion gives way to hard work. This will be reflected in the personalities of the team.

You'll start hiring specialists — specifically business development, agriculture, ecosystem restoration, and finance. Roles that become important after two to three years include:

- ➔ Inspirer /visionary
- ➔ Project coordinator
- ➔ Finance manager
- ➔ Business coordinator
- ➔ Marketing and communications professional
- ➔ Natural areas restoration specialist
- ➔ Regenerative agriculture specialist
- ➔ Culture, stories, and inspiration specialist
- ➔ Research and education specialist
- ➔ Monitoring, evaluation, and learning specialist

Work towards a team that does not rely on one person — avoiding “key person risk”. At this stage, distribute decision-making across the organisation.

The rehabilitation team working in the Baviaanskloof, South Africa. Photography: Living Lands.



It is important to define roles and responsibilities clearly, especially as they evolve. Open communication, trust, and transparency among team members are fundamental for smooth functioning. Coordinators aid this by motivating, trusting, and supporting their team members.

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## CONNECTION TO THE LANDSCAPE

All team members should feel connected to the landscape and understand its local language and culture. Some roles, such as landscape mobiliser, are played more effectively by a person living in or originating from the landscape. Key stakeholders and residents must be able to trust your team, and this is more likely when local people see you as “one of them”.

Non-local people also have their strengths, such as bringing new energy when a system is stuck. They can ask the so-called “obvious” questions that locals may feel they can’t. Seen as a neutral party, they can also mediate conflict. Humility is key for people who do not live in or originate from the landscape.

It’s important to note that requiring new employees to move to the landscape can put them under pressure. They may struggle to build a new social network. Make sure applicants are aware of this during the hiring process, but also take responsibility as an organisation in developing a culture of work-life balance.

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## VOLUNTEERS

Eager to learn, enthusiastic to work, and requiring little or no financial resources to hire, volunteers can be a valuable addition to your landscape programme. They may need careful guidance to do the job well, so consider whether it is worth the effort before getting them involved.

Ecosystem Restoration Communities offers interesting volunteer projects around the world. The foundation’s camps offer a place to stay and a learning environment. <sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>

Learn more at [ecosystemrestorationcommunities.org](https://ecosystemrestorationcommunities.org)

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## LEGAL STATUS

The legal status of a holistic landscape restoration organisation — for example, limited liability company, foundation, association, community interest company — influences its operations, regulatory compliance, and operational boundaries. Each country has various legal structures, each with pros and cons. It's important to establish the best fit for the context. Changing the legal form after setup is challenging, so researching beforehand and seeking advice from similar organisations is advisable.

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## INTERNAL PROCESSES

Establishing effective internal processes is important for the efficient functioning of an organisation. Tasks such as administration, human resources, and bookkeeping may seem daunting, but they facilitate financial planning, accounting, and reporting for stakeholders. They also streamline contracting procedures and raise team members' confidence. Neglecting to set up efficient processes can result in complications and disorder, ultimately endangering the initiative.

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## A partnership that lasts

Holistic landscape restoration is a long-term endeavour. The *4 Returns Framework* suggests that 20 years is the minimum amount of time needed to achieve large-scale, lasting change. This means you are in it for the long run. There will be times when you face difficulties and when a partnership may be under pressure. That is when you must have each other's backs. Partners can take risks that they may not have taken if they were in this alone when they know they are supported.

It helps to spend time understanding each other's situations and finding ways to navigate different ways of working. Celebrate your differences because these offer opportunities for understanding other perspectives and stretching beyond your comfort zone.

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## BUILDING TRUST AND UNDERSTANDING

If a shared vision is the fuel that drives the partnership, trust between partners is the oil that lubricates its moving parts. Trusting each other is essential for the freedom and confidence needed to pursue goals and navigate failures. The strength of a partnership lies in human relationships more than the content. Enduring trust takes time to build, but when it's strong, it enables teams to act cohesively and take calculated risks without fear.

Trust is cultivated through assuming good intentions, creating safe spaces, transparency, embracing mistakes, and creating space for difficult conversations. Communication is key. Verbal communication helps understanding and prevents misunderstandings that can arise from written communication.

Holistic understanding means that every member understands the big picture, their role, and shared goals. Leaders play a crucial role in creating trust and sharing information within their organisations. They should take a nurturing approach by building relationships, emphasising common goals, and encouraging individual growth and critical thinking. Transparency in decision-making also helps to build trust and ensure everyone understands the partnership's objectives.



“For us, the most important is confidence. Confidence in each other and the team.”

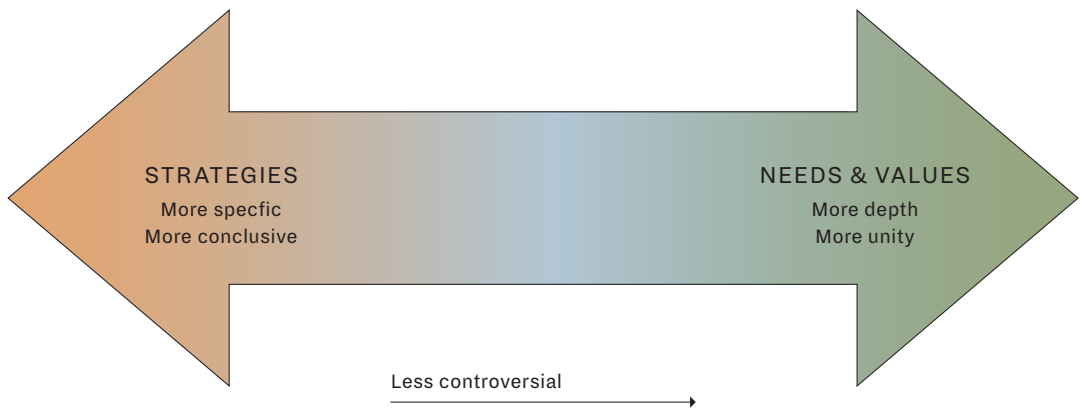
ELVIRA MARÍN, former Coordinator, AIVelAI,  
currently Director, Aland Foundation

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#### CELEBRATE FRICTION

As diverse perspectives are brought together, some friction, and differing opinions are inevitable. How we deal with friction determines whether it has a positive or negative outcome on our relationships. We need to take the heat out of conflict and turn it into a learning opportunity. Without friction, there is no shine.

Conflict often comes from different views on strategy — opinions about the best way to get to a goal — rather than from a difference in core values. To resolve conflict, it is best to park the disagreement and spend time listening to each other’s core values. A stakeholder approach — such as *Theory U*, *Mutual Gains Approach* to negotiation, or nonviolent communication techniques — offers tools to align core values. When these are agreed, you can redesign the strategy in a way that takes account of the values of all parties.



↑ Disagreement on strategies does not necessarily mean misalignment of needs and values. From Prosocial World.

## Scaling up

As your holistic landscape restoration project scales up, you will extend partnerships beyond the original partners. Achieving the same sense of partnership among a larger group of people, who may never interact personally, can appear challenging. A strong vision will keep the partnership going.

This phase is about opening the partnership to newcomers. Exclusivity is a killer of collaborations. You could start by inviting a small selection of stakeholders to join, but you must keep extending the invitation. The open invitation should entice people from diverse backgrounds, not just for their technical skills, but also for the social capital they bring.

This is the moment to organise distributed leadership, which means that that decision-making takes place at the “lowest” level, or as close to the action as possible, rather than always being coordinated centrally. Distributed leadership empowers decision-making in complex contexts such as landscape partnerships.

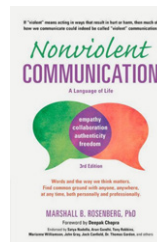
### + LEARN MORE

Strategies for building trust and dealing with friction are outlined in Jean Oelwang’s book *Partnering*.



*Partnering*  
Jean Oelwang

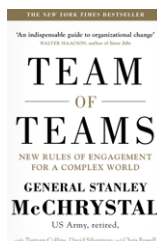
Random House UK Ltd  
ISBN 978-1-5291-4606-6



*Nonviolent Communication*  
Marshall B. Rosenberg

PuddleDancer Press  
ISBN 978-1-892005-28-1

Stanley McChrystal’s *Team of Teams* looks at the role of a holistic approach to partnerships.



*Team of Teams*  
Stanley A. McChrystal,  
David Silverman, Tatum  
Collins, Chris Fussell

Penguin Books Ltd  
ISBN 978-0-241-25083-9

The Partnerships Resource Center offers tools for navigating partnership practices, developed in collaboration with practitioners from both public and private sectors.



Learn more on [rsm.nl](http://rsm.nl), in the Partnerships Resource Centre.



↑ Sharing learnings on restoration, community activation, and finance at the Bioregional Weaving Labs learning summit in Germany, 2023. Photography: Nadine de Vogel, Commonland.

## What's next?

Having introduced the formal and informal aspects of landscape partnerships, it's time to dive deeper. How can we create spaces of belonging that enable systemic collaboration across landscapes?

# Creating spaces of belonging

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- ➔ Spaces of belonging are the basis for transformative change in landscapes. They empower individuals to collaborate towards common goals, and to drive meaningful and sustainable change.
- ➔ *Theory U* is a method of creating spaces of belonging that combines well with the *4 Returns Framework* because it's designed for transformative outcomes.
- ➔ *Theory U* has five phases: co-initiation, co-sensing, co-strategising, co-creating, and co-evolving. In the *4 Returns* holistic landscape restoration context, there are diverse ways to apply *Theory U*.
- ➔ Other participatory methods exist that fit with a holistic landscape restoration approach, including the *Mutual Gains Approach*.

The transformative change needed for holistic landscape restoration is only possible when all landscape stakeholders feel that they belong to a community with a shared goal. The concept, spaces of belonging, encourages collaboration among large numbers of stakeholders from within and outside a landscape. The spaces support a shift to a transformative mindset. They nurture and reinforce people's commitment to a shared vision. It is an inclusive space where stakeholders can deepen their relationship with themselves, with those around them, and with nature. Ultimately, spaces of belonging empower individuals to collaborate effectively towards common goals, and to drive meaningful and sustainable change in the landscape.



Spaces of belonging are important in holistic landscape restoration because of the complexity of the challenges. This brings a need for transformation and resilient teams that are deeply invested in bringing about change. But how can we encourage this engagement in a landscape?

Various participatory approaches provide spaces of belonging, or participatory involvement, within the context of holistic landscape restoration. These approaches are about putting the local system and its people at the centre.

This chapter focuses on one of such approaches: *Theory U*. Developed by Otto Scharmer, a senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in America and the Presencing Institute, *Theory U* offers a transformative approach to addressing pressing global challenges. The process was designed to allow stakeholders from diverse backgrounds to collect and interpret data together, understand each other's perspectives, and create inclusive solutions. It is a valuable tool for multi-stakeholder processes and complex issues that are faced in holistic landscape restoration.

*Theory U* has been used successfully by Commonland in various landscapes for more than a decade. Designed for achieving transformation, this method complements the *4 Returns Framework* because it works well in the context of complex landscapes.

This chapter shows how to use *Theory U* in a landscape initiative. It also looks at the *Mutual Gains Approach*, which could also be valuable in certain contexts. This chapter is based on the paper *Creating spaces of belonging for large scale landscape restoration* by Commonland and the Presencing Institute. Reading the full paper will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topics presented here. For a deeper understanding of *Theory U* and how to put it to practice, we refer to the u-school for Transformation developed by the Presencing Institute.

**+** LEARN MORE

*Creating spaces of belonging for large-scale landscape restoration*, published by Commonland and the Presencing Institute, describes a combined approach of the 4 Returns and *Theory U* framework to tackle the root causes of landscape degradation.

→ [commonland.com/publications](https://commonland.com/publications), search for: *Creating Spaces of Belonging*

The u-school for Transformation is a global platform that offers programs, certifications, space holding and innovation labs using *Theory U*.

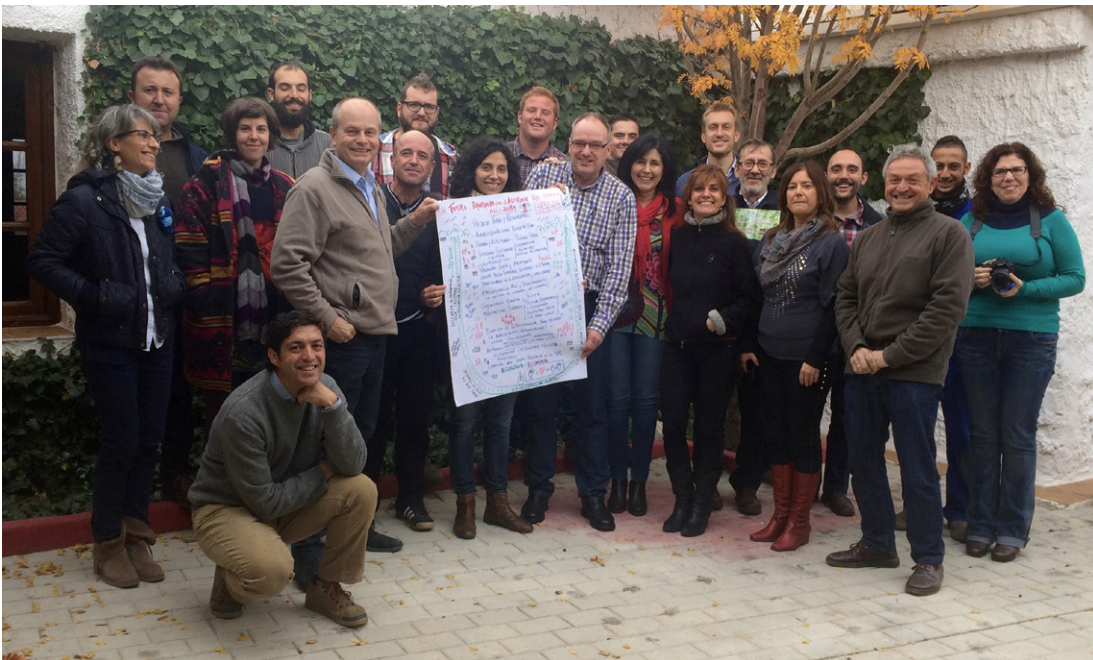
→ [u-school.org](https://u-school.org)

## The Theory U process

Landscape degradation is complex — caused by interwoven geological, ecological, social, political, economic, and cultural factors. It should therefore be approached from a holistic, multi-stakeholder perspective. Taking different points of view into account requires a shift from a symptom-focused approach — where each problem gets solved in isolation — to an integrated, collaborative, and transformative way of communicating and working.

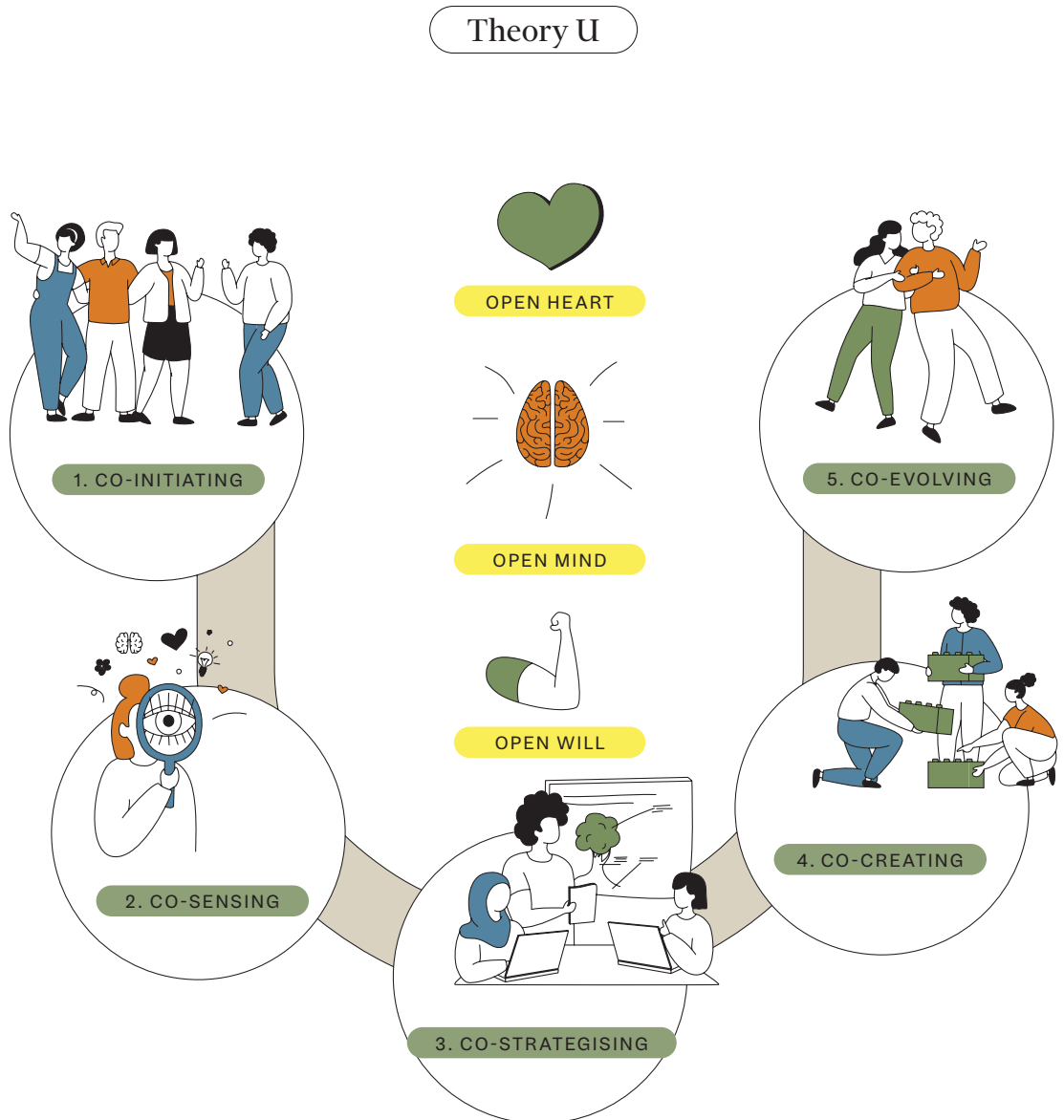
Stakeholders, inside and outside the landscape, must engage in deep listening, dialogue, and collective learning. Not only must communities learn together but they need to share their knowledge with other groups, such as other practitioners, funders, policymakers, and, potentially, consumers. *Theory U* offers a process for this. It enables stakeholders to connect, gain a shared understanding of root causes, formulate a future vision, and move into action.

At Commonland's first landscape workshop in the Altiplano Estepario, Spain, in 2014, 30 farmers, conservationists, and entrepreneurs came together to discuss their goals. It led to the first shared vision for a 4 Returns holistic landscape restoration initiative, guided by *Theory U* principles and exercises. Photography: Commonland.



## The five phases

*Theory U* consists of five phases, and you may go through them more than once. Sometimes, the five phases of *Theory U* coincide with the 5 Elements of the 4 Returns Framework.





## 1. Co-initiation

Joining the group, setting a joint intention for the process

The first phase focuses on nurturing trusting relationships among stakeholders within a landscape. Stakeholders are introduced to deep listening and systems thinking to increase awareness of each other's purpose, values, and work. They're also introduced to the *4 Returns Framework* and reflect on the return of inspiration, revealing the possibility of a better future in the landscape. The group co-creates an inspirational shared intention for the landscape based on the *4 Returns Framework*, such as ensuring a future for the next generation or increasing connection in the landscape to cultivate positive change.

Time is a critical factor. Seeking a commitment of at least 20 years encourages stakeholders to engage from a dedicated and practical perspective. This is essential for developing trust because it deters those who are involved only transiently and signifies a serious, long-term endeavour. The 20+ Year commitment underscores the importance of the initiative, instilling confidence and building lasting partnerships.

The desired outcome is that stakeholders gain a sense of trust and feel committed to the process. They now share a language — the *4 Returns Framework* — and can see how various influences on the landscape connect. They have started to uncover some individual and collective blind spots.



### TOOLS TO USE

Container building: a process for creating a safe space for a group or a team by establishing both trust and ground rules for engagement



[u-school.org/container-building](https://u-school.org/container-building)

Listening assessment: a personal digital journal to track your listening levels



[u-school.org/listening-assessment](https://u-school.org/listening-assessment)

## 2. Co-sensing

Letting go of preconceptions and investigating with an open mind, open heart, and open will

The partnership “senses” the landscape collectively, understanding its potential, opportunities for change, and challenges. Through learning journeys, dialogue, stakeholder interviews, and shadowing (following a worker to learn about their job), the stakeholders know more about the underlying dynamics and mindsets that need to be addressed for change to occur. They begin to understand their role as leaders of this change. The primary focus here is to learn from what is already working, and what could be possible if we collaborate.

### + TOOLS TO USE

Dialogue interviews: these interviews engage an interviewee in reflective and generative conversation

→ [u-school.org/dialogue-interview](https://u-school.org/dialogue-interview)

Shadowing: the practice of accompanying and observing someone for a defined period of time during your work and learning from this observation

→ [u-school.org/shadowing](https://u-school.org/shadowing)

3D modelling: a tool to map stakeholders and interactions in landscapes.

→ [u-school.org/3d-modelling](https://u-school.org/3d-modelling)

Stakeholder interviews: these interviews allow you to step into the shoes of key stakeholders in your ecosystem and see your role through their eyes

→ [u-school.org/stakeholder-interview](https://u-school.org/stakeholder-interview)

Learning journey: a method to step out of your daily routine and to experience places, people, and organisations that are relevant to issues you are working on

→ [u-school.org/learning-journeys](https://u-school.org/learning-journeys)

4D mapping: this exercise makes visible the current reality in a social system, such as a school system, health care system, or government.

→ [u-school.org/4d-mapping](https://u-school.org/4d-mapping)



3D modelling is a tool to map stakeholders and interactions in landscapes. When the model is complete, participants move around to view it from different perspectives. Here a Commonland team at a *Theory U* foundation training in October 2021 looks at a 3D model. Photography: Commonland.

### 3. Co-strategising

Realising what these new insights mean for you and your work

Integrating and reflecting on the learning from the co-sensing phase, stakeholders build on their shared understanding of the system, to determine their roles within it, both on an organisational and personal level.

They move from learning to action by connecting to inspiration and common will. To overcome barriers to change — including cultural and psychological challenges — stakeholders need to embrace their role in bringing about the necessary change and shift in mindset.

This is usually the phase in which the first strategic plans are developed — whether it be a first proposition or a full strategy.



#### + TOOLS TO USE

Guided journaling: this exercise invites practitioners into a process of self-reflection; the journaling questions follow the U-process

→ [u-school.org/journaling](https://u-school.org/journaling)

## 4. Co-creating

Prototyping new initiatives that could contribute to addressing systemic barriers

In the co-creating phase, small teams of stakeholders develop examples of integrated solutions based on the local context. They step over the threshold into thoughtful and heartfelt action and start co-creating a portfolio of locally adapted solutions with the potential to scale.

This includes creating an impact strategy, preliminary scaling and replication strategies, and regenerative business development (see chapters *Monitoring the impact of 4 Returns* and *Regenerative business* [page 274, page 227]). Our focus in this phase is on creating prototypes — doing small-scale actions on the ground, reflecting on them, and adapting to learn quickly and integrate strategically. These actions are based on insights from thorough landscape analysis and are informed by the concept of the 3 Zones.

### + TOOLS TO USE

Case Clinic: a peer coaching process designed to identify innovative solutions and next steps for addressing a pressing and immediate leadership challenge

→ [u-school.org/case-clinic](https://u-school.org/case-clinic)

Prototyping: a process to refine an idea and its underlying assumptions, and to test what later could become a pilot project

→ [u-school.org/prototyping](https://u-school.org/prototyping)





## 5. Co-evolving

Reflecting, learning, scaling what works, and changing what doesn't

The last step in the process is aimed at finding long-term funding, and scaling, replicating, and integrating prototypes and innovations into the existing landscape. Having chosen which prototypes are most suitable for the ecosystems within the landscape, we work with stakeholders to develop strategic action plans and then continue to support with scaling, adaptation, and replication of these solutions.



### TOOLS TO USE



The Chapter *Strategic planning tools* [page 168] offers tools to support strategic decision making in iterative learning loops.



### From daily practice to systemic change

*Theory U* proposes that the quality of outcomes in any system depends on participants' level of attention or consciousness. It serves as a framework, a method for change, and even a way of being. *Theory U* excels in systemic transformation.

In landscape restoration, *Theory U* helps stakeholders to recognise blind spots and align the efforts of participants. We have adapted *Theory U* to work specifically in the multi-stakeholder settings of landscape restoration. There are four ways in which *Theory U* can be applied in the context of holistic landscape restoration.



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Find more about the u-school on [u-school.org](http://u-school.org)

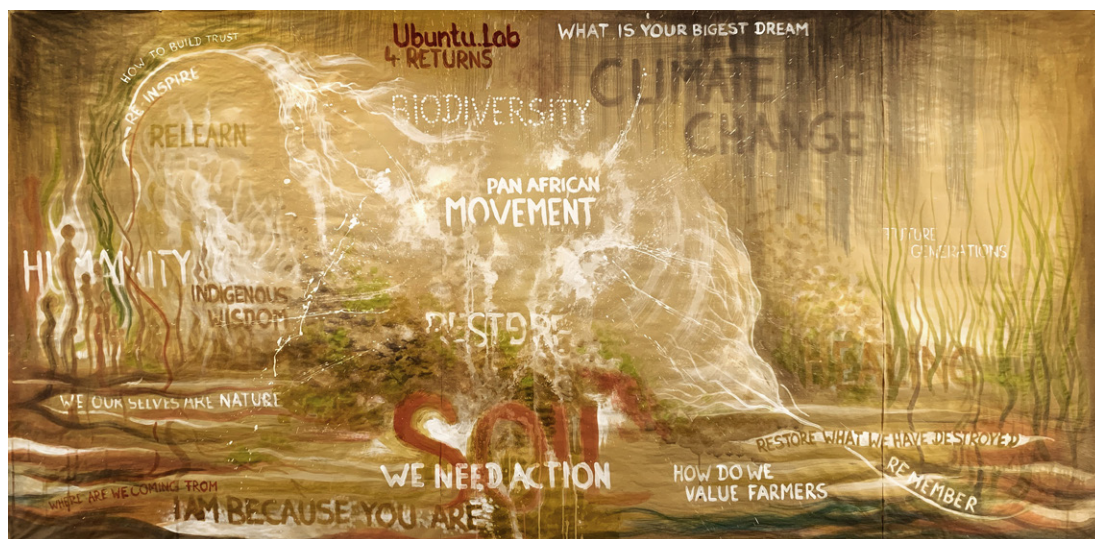
- ➔ **Daily practice.** One of the ways in which *Theory U* is understood is as a state of being, a sense of self and our role in the bigger system. You can practice elements of *Theory U* daily, for example by practising the four levels of listening, or doing guided journaling, empathy walks, dialogue interviews, or case clinics. You can learn more about these practices on the website of the u-school for Transformation.<sup>4</sup>
- ➔ **Targeted workshop.** *Theory U* can be used as a guiding process in a workshop, usually over one or two days. It offers an excellent selection of tools for diverse groups of stakeholders. A *Theory U* workshop could change their perspective of the landscape and their role in it. It can encourage collaboration.
- ➔ **Landscape lab.** Here, lab is short for “systemic / social innovation lab”. In our context, it usually has a trajectory of one to two years during which 50-80 landscape stakeholders from various sectors spend time together in workshops, which “anchor” the process and mark the progress of the *Theory U* steps. They also do some practical work between workshops. The purpose is to instil a shared, holistic understanding of the landscape across all stakeholders, enabling them to collaborate more effectively to create change in the landscape, for example by removing systemic barriers.
- ➔ **Regional learning lab.** This lab, rather than serving one landscape, acts as a place where the partners involved in landscape labs in various landscapes come together to share experiences. It is a support structure for several labs with matching characteristics, such as a focus on a particular theme or proximity to each other.

These levels of applying *Theory U* for holistic landscape restoration can be used at various stages of an initiative as needed. In its simplest form, *Theory U* can become part of our daily operations. The other levels are context specific. They are used in a targeted manner, with some prerequisites. It depends on the local context, the preconditions needed for a lab, such as fertile ground and a capable and resourced team to organise and coordinate the process and follow-up, and what the landscape team wants to achieve.

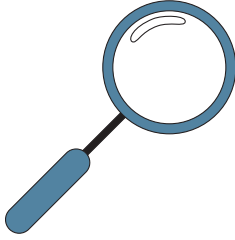
## Conditions for success

Trust is crucial in holistic landscape restoration initiatives. Trust builds over time through years of working together, emphasising the importance of long-term commitment. *Theory U* workshops and labs can foster excitement among landscape stakeholders, but failing to follow up effectively can damage trust. To avoid this, prerequisites must be met:

- **Team capacity.** Ensure your team is capable and resourced to support the process, including financing and ongoing support between workshops.
- **Clear purpose.** Define the lab's purpose clearly and ensure the team understands the process.
- **Connect to practice.** Ensure the process integrates all relevant research and information about the landscape, its challenges, existing initiatives, and stakeholders. If this information is not included, participants can feel that you are disregarding the work that has already been done.
- **Concrete action.** Prototypes and conversations must lead to tangible actions that create value for landscape initiatives.
- **Manage expectations.** Do this throughout the process.



↑ Live scribing by Olaf Baldini during the first workshop series of the 4 Returns Ubuntu Lab partnership programme, 2022. Learn more about this partnership here: [commonland.com/regional-learning-networks](https://commonland.com/regional-learning-networks)



## OTHER WAYS TO GAIN MULTI-STAKEHOLDER CONSENSUS

The *Mutual Gains Approach* (MGA) is part of the consensus building process developed by the Consensus Building Institute. Consensus building is a way to structure and ease multi-stakeholder, multi-issue negotiation by:

- ➔ Identifying stakeholders and assessing their interests, abilities, and potential for reaching consensus-based agreements
- ➔ Deciding whether to go ahead with a consensus-building process and starting with clear goals, ground rules, a work plan, and timetable
- ➔ Using joint fact-finding to resolve technical and factual questions and help the group develop workable options
- ➔ Managing deliberation among stakeholders to maximise the chance of reaching agreements that are technically sound and politically acceptable
- ➔ Promoting consensus agreements whenever possible, or enabling near-consensus alternatives
- ➔ Offering opportunities for stakeholders to revise their agreements during the implementation phase

More details can be found on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com).<sup>①</sup>

The *Mutual Gains Approach* comes into play during the consensus-building process when stakeholders are negotiating outcomes. At the core of the *Mutual Gains Approach* are four steps for negotiating better outcomes while protecting relationships and reputation. A central tenet of this approach is that a vast majority of negotiations involve parties who have more than one goal or concern in mind and more than one issue that can be addressed in the agreement they reach. Participants using this approach improve their chances of creating an agreement that is better than existing alternatives. The four steps of the *Mutual Gains Approach*,<sup>②</sup> are:

- ① Preparation
- ② Creating value
- ③ Distributing value
- ④ Follow-through

The consensus-building process and the *Mutual Gains Approach* are particularly relevant to elements of the *4 Returns Framework* — shared understanding, as well as vision and action plan.

① More details on these steps can be found on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Overview of Multi-stakeholder Consensus Building*

② Learn more on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *The Mutual Gains Approach*



## LEARN MORE

Participatory leadership needs trained facilitators. Here are some platforms, resources, and courses to get trained as a facilitator yourself:

The u-school for Transformation by the Presencing Institute is a global capacity-building and action research platform that offers programmes, certifications, space holding, and the formation of innovation labs on *Theory U*.

→ [u-school.org](http://u-school.org)

*Art of Hosting* is a way of harnessing the collective wisdom and self-organising ability of groups of any size. It blends a suite of processes, including *Theory U*, to invite people to take charge of the challenges facing them.

→ [patterns.sociocracy30.org/glossary](http://patterns.sociocracy30.org/glossary)

*Liberating Structures* is a set of facilitation techniques and tools designed to empower groups and enable inclusive, creative problem-solving, and decision-making.

→ [liberatingstructures.com](http://liberatingstructures.com)

Read more about the application of *Theory U* in the context of landscape restoration in the paper *Creating spaces of belonging for large scale landscape restoration*.

→ [commonland.com/publications](http://commonland.com/publications),  
search for: *Creating Spaces of Belonging*

*Sociocracy 3.0 Patterns* is social technology for evolving agile and resilient organisations, from start-ups to international networks and multi-agency collaborations.

→ [patterns.sociocracy30.org/map.html](http://patterns.sociocracy30.org/map.html)

*Nonviolent Communication* is a method of promoting empathy, understanding, and conflict resolution through compassionate expression of feelings and needs, avoiding blame or judgment.

→ [cnvc.org](http://cnvc.org)

Living Lands in South Africa developed the *Living Landscapes Approach*, which integrates the building blocks of *Theory U* and the *4 Returns Framework* into their context.

→ [livinglands.com](http://livinglands.com)

## A place for notes

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A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.

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## What's next?

Having shown how to create a solid basis for your initiative with a landscape partnership, the next section explores an important phase of setting up a new initiative — gaining a shared understanding of the landscape and its stakeholders.



**Develop a shared  
understanding**

Everyone brings unique perspectives and priorities to the landscape. Developing a shared understanding of the landscape, its challenges, and 4 Returns opportunities, ensures all voices are heard.

Developing a shared understanding within a landscape partnership is essential for uniting stakeholders, aligning interests, and collaboratively developing and implementing a landscape plan. Stakeholders might have fragmented knowledge about the landscape, and it is important to see where information overlaps and identify gaps. Achieving a shared understanding from the 4 Returns perspective involves grasping the root causes of the 4 Losses resulting from degradation: loss of purpose and hope; loss of jobs and prosperity; loss of biodiversity, soil, and water; and loss of long-term income. These are intertwined with factors such as the landscape's history, culture, location, and political context. At this stage, it can be helpful to engage a neutral facilitator, who will guide stakeholders in generating and analysing landscape information, leading to a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding.

The chapter *Defining the landscape* delves into the factors that shape a landscape and the importance of defining boundaries. It examines geological, ecological, and human influences critical for effective management and restoration. The 3 Zones provide insight into landscape dynamics. Through hands-on exercises, you will learn to define these zones in order to make informed decisions about spatial design and foster a shared understanding of the landscape.

The chapter *Understanding the landscape* suggests two ways of improving your shared understanding of the landscape, the 4 Returns diagnosis and a landscape and stakeholder analysis. The 4 Returns diagnosis provides a snapshot of current conditions, identifying focus areas and interventions. Landscape and stakeholder analysis blends desk research with fieldwork, engaging diverse stakeholders. These analyses inform decision-making and restoration strategies, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the landscape's state, needs, opportunities, and potential partnerships.



## RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND METHODS

The tool *Defining the 3 Zones*, published by Wetlands International, Commonland, and the Landscape Finance Lab in 2024, provides guidance on the 3 Zones and includes two exercises to define the 3 Zones in a landscape.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Defining the 3 Zones*

*The 4 Returns diagnostic tool*, published by Wetlands International, Commonland, and the Landscape Finance Lab in 2023, can help identify the status of the 4 Returns in the landscape and the impact achieved so far.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *4 Returns Diagnostic Tool*

The resource *A quick-start guide to stakeholder mapping*, published by Commonland in 2023, provides more information on stakeholder mapping and analysis.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Stakeholder Mapping Guide*

*The landscape and stakeholder report layout*, created by Commonland in 2023, provides the structure for your landscape and stakeholder report.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Landscape and Stakeholder Report Layout*

## ENVISAGED OUTCOMES

- ① Reached a thorough understanding of the landscape's history, characteristics, and current state. This includes identification of land uses (the 3 Zones) and assessing the state of the 4 Returns in the landscape (including the root causes of degradation and future challenges), commonly referred to as the 4 Returns diagnosis.
- ① Attained insight into stakeholders' interests. Acknowledging stakeholder perspectives and negotiating an inclusive future for collaboration in the landscape is an essential part of the process.
- ① Gained awareness of key restoration and regeneration opportunities in the landscape. An assessment of landscape opportunities (including carbon projects) and future scenarios for optimising the 4 Returns will help ensure a programme's success.



A farmer working in the field, in the background the beginning of a forest.  
Photography: Tom Davies, Commonland.





# Defining the landscape

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- ➔ Different forces shape a landscape: including geological, ecological, and human influences. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for effective management and restoration efforts.
- ➔ Landscape boundaries are defined by spiritual, natural, cultural, and economic factors. Boundaries are more than lines on a map; they align activities, create project identity, and aid monitoring.
- ➔ The 3 Zones can help define and understand your landscape. They help you to zoom out and see the big picture, and to understand the complexity and dynamics between natural, economic, and combined zones in support of better decision making.

One of the first steps in working at a landscape level is to analyse the landscape to gain a better understanding of how it was shaped and what factors influence it. To begin, you need to define your working area by drafting boundaries. Sometimes the boundaries of a landscape are clear, but at other times it can be difficult to be precise. This chapter explores methods for defining the boundaries and the advantages of embracing a 3 Zones perspective.



↑ Dutch Peat Meadows, the Netherlands.  
Photography: Tom Baas, Commonland.



① Modified from *The Little Sustainable Landscapes Book*. Find it on [globalcanopy.org](http://globalcanopy.org), search for: *The Little Sustainable Landscape Book*

#### REMINDER: WHAT DO WE MEAN BY LANDSCAPE?

Let's revisit the concept of a landscape. It is a socio-ecological system that consists of multiple interconnected natural or human-modified lands and wetlands. It is influenced by geology, climate, flora, and fauna, as well as historical, economic, socio-cultural, and political activities.<sup>①</sup> Within a landscape, a variety of land uses coexist, from agriculture and forestry, to biodiversity conservation and urban areas. Generally, if the area only has one type of land use, it is considered a site, not a landscape. These different uses are managed by different stakeholders, each with their own objectives, such as biodiversity preservation, agricultural productivity, or livelihood security. Given the diverse use of landscapes, defining boundaries can be challenging. So, where do we begin?

It's crucial to find the right balance in terms of scale, and to optimise ecological restoration efforts. Ideally, a landscape is small enough to manage effectively but big enough to serve the needs of various stakeholders. Landscapes should be large enough to accommodate all components of their complex systems, typically ranging from 50,000 to 100,000 hectares, though this may vary depending on the specific context.

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## What shapes a landscape?

Looking back in time to understand the factors that shape the physical and biological environment of a landscape will guide effective management and restoration efforts. By recognising these influences, stakeholders can develop informed strategies. Key factors that shape landscapes are:

- ➔ **Geological influences.** These forces operate over long timescales and include tectonic movements, uplift, and volcanic activity. They determine the fundamental characteristics of the landscape, such as its rock types and basic topography.
- ➔ **Geomorphological influences.** Weather, water, vegetation, and other natural forces shape the landscape by eroding land, depositing sediment, and building soil. These processes occur over medium timescales, spanning decades to centuries.
- ➔ **Ecological influences.** The dynamic interplay between biodiversity and the geological environment drives continuous evolution within ecosystems. Vegetation, plant-eaters, meat-eaters, prey, and predators continuously shape the ecosystem which they have inhabited since evolutionary times. From large wildlife to microorganisms, species interact to shape the landscape's ecological balance. This has been ongoing for thousands of years, just as human activities have dramatically altered landscapes over the past millennia.
- ➔ **Anthropogenic influences.** Human activities have a profound effect on the landscape. People cut down forests, drain, mine, or cultivate land, change the course of rivers, and build roads and cities. These effects are often seen at short timescales of months or decades. Although humans have interacted with landscapes for thousands of years, their ability to change their environment has increased massively since the invention of the steam engine. Cultural factors also play a role in shaping beliefs and behaviours that influence land use and management practices.

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## Identify the landscape's boundaries

A landscape is vital to people's local and national identity, but its boundaries are not rigid; they can shift over time. Defining where one landscape ends and another begins is a bit like finding the border on a map — sometimes clearly defined, other times uncertain. Deciding these boundaries involves more than just scientific analysis; it requires open dialogue. Establishing boundaries fosters shared understanding and provides clarity for organising activities and monitoring progress.

As you deepen your understanding of the landscape, boundaries may change to better reflect the scope of your work and the landscape's dynamics. For example, landscape boundaries might be adapted when setting tangible goals aligned with your vision (see chapter *Creating a shared vision for the landscape* [page 142]). To define your landscape's boundaries, it is helpful to analyse the landscape's characteristics and to define the 3 Zones — which we will explore next.



↑ Villagers in the Kabirdham landscape, India, view the *4 Returns Framework* represented as a map in the local language and aligned with the local context.

## Factors for defining boundaries

In this section, we explore factors that contribute to the way you define your landscape's boundaries. Set by stakeholders involved in landscape management, the boundaries may align with natural features, socio-cultural areas such as Indigenous territories, or administrative boundaries, sometimes even crossing national borders. Let's delve into how each of these factors influences the delineation of your landscape for effective planning and management.

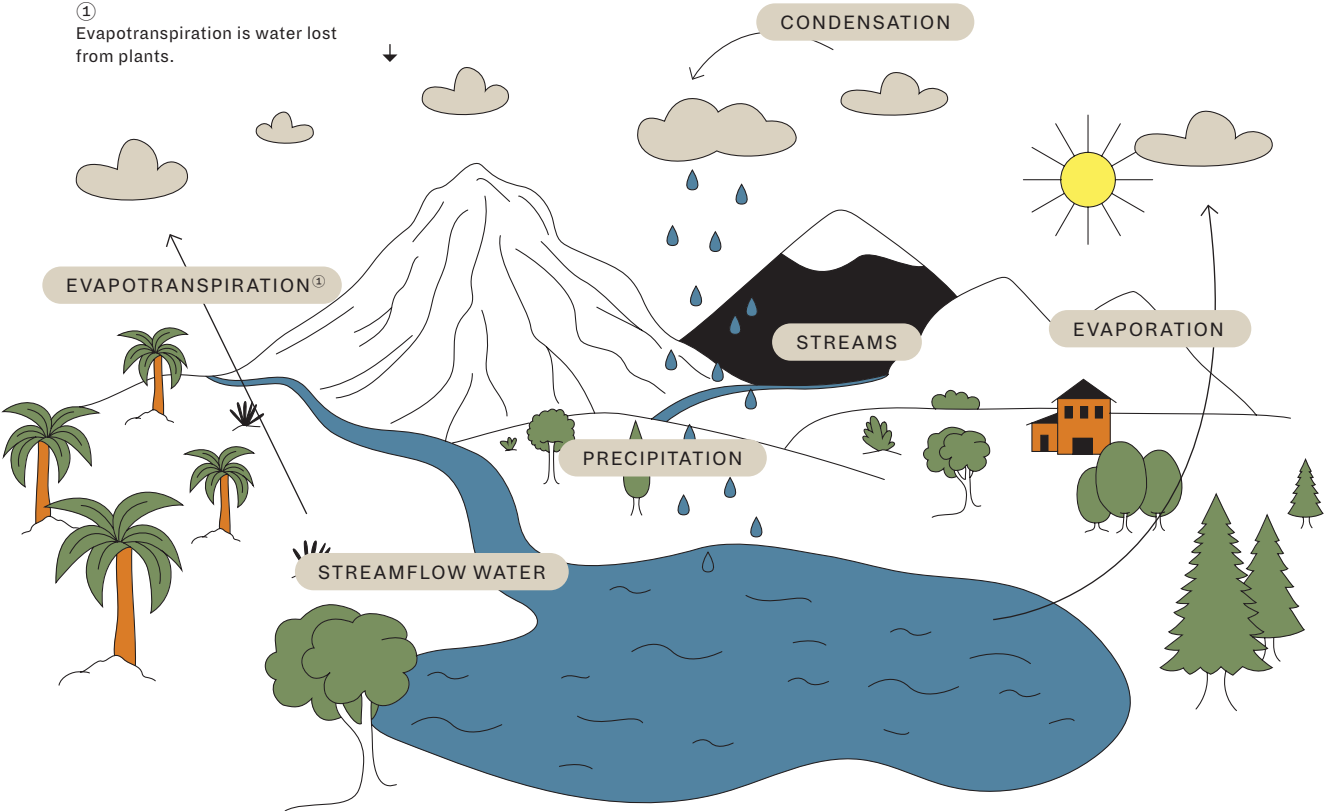
**Watershed boundaries.** Water plays a key role in shaping landscapes. A watershed is where all the water from rainfall and snowmelt flows into a common body of water, such as a river, lake, or wetland. These areas act like natural bowls, collecting water and directing it into larger bodies of water. Wetlands, often found within watersheds, filter water and prevent flooding. It's important to consider watershed boundaries, starting from the top. Issues such as flooding, drought, and invasive species can be understood and addressed better by focusing on the watershed. This approach, which focuses on managing resources within a specific geographical area defined by its hydrological boundaries, helps target restoration and conservation efforts strategically.



## Water Cycle

Water is a significant factor in shaping landscapes — you need to understand how it runs in yours.

① Evapotranspiration is water lost from plants.



**Administrative boundaries.** Administrative boundaries often fail to match the natural layout of the land. While it might make sense to define your landscape according to natural features, doing so can present challenges when working across administrative borders, such as provincial or national boundaries. A river or mountain range may serve as a clear natural boundary within a landscape, while administrative borders may cut across these features, for example. This mismatch can complicate collaborative efforts that span multiple administrative areas.

**Vegetation types.** In certain regions, vegetation varies noticeably. Distinct types of vegetation may have vastly different dynamics and requirements for restoration or sustainable management. Depending on your priorities, you might decide to focus on just one type of vegetation or include a mix in your landscape plan. In a coastal wetland area, for example, salt-tolerant mangroves may thrive alongside freshwater marshes and upland forests. Depending on your objectives, you might opt to concentrate on restoring a specific vegetation type, such as mangroves, or incorporate a combination of habitats into your landscape plan.

**Geology and soil types.** Just like vegetation, you need to consider whether to concentrate on specific types of geological or soil characteristics, or to embrace the variation in the landscape. If the aim is to restore wetland habitats, for example, focusing on peat meadows could be a strategic choice.

**Migration routes of wildlife.** Important wildlife migration routes could define the boundary or require complete inclusion within your landscape boundaries. In a forested region, for example, the migration path of a herd of deer might cross various habitats, including woodland, grassland, and wetland areas. Ensuring that these routes are fully encompassed within landscape boundaries supports their protection and conservation.



← A map in which stakeholders during a workshop have identified key biodiversity spots in the region at a Bioregional Weaving Labs programme, Ireland. Photography: Commonland.

**Total size.** Landscapes are not characterised or defined by size but for practical reasons it is best to work in large landscapes of 50,000 to 1,000,000 hectares, or more. This makes it possible to restore ecological processes, such as animal migration and seed dispersal, that require large areas. Exactly what is too small and what is too large varies in different contexts worldwide, but landscapes should be of a size that makes it possible to restore ecological processes and monitor progress throughout. Remember, landscapes have multiple uses, comprising interconnected natural land, human-modified land, and wetlands. Also, if the area only has one type of land use, generally it is considered a site, not a landscape.

<sup>2</sup> Find a more detailed description of wetlands on [ramsar.org](https://www.ramsar.org), search for: *What are Wetlands?*

**Wetlands.** Consider the significance of wetlands in your landscape assessment. These are areas where water is the primary factor controlling the environment as well as the associated plant and animal life. They occur where the water table is at or near the surface of the land, or where the land is covered by water.<sup>2</sup> These areas, which encompass water bodies such as streams, rivers,

lakes, and coastal seas, play a vital role in the dynamics of a landscape. Wetlands connect land, vegetation, and water, exerting considerable influence on each. When defining landscape boundaries, wetlands must be included to ensure the protection and conservation of critical habitats for aquatic species, for example.

**Topography and dominant weather patterns.** If the landscape features varied terrain, you need to consider prevailing weather patterns. This helps identify areas of high rainfall and those prone to rain shadows. The latter are patches of warm, dry land caused by mountains blocking precipitation to one side. Topographical features greatly influence water flow, soil erosion, and agricultural viability.

**Cultural diversity and local identities.** It is important that boundaries accurately reflect the diversity of cultures and subcultures in the landscape, including cultural heritage, sacred sites, and traditional land use practices. A holistic approach builds on traditional and Indigenous wisdom to encompass centuries' worth of sustainable practices that are often deeply rooted in harmonious relationships with nature.

**Potentially interesting stakeholders.** Funders, government agencies, showcase farms, and other potentially relevant stakeholders should also be considered when defining the landscape. It may be strategic to incorporate their areas of operation into your landscape definition, which can be visualised using pins on a map. Collaborating with a government agency on watershed management, including its operational area within the landscape boundary, ensures alignment with its objectives and facilitates coordination, for example.

**Industry.** Your initiative's boundaries could be shaped by industry. If focusing on a specific industry or value chain, such as citrus farming for example, you might define your landscape boundaries around areas where citrus farms are concentrated. This approach ensures alignment with the industry's needs and facilitates targeted interventions to support citrus production and associated activities within the defined landscape.

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## SKETCHING BOUNDARIES

When you have mapped out the factors that contribute to defining your landscape's boundaries and overlaid them on maps, your working area will begin to take shape. You will notice areas where boundaries overlap or where there's a concentration of potentially interesting opportunities, whether they involve stakeholders or other factors. Sketch out the boundaries roughly, using a pencil for flexibility. Precision isn't crucial at this stage; what matters most is that stakeholders identify with the defined area. Reading the next section about understanding and defining the 3 Zones could also be helpful when sketching out the boundaries.

### + ADDITIONAL TOOLS

Here are some tools that can assist you in exploring spatial information and digitally mapping boundaries:

Terraso

→ [terraso.org](https://terraso.org)

QGIS

→ [qgis.org](https://qgis.org)

Explorer.land

→ [explorer.land](https://explorer.land)

Restor

→ [restor.eco](https://restor.eco)

Leaflet.js

→ [leafletjs.com](https://leafletjs.com)

Carry Map

→ [carrymap.com](https://carrymap.com)

Mapeo

→ [digital-democracy.org/mapeo/](https://digital-democracy.org/mapeo/)

Google Earth Engine

→ [earthengine.google.com](https://earthengine.google.com)

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## Defining the 3 Zones

When the landscape boundaries have been defined roughly it can be helpful to view your landscape from a 3 Zones perspective. It is also helpful to do this if you're still at the roughing out stage. Building on the introduction to the 3 Zones (see chapter *The 4 Returns Framework* [page 21]), this section provides practical guidance on understanding and defining the current spatial configuration of the 3 Zones in your landscape.

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## GAINING PERSPECTIVE

Exploring the 3 Zones in your landscape isn't just about drawing lines on a map — it's about gaining insights, sparking discussions, and shaping a shared vision. Maps are helpful, but rich dialogue also plays a role in planning and managing your landscape. Understanding and defining the 3 Zones allows you to zoom out and gain a bird's eye view, so you see the complexity and dynamics at play between the 3 Zones. This insight validates your boundaries and deepens your understanding of the landscape's context. It

enhances better communication, helps identify priorities, and guides interventions, ultimately shaping the vision of your landscape. In short, exploring the 3 Zones serves two important purposes:

- ➔ **Facilitating a shift of mindset among landscape stakeholders.** The 3 Zones help in viewing the landscape as an interconnected system, considering various aspects of human activities, conservation, and ecosystem health. It enables a more holistic approach to land-use management and fosters thinking at the landscape level.
- ➔ **Providing an understanding of the landscape context.** Understanding the 3 Zones in your landscape will contribute to a better understanding of land use, land use change, and the interconnectedness between different landscape fragments. This is important because the implementation of restoration activities within a landscape requires careful planning and an understanding of the needs of both nature and people.

↓ Definitions of the 3 Zones within a landscape.



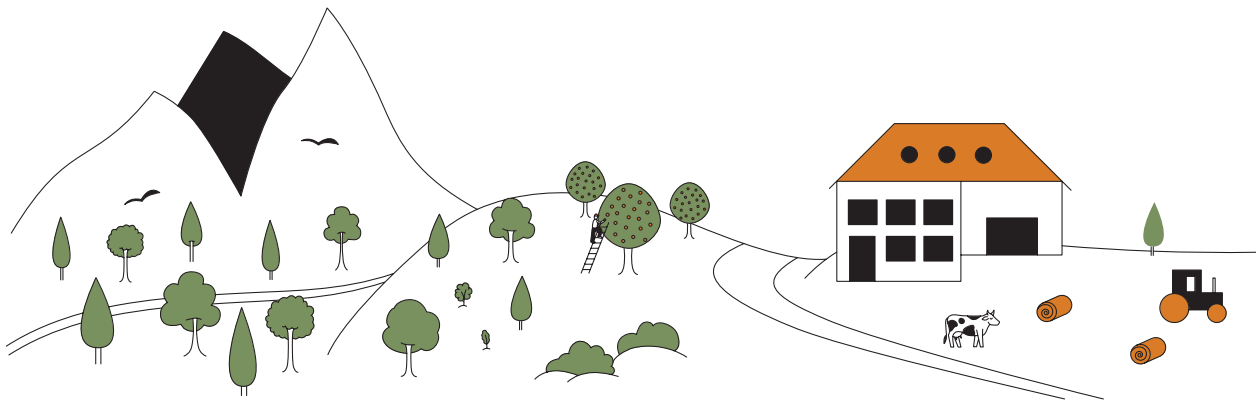
## CRITERIA TO DEFINE THE 3 ZONES



Find the 3 Zones exercise in the tool *Defining the 3 Zones* on [4retuns.commonland.com](https://4retuns.commonland.com), search for: *Defining the 3 Zones*

Recognising the diverse nature of landscapes, it is important to define the 3 Zones distinctly within each landscape. The main uses of land in each zone are shown in the table below, and the criteria that characterise the zones can be found on the 4 Returns platform.<sup>3</sup> Defining zones may depend on the context. What is considered an economic zone in one landscape, may be defined as a combined zone in another landscape. So, the 3 Zones and their criteria are intended as guiding principles and are adaptable to the context and restoration objectives of each landscape.

### Land cover or land uses of the 3 Zones



#### NATURAL ZONE

- Natural / semi-natural forest
- Natural / semi-natural short vegetation
- Natural wetlands
- Mangroves
- Natural bare areas
- Natural surface water

#### COMBINED ZONE

- Agroforestry systems
- Croplands under sustainable production
- Sustainably managed pastures
- Artificial wetlands
- Artificial water bodies

#### ECONOMIC ZONE

- Plantations
- Monocultures with high chemical input
- Croplands
- Pastures
- Hard infrastructure and urban areas



## UNDERSTANDING THE ZONES IN YOUR LANDSCAPE

<sup>4</sup> Find the 3 Zones exercise in the tool *Defining the 3 Zones* on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Defining the 3 Zones*

How do you apply those criteria to your own landscape? The 3 Zones exercise<sup>4</sup> on the 4 Returns platform will help. It can be done in a workshop with your team or landscape partners and is useful for assessing the current situation and envisioning the landscape's future, aligning with a long-term vision (see chapter *From vision to action* [page 153]). The 3 Zones exercise offers different approaches to help define the 3 Zones, including a workshop in which stakeholders define and map the zones and an approach based on a geographic information system (GIS) using spatial mapping software. The approaches can be combined to complement each other.

The workshop method gathers diverse stakeholders for an inclusive discussion on defining a landscape's 3 Zones. Participants examine thematic maps of an area and discuss its current state and potential future zones. The guide *Spatial Planning and Monitoring of Landscape Interventions: Maps to Link People with their Landscapes*<sup>5</sup> can help in selecting and tailoring maps for this exercise. When the 3 Zones are defined, participants can draw them on a landscape map and discuss what dynamics are at play between them now and potentially in the future. Boundaries are roughly outlined, capturing the distinctive characteristics and functions of each zone. Through this interactive process, stakeholders collectively create a holistic understanding of the landscape's dynamics and develop an initial vision for its sustainable management and restoration.

<sup>5</sup> Willemen, L., R. Kozar, A. Desalegn, and L.E. Buck, 2014. *Spatial Planning and Monitoring of Landscape Interventions: Maps to Link People with their Landscapes: A User's Guide*. Washington, DC: EcoAgriculture Partners.

Discussing the 3 Zones, mapped for Waterford County bioregion in Ireland, during the Global Learning Summit in 2024. Photography: Niels Blekemolen, Commonland.





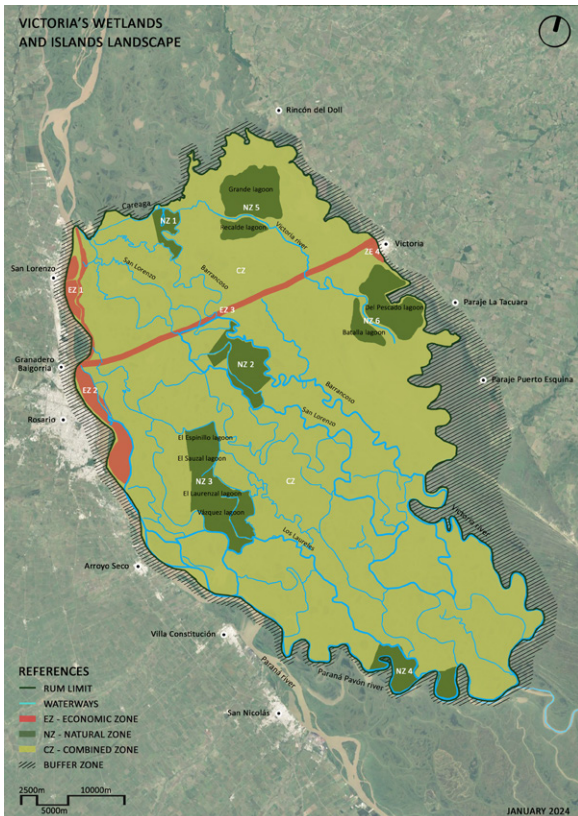
↑ In Sweden, changemakers organise a landscape gathering convening many stakeholders to collectively map out the type of biodiversity in the region and discuss next steps to restore the land together. Photography: Commonland.

The GIS-based approach uses spatial mapping tools, such as ArcGIS or QGIS, to visualise a landscape's 3 Zones. It involves creating detailed maps that show distinctive features and land types. Satellite images and other data are used to outline each zone. These maps help clarify what is happening in the landscape now and what could change in the future. They spark conversations on the landscape's support planning and decision-making processes. Further information can be found on the 4 Returns platform.



## LANDSCAPE STORY: A 3 ZONES EXERCISE

Stakeholders of the Victoria Wetlands and Islands Multi-Use Reserve in Parana Delta, Argentina, envision the landscape as an integral part of a biocultural corridor within a larger system. They aim to preserve water dynamics, biodiversity, and cultural richness. Essential to this is the sustainable production that is tailored to the wetland and the services that address people's needs and activities. The stakeholders needed to inspire people to collaborate in caring for the wetland and decided to develop a management plan. They did this through a 3 Zones workshop facilitated by Wetlands International Latin America and the Caribbean. They identified 3 Zones with distinctive land uses. The natural zone consists of healthy wetlands integrated with other ecosystems. The combined zone includes scattered houses and ranches, fishing, cattle ranching, and beekeeping. The economic zone is where well-being initiatives and resources are being generated. They also identified areas outside the reserve's boundaries to incorporate neighbouring economic and combined zones. The participatory approach to defining zones enabled a comprehensive and inclusive approach to land management. Stakeholders can prioritise conservation and restoration efforts while reducing conflicts.



← Four economic zones, six natural zones, and a large combined zone are proposed to achieve the agreed vision of the Victoria Wetlands and Islands Multi-Use Reserve, Argentina. Credit: Wetlands International.

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## What's next?

From uncovering the forces that shape a landscape and its boundaries, to delving into the dynamics of its 3 Zones, you've built a solid foundation for effective management and restoration. As we move forward, the next chapter will build upon this groundwork, offering hands-on exercises and approaches to enrich your landscape understanding. These tools will empower you to develop targeted strategies for holistic landscape restoration and refine your vision. Let's continue the journey towards gaining a shared understanding of the landscape.

# Understanding the landscape

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- ➔ Guidance on gathering insights into the current state of the 4 Returns in your landscape with the 4 Returns diagnostic tool
- ➔ Gaining a shared understanding through a combination of desk research and fieldwork, with a diverse group of stakeholders
- ➔ How a landscape stakeholder analysis deepens connection with communities in the landscape, shows dynamics at play, and explores opportunities and challenges

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## Understanding your landscape

When the boundaries are defined and the 3 Zones are identified, it is time to explore your landscape's key characteristics further. Knowing a landscape and its driving forces, barriers, potential, and challenges helps stakeholders make informed decisions on effective restoration methods. It also fosters inclusive stakeholder engagement and helps create a baseline for monitoring progress. Exploring and building on existing information about the landscape is a great way to start.

This chapter provides guidance and practical approaches on how to improve your understanding of the landscape. We recommend two ways forward: understanding the 4 Returns in your landscape through a 4 Returns diagnosis and conducting a landscape and stakeholder analysis. Both are helpful tools for creating the shared understanding needed for strategy and partnering with stakeholders, and a source of insight for funding and communications. These assessments don't necessarily follow one after the other; they are complementary and can be used alongside other analyses or workshops. Both feed into Element 3 in this guidebook, in which we move towards creating a landscape plan. At this stage, more than any other, it is crucial to involve a diverse group of stakeholders in each step in the process to create a shared understanding.

Farmer René on his land in Baviaanskloof, South Africa. Water bunds catch water and create little protected ecosystems. Photography: ↓ Reblux photography, Commonland.

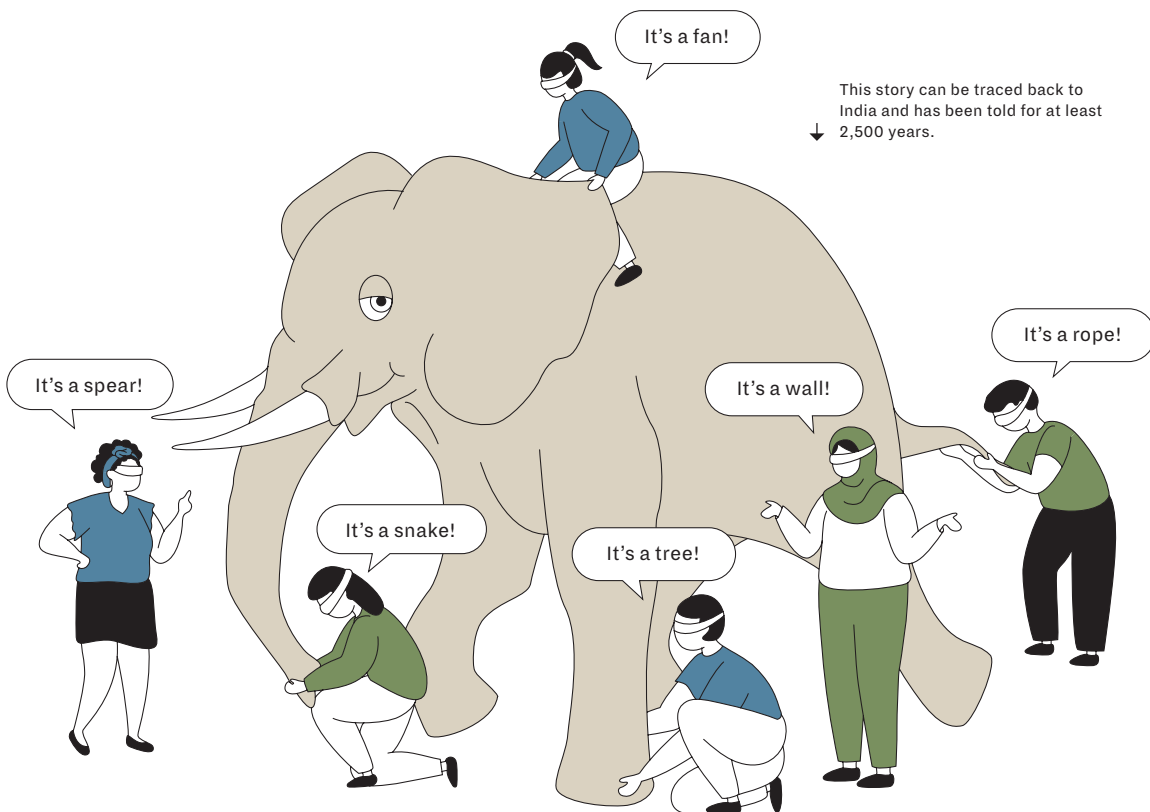


## The elephant and the blind men

We start this chapter with a parable.

Once upon a time, a group of blind individuals learned of a mysterious creature called an elephant that had arrived in their town. Eager to understand this creature, they decided to explore it by touch, relying on their sense of feel. As they approached the elephant, each person touched a different part. One, feeling the trunk, likened it to a thick snake. Another, touching the ear, thought it resembled a fan. A third, encountering the leg, believed it to be a sturdy pillar akin to a tree trunk. Yet another, exploring the side, deemed it a solid wall. Another, grasping the tail, described it as a rope. And finally, the one who felt the tusk, described the hard and smooth surface as a spear.

People can tend to see their own, often limited, perspective as the only truth. In reality, there can be many truths at the same time, all of them equally valid. When we come together as a diverse group, we share these individual truths and jointly shape a more complete picture — a shared understanding. It is important that we do this with empathy, grace, and compassion, and not create opposition. Each perspective has value.



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## Exploring the 4 Returns in your landscape

To create a better understanding of the 4 Returns in your own landscape, you could conduct an assessment. The 4 Returns diagnosis offers a comprehensive snapshot of the status of the 4 Returns within the landscape. This can be useful to stakeholders who are new to landscape restoration, as well as to stakeholders who are already working in a landscape and want to broaden their approach. The content is gathered through interviews with landscape stakeholders and complemented by existing resources such as local information, literature, and reports.

Although the main purpose of the 4 Returns diagnosis is to assess the status of the 4 Returns in your landscape, it could also be used for:

- ➔ Creating a shared understanding of the 4 Returns and the state of your landscape
- ➔ Identifying potential areas of focus and barriers to restoration
- ➔ Developing pilot designs and interventions for holistic landscape restoration
- ➔ Input for a landscape proposition, which will be further explained in the chapter *From vision to action* [page 153]
- ➔ Input for the strategic direction of a holistic landscape restoration plan

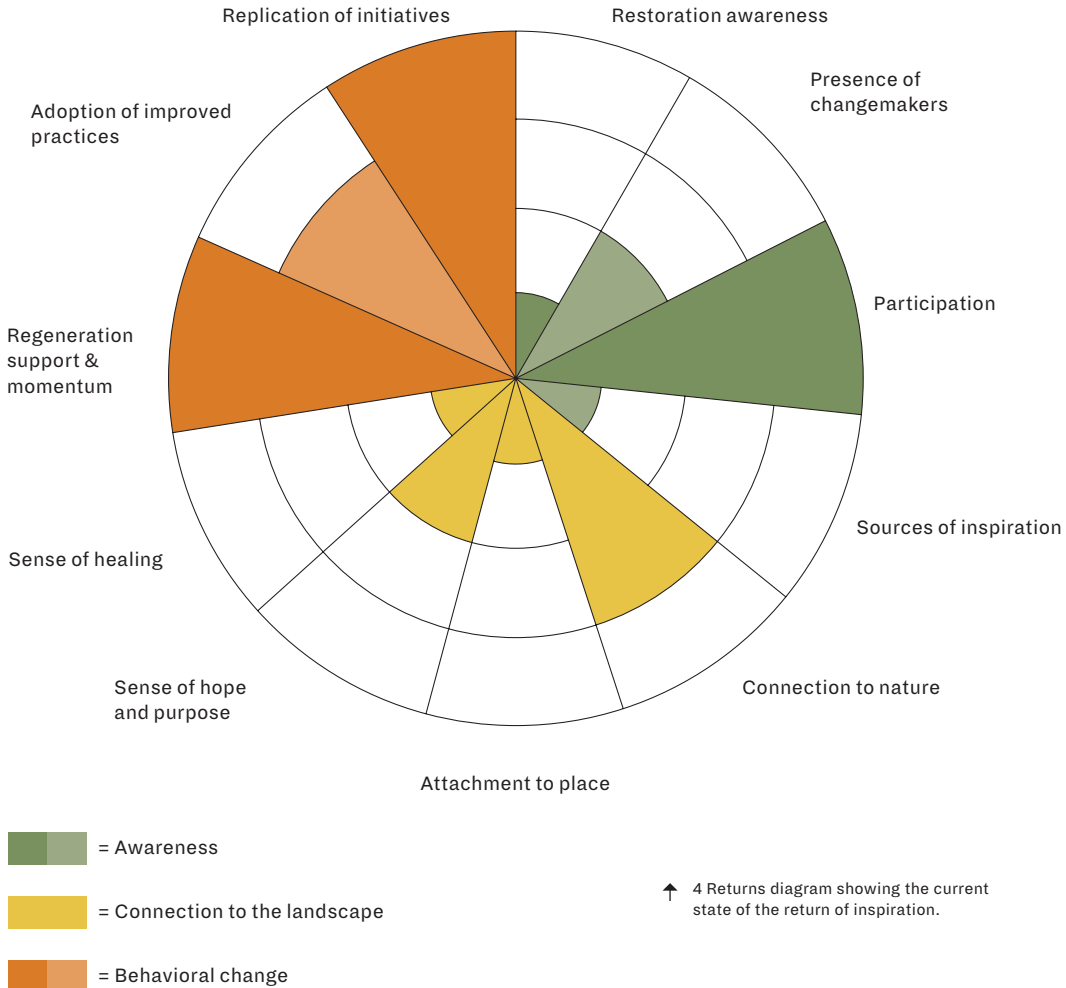
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### HOW DOES THE 4 RETURNS DIAGNOSIS WORK?

The assessment dives into all 4 Returns and their themes, which are explained in the chapter *Unpacking the 4 Returns* [page 33]. The return of inspiration, for example, includes awareness, connection to the landscape, and behavioural change. Each of these may, in turn, deliver several effects. Using the 4 Returns diagnosis, you rate the state of all these effects on a scale from one to four, including an explanation. This data creates a 4 Returns diagram for each return. A report is generated; this is not a definitive landscape assessment but a glimpse into the landscape that serves as a starting point for discussions to shape strategies and interventions for holistic landscape restoration.

In the example below, the 4 Returns diagram for the return of inspiration in a hypothetical landscape reveals that the replication of initiatives is very high, but restoration awareness is still low. The diagram could help stakeholders define potential focus areas as it highlights the landscape's strengths and challenges from a holistic perspective.

## Return of inspiration



### HOW TO DO A 4 RETURNS DIAGNOSIS?

**6** Find the 4 Returns diagnostic tool on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *4 Returns Diagnostic Tool*

You will find the 4 Returns diagnostic tool on the 4 Returns platform.<sup>6</sup> It will guide you through all the steps of a 4 Returns diagnosis and help identify which stakeholders to consult. Your report can be downloaded; remember, it is intended as a glimpse into the landscape not a definitive assessment. Having validated and discussed the report with all relevant stakeholders, you can think about viable next steps. The nature of these will vary depending on your landscape's stage and particular needs.



Some potential follow-up workshops include:

- ➔ Discuss and validate the 4 Returns diagnosis with a broader stakeholder group. Which outcomes of the diagnosis stand out and why? Does it describe the current state of the landscape well? What questions arise from it? Which factors would be interesting to explore through follow-up conversations, research, or another way?
- ➔ Organise a participatory session to prioritise focus areas based on the outcomes of the 4 Returns diagnosis. Explore existing pilots or interventions, design new ones.

You can also use the outcomes of the 4 Returns diagnosis to feed into a landscape and stakeholder analysis, which will be discussed below.

Señor Gomez, farmer, inspecting the ground cover in his regenerative almond grove in Ferreria, Spain. Photography: Tom Lovett, Commonland.





## LANDSCAPE STORY: 4 RETURNS DIAGNOSIS

The Mahanadi Delta in eastern India is a dynamic landscape with mudflats, marshes, mangroves, estuaries, islands, and tidal channels supporting human and natural communities. Wetlands International South Asia started an ecological restoration programme in the delta's Chilika catchment in 2000 in collaboration with the Chilika Development Authority, local NGOs, and private partners. As a result, the population and habitat of the endangered Irrawaddy dolphin has increased. In 2023, the consortium started implementing the *4 Returns Framework* to improve holistic development for resilient communities in the Chilika catchment.

Doing a 4 Returns diagnosis enhanced a shared understanding of the landscape by bringing together existing information. It showed the landscape's potential and barriers to delivering the 4 Returns, and contributed to prioritising focus areas and interventions for holistic landscape restoration. The assessment highlighted that the focus and strength of the landscape initiative are on wetland restoration, and less on the uplands. The programme has the opportunity to be strengthened to have more effect socially and financially. Low scores in areas such as basic services and infrastructure underscore the need for sustainable and resilient infrastructure, particularly to mitigate the high vulnerability of the area to climate change. The community's livelihoods are at risk due to natural and social threats, which drive people to migrate from their native area.

Ravi Prakash, of Wetlands International South Asia, said: "The holistic nature of the 4 Returns diagnosis helped us to create a better shared and holistic understanding of the landscape. It helped to see the complex socio-economic, as well as ecological processes, happening in the landscape in a much easier and more understandable way and provided the opportunity to integrate it into the already existing Chilika management planning framework. It provided us with a way forward to work on prioritised interventions that will enable us to strengthen financial and social returns. As a follow-up step, we will plan to create a shared landscape vision, have participatory sessions to prioritise focus areas, and explore new sustainable interventions."



↑ A multistakeholder workshop to develop shared understanding and landscape vision in the Mahanadi Delta, using the *4 Returns Framework*, was convened by Wetlands International South Asia in 2023. Photography: Wetlands International South Asia.

## Conducting a landscape and stakeholder analysis

You might decide to run a comprehensive landscape and stakeholder analysis instead — or as well as — a 4 Returns diagnosis. When the landscape boundaries are roughly outlined, you can choose the method or methods that best supports you depending on the stage you're at and what you need to know. You can do them in parallel or one at a time, in any order. For example, conducting a 4 Returns diagnosis alongside a landscape and stakeholder analysis could offer valuable insights into the current state of the 4 Returns in your landscape.

The landscape and stakeholder analysis involves a detailed examination of the landscape, making use of insights gained in the process of defining the boundaries. It provides deeper analysis of historic and current effects of geology, climate, culture, economics, policy, and initiatives on the landscape. The analysis supports understanding of the landscape's challenges and opportunities, and explores areas of high urgency. This sense of urgency is when land users are already facing significant challenges of land degradation and are potentially more willing to do something about it. This way, you can reach scale more quickly and you don't have to start from scratch.

To create local ownership and build on what is already there, we suggest identifying existing initiatives and stakeholders who are already working on landscape restoration. The landscape and stakeholder analysis is best done with a variety of stakeholders who between them offer a mix of knowledge about local context and networks, and experience of other landscapes.

The analysis is split into desk research, fieldwork, and write-up. Fieldwork is invaluable for gaining nuanced insights that you can't get from desk research. To make the fieldwork as useful as possible, first do the desk research and gather as much information as you can to describe the landscape's relevant history, its current state (which can be enriched with a 4 Returns diagnosis and the 3 Zones exercise), and the driving forces that have shaped it. Include an overview of the most important challenges of land degradation that are faced by stakeholders in the landscape. Finally, identify potentially interesting stakeholders to meet during the field trip.



## DESK RESEARCH

A vast choice of topics is suitable for investigating at your desk. Find a balance between being comprehensive and concise. Topics include geology, hydrology, biodiversity and ecology, climate change effects, weather patterns, population and culture, economy, governance, and mapping of stakeholders and existing initiatives (see more on this below). For each of these topics, you can describe the relevant history, status, recent developments, and future expected developments.

The sources you can use for this are varied, so consider: strategic documents of partners; research and evaluation studies from local, national, and international knowledge institutes, NGOs, and governments; reports, policy documents, strategy documents, websites, or media outings from local, national, and international partners, NGOs, governmental agencies; and spatial data from geographic information systems.



### RECOMMENDED TOOLS

**Governance.** The Sustainable Landscapes Rating Tool enables a rapid assessment of the key conditions for jurisdictional policies and governance for sustainable landscapes.

→ [climate-standards.org/sustainable-landscapes-rating-tool](https://climate-standards.org/sustainable-landscapes-rating-tool)

**Soil information.** iSDAsoil provides soil information at the scale of individual small farms across Africa. This is achieved by generating maps at an unprecedented resolution of 30 meters, encompassing 24 billion unique locations across Africa.

→ [isda-africa.com/isdasoil](https://isda-africa.com/isdasoil)

**Water risk.** Aqueduct tools help identify and evaluate water risks around the world. It includes four tools: Aqueduct Water Risk Atlas, Aqueduct Country Ranking, Aqueduct Food, and Aqueduct Floods. The interactive map layers in these tools can be used to analyse your landscape.

→ [wri.org/aqueduct/tools](https://wri.org/aqueduct/tools)

**Ecological information.** Crowther Lab has provided an interactive map with environmental and ecological layers to explore. Each map layer represents the outputs from various models produced by the scientific community providing key data about our ecosystems.

→ [crowtherlab.com/maps](https://crowtherlab.com/maps)

Ecological information. OpenLandMap is an open-source map displaying the world's environmental data (land cover, vegetation, soil, climate, water, terrain, and more). Within your web browser, you can explore the different map layers displaying the various environmental themes across the globe and across time. All the data is also freely available to download.

→ [openlandmap.org](https://openlandmap.org)

Biodiversity information. Nature Map is an integrated global map of biodiversity, carbon storage, and other nature services to support decision-making on national, regional, and global targets. The tool offers freely available global maps of terrestrial biodiversity, carbon stocks, and water supply, designed to guide policies that address biodiversity loss and climate change in an integrated manner.

→ [naturemap.earth](https://naturemap.earth)

Extinction risk. The IUCN Red List is the world's most comprehensive information source on the global extinction risk status of animal, fungus, and plant species. Use their website to assess the conservation status of species and ecosystems within your landscape.

→ [iucnredlist.org](https://iucnredlist.org)

Biodiversity information. The Global Biodiversity Information Facility is an international network and data infrastructure funded by the world's governments and aimed at providing anyone, anywhere, open access to data about all types of life on Earth. You can use the website to access and analyse biodiversity data based on scientific evidence.

→ [gbif.org](https://gbif.org)

Restoration potential. Restor is a science-based open data platform to support and connect the global restoration movement. It allows you to analyse the restoration potential of an area as well as monitor and manage restoration projects.

→ [restor.eco](https://restor.eco)

Problems and solutions. The problem and solution analysis (step four of *A Landscape Approach for Disaster Risk Reduction*) is suited to landscapes threatened by disasters such as flooding or drought. There is guidance on disaster risks and how to map them, plus a description of interventions and where they will be most effective.

→ [wetlands.org](https://wetlands.org),  
search for: *Disaster Risk Reduction in 7 Steps*

Drivers of degradation. Situation models (the “assess” step in the Conservation Standards strategic process) can be used especially in conservation initiatives to gain a deeper understanding of the factors driving biodiversity losses in the landscape (direct and indirect threats, opportunities, enabling conditions) and key actors. A situational model provides graphic representation of the situation analysis with a cause-effect relationship among the factors and their connection to the biodiversity elements being prioritised for conservation action.

→ [conservationstandards.org](https://conservationstandards.org),  
search for: *Open Standards for Nature Conservation*

Integrated landscape-scale information. To bring together all information gathered in a shared digital place for all stakeholders, you can sign up for Terraso. Terraso delivers information and software tools addressing the main challenges landscape actors face. It offers tools for data collection, storage, sharing, mapping, storytelling, and capacity strengthening. The Terraso platform provides the digital backbone for the the 1000 Landscapes for 1 Billion People initiative, driven by core partners EcoAgriculture Partners, the Rainforest Alliance, Commonland, Conservation International, United Nations Development Programme, and Tech Matters.

→ [terraso.org](https://terraso.org)

A farm in the highlands of Spain,  
showing the natural and combined  
zones. Photography: Gabriela  
↓ Hengeveld, Commonland.



## Stakeholder mapping

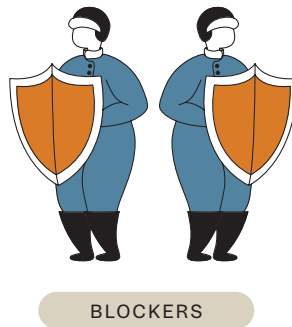
Before going on to fieldwork, it is important to have a good overview of all the stakeholders in a network, and their activities, relationships, and stakes. This will help you connect with the right people at the right time. Stakeholder mapping can take many forms, from quick and dirty desk research to a workshop or a comprehensive participatory process. There are several tools and resources that can help you get started in the way that suits your stage in the process and context.

7 Find the stakeholder mapping guide on [4retuns.commonland.com](http://4retuns.commonland.com), search for: *Stakeholder Mapping Guide*

*A quick-start guide to stakeholder mapping*<sup>7</sup> provides an overview of the essentials of stakeholder mapping in a holistic landscape restoration context. It includes several frameworks and tools that are easy to use in your desk research and workshops. The guide includes four key steps:

- ➔ Identify key stakeholders
- ➔ Conduct a power analysis
- ➔ Start engaging with stakeholders
- ➔ Loopback and follow through

You could think about who your champions are, those who might block your initiative, those who might still be hesitating but could become your ally. Champions can be front-runner farmers, who are already experimenting and trying new ways to farm. Blockers might be organisations that have vested interests in the status quo and will work actively against change. Hesitators can be anyone open to change, but not willing to be the first to try it out. Remember the theory of *Diffusion of innovations* as explained in the chapter *How to get started* [page 55].





8

Find the guide on [wri.org](http://wri.org), search for: *Mapping Social Landscapes*

To learn more about how stakeholder mapping can drive positive change in landscape restoration, we recommend *Mapping Social Landscapes*<sup>8</sup> by the World Resources Institute. It explains how to recognise the social capital of actors within landscapes, spot opportunities for building stronger networks, and measure changes in the network, through mapping actors' resource flows, priorities, and values.

9

Find out more on [kumu.io](http://kumu.io)

Finally, Kumu<sup>9</sup> is a simple tool for organising complex data, such as people, systems, and concepts, into relationship maps.

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## FROM DESK TO FIELD

While much can be discovered through desk research, fieldwork can enrich an understanding of a landscape; meeting people face to face yields higher quality information. Developing deep cultural understanding takes years, but a thorough landscape and stakeholder analysis is a valuable start.

Begin your fieldwork by drawing up a plan of where to go and who to meet based on the results of the desk study. The fieldwork will test your assumptions. You will investigate what the stakeholders in the landscape need and how they might be inspired and supported to restore their landscape. Plan well and reserve time for follow-up interviews because you will probably be introduced to even more stakeholders who can add insights.

It is best to carry out fieldwork with two or more people who can listen from different perspectives. During preparation for fieldwork, consider:

- **Expectation management.** Think carefully in advance about the storyline. How will you present yourself? Why are you there? What do you want to achieve? Why are you interested in these stakeholders and what will you do with the information you glean from them? It can be useful to prepare a short briefing before the field trip, summarising the main facts you already know, the key questions that are still open, and hypotheses and assumptions you would like to test. This will also allow the landscape stakeholders to share their expectations and bring in topics.
- **Building a trusting relationship with stakeholders.** Be transparent and give stakeholders something in return for their time. Send your partners a copy of your report after the field trip. This demonstrates that you are extracting information not just for your benefit. Also, the interview and report may stimulate them to think about their landscape differently. Promise to contact them again after a few weeks for feedback on your report to talk about a possible way forward. Keep that promise.



A workshop in Sweden held for stakeholders from the region to map out the restoration opportunities and challenges. Part of the Bioregional Weaving Labs programme, July 2022.

## STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT



Find the listening assessment on [u-school.org](https://u-school.org), search for: *Listening Assessment*



Find the stakeholder interviews on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Stakeholder Interviews*

During the field trip, you will probably interview stakeholders and experts, and visit locations and initiatives. You will collect more information and test assumptions. It is important to listen carefully; the listening assessment from *Theory U*<sup>10</sup> could help sharpen your skill. Likewise, *Theory U* stakeholder interviews<sup>11</sup> may be useful before meeting people in the landscape. Take a lot of photos and videos, and record all your conversations. Try to expand your network as you go.

The people you interview will be from your stakeholder research during the desk study, or from a stakeholder mapping exercise. It is also interesting to speak with individuals or organisations that may not have a big stake but do have a large network that you could use or build on. Potentially interesting stakeholders to interview during fieldwork:

- ➔ Farmers and farmer groups or collectives
- ➔ Land users such as foresters, fishers, grazers, eco-tourists
- ➔ Local entrepreneurs
- ➔ Local government
- ➔ Regional government



- Conservation public organisations and private NGO initiatives
- Community development NGOs
- Community leaders or community-led initiatives and organisations
- Companies working on coastal protection, infrastructure, value chains, or sourcing natural produce from agriculture, forestry, fisheries, mining, and water
- Research institutes such as universities
- Relevant ministries and departments of the national government

Small workshops can be included in the field trip. You can choose the assessments or workshops that best support the stage or needs of your initiative. Options include the 4 Returns diagnosis, the 3 Zones exercise, or a stakeholder mapping workshop [page 123].

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## WRITE YOUR REPORT

Now write up your findings in a landscape and stakeholder report. This document summarises the current state of the landscape and the driving forces that shaped it. Also, write down the landscape's key needs and opportunities. Needs are the obstacles that stakeholders face or gaps that exist, standing in the way of landscape restoration. Opportunities are ideas for projects that could contribute to solving the challenges related to land degradation. They can be suggestions from stakeholders, concepts that we've seen working in other landscapes, or brand-new ideas of your own. Compile a list of needs and opportunities for possible partners, projects, and interventions. You can also share your opinion on partnerships and activities that could be developed to start the shift from degradation to restoration.

<sup>12</sup> Find the *Landscape and stakeholder report layout* on [4returns.commonland.com](http://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Landscape and Stakeholder Report Layout*

A layout for a Landscape and stakeholder report can be found on the 4 Returns platform.<sup>12</sup> Adding maps and pictures with details and descriptions, including location (GPS tag) and credits if possible, will help ground the analysis.



A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.

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## What's next?

Gaining a thorough understanding of your landscape is crucial for long-term decision making and knowing where to focus your energy and activities. This chapter introduced you to the 4 Returns diagnosis and the landscape and stakeholder analysis. Remember to always view these analyses within the wider landscape context. The next element focuses on creating a landscape vision and collaborative planning, ultimately leading to a landscape plan.

# **Build a landscape vision & plan**

## Work together to create an inspiring collective vision and design your long-term landscape plan.

When stakeholders come together to envision an inspiring future for the landscape they create a vision that reflects their shared aspirations. Through visioning and planning, they can imagine what could be accomplished in unison and then create a **landscape plan** to guide them there. The landscape plan steers the implementation of holistic landscape restoration activities across the 3 Zones, with everyone collaborating towards a jointly created and agreed vision.

This element is about progressing from vision to action. The first two chapters introduce key stages in this process: a **landscape vision**, a **landscape proposition**, and a **landscape plan**. The final chapter examines tools that landscape restoration practitioners have used for strategic planning. They apply to all kinds of strategic processes, from projects to landscape scale.

A landscape proposition collates key information on both landscape and restoration goals, and based on the landscape vision, provides a roadmap that sets out steps to develop a landscape plan at a later stage. A landscape plan describes a more detailed pathway towards implementation and realisation of the landscape vision. It shows how to deliver the 4 Returns in your landscape in the long term and is the result of intense multi-stakeholder processes based on a continuous effort to include the right people.



The chapter *Developing a shared vision for the landscape* highlights the significance of creating a landscape vision and how to unite partners and stakeholders in its formation. We explore ways of crafting a powerful vision statement to ignite collaboration, with insights from the field. The takeaway? A shared vision is the cornerstone of collaborative progress, evolving dynamically with the project. Always anticipate the next steps to keep your vision alive and moving forward.

The chapter *From vision to action* explains how to create a landscape proposition as an initial plan for bringing your vision to life and as a stepping stone to the landscape plan. The chapter will guide you to create a 4 Returns landscape plan, outlining essential steps such as co-creation with stakeholders and defining contents.

The chapter *Strategic planning tools* provides a foundation for strategic planning, including tools and frameworks to help you move from a vision to actionable steps.



## RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND METHODS

*Theory U* is a change framework and a set of methodologies developed by Otto Scharmer to address global challenges.

→ [u-school.org/theory-u](https://u-school.org/theory-u)

Dive deeper with the *Letter from the future exercise*, adapted from The Thiagi Group by Bill Matthews in 2002.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Letter from the Future*

The tool *Defining the 3 Zones*, published by Wetlands International, Commonland, and the Landscape Finance Lab in 2024, is helpful for developing a shared vision.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Defining the 3 Zones*

If you need a basis for your landscape plan, the *Template for a 4 Returns landscape plan* can provide a good place to start.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Template for a Landscape Plan*

The 4 Returns *Theory of Change* template, created by Commonland in 2021, and the guide *Theory of Change Thinking in Practice*, developed by Hivos in 2015, can both support your strategic planning process.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *4 Returns Theory of Change Template*

→ [hivos.org](https://hivos.org),  
search for: *Theory of Change Thinking in Practice*

A landscape proposition is an early stage action-oriented document of the landscape restoration process. The tool *Landscape Proposition*, developed by Commonland, Wetlands International, and the Landscape Finance Lab in 2024, provides guidance to create your proposition.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Landscape Proposition*

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## ENVISAGED OUTCOMES

- **A shared vision for a healthy, sustainable, resilient, productive landscape.** The vision should be long-term (at least 20 years) and address the returns desired from the landscape.
- **4 Returns landscape proposition developed.** This document is an initial action-oriented summary of the landscape restoration process, collating key information on the landscape and restoration goals.
- **4 Returns landscape plan developed.** This detailed document sets out how the 4 Returns landscape restoration will be carried out over the long term. The document can be preceded by a landscape proposition to mobilise more stakeholders and resources towards the landscape plan.

# Developing a shared vision for the landscape

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- The importance of creating a landscape vision that serves as a guiding light for collective action is emphasized
- Strategies for bringing partners and stakeholders together to develop a shared vision
- Support in crafting a robust vision statement to inspire collaboration that includes the desired future of all stakeholders
- A reminder that your vision should remain dynamic and will be updated as your project progresses
- Landscape stories on inspiring and developing shared visions in India and Tanzania

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## Bringing back hope and purpose

Now, let's dive into the power of an appealing vision in driving collaboration for landscape restoration. This chapter explores what a landscape vision is, what it embodies, how it stands apart from other visions, who shapes it, and the strategies for its creation. At the heart of this journey lies the transformative conversation sparked by the return of inspiration. Introducing this concept prompts conversations that aren't just about goals, but rather an exploration with head, heart, and hands. It unites individuals in a shared purpose. It's this meaningful connection that sets the 4 Returns approach apart and fuels our collective journey towards a better future for our landscapes.

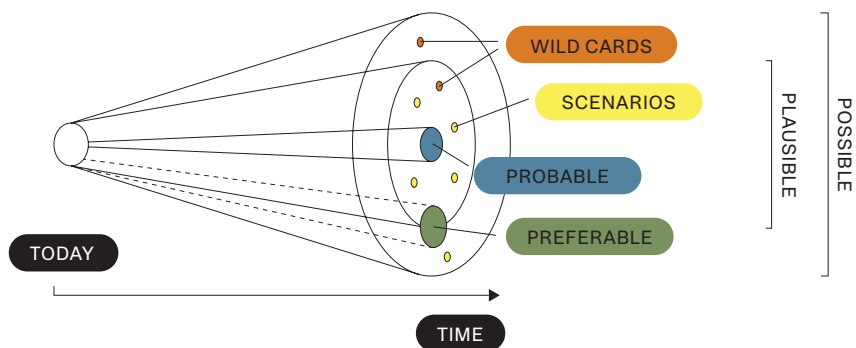
A landscape vision can:

- Be a source of purpose and inspiration, a force of motivation, and a call to action for people to partner up for long-term collaboration
- Provide guidance and direction on priorities and actions and serve as a framework for strategic decision-making for many years to come

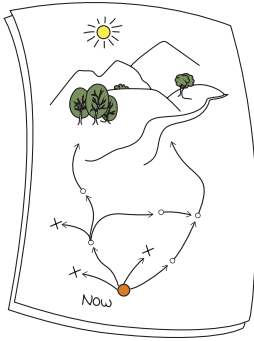
Partnerships that last and create impact have a strong vision accompanied by an ambitious goal. When partnering, you need to let go of some of your individualism for the sake of a greater shared intention. A compelling, strong vision that resonates with everyone involved is required if individual partners are to commit. A strong vision inspires, motivates action, and creates a feeling of togetherness. Every partner needs to believe in the common good or shared vision for the partnership to work.

## Using your vision for strategic decision making

The future isn't set in stone and different "futures" are possible. The illustration of the futures cone (below) shows that the most probable outcome, the one without any action, may not be the most preferable outcome. Shifting the trajectory will require effort. To understand the specific actions needed, we must first clarify our destination — the vision of our desired future.



↑ The futures cone was developed by Joseph Voros, 2000. Find more on: [thevoroscope.com](http://thevoroscope.com)



When time and resources are limited, having a clear vision helps to determine which activities to prioritise. As we travel through this uncharted territory, we need a guiding light to tell keep us on the right track.

#### WHOSE LANDSCAPE VISION IS IT?

The aim is to create a vision for the landscape — what you think it could look like in 20 years or more. At this stage, you are not creating a vision of the landscape that is supported by everyone in the landscape. The message isn't: "This is where the landscape wants to be in 20 years." It is: "We think there is a better future for us in this landscape, and we imagine it could be something like this; do you want to join us, and we can find out together?"

The question of who the landscape vision is for follows from the purpose of the vision. It is a rallying cry to bring together all the people with whom you would like to collaborate, and it empowers everyone to assess whether their actions are aligned with the envisioned direction. In that sense, holistic landscape restoration differs from non-holistic restoration because of the number of stakeholders involved. A comprehensive landscape vision engages a wide range of stakeholders, ensuring their meaningful participation in shaping the landscape vision.

“It is not a group of stakeholders coming together just to decide their vision for the landscape but, rather, given all the observations, data, and sensing that they have been looking at and making together, what is the future vision of the landscape that is beginning to emerge through the collective process that they are going through.”

JOHN STUBLEY, Faculty, Presencing Institute

## LANDSCAPE STORY: A BANNER TO INSPIRE CONVERSATIONS IN KABIRDHAM, CENTRAL INDIA

An example of the power of a visual representation comes from the Kabirdham landscape in Central India. The landscape covers more than 200,000 hectares from the forested hills in the west, home to Gond and Baiga tribal communities, to the plains in the southeast, where farmers grow mostly paddy rice and sugarcane. Usually, their smallholdings are no bigger than two hectares each. Kabirdham's ecological resilience and community prosperity are under pressure due to a rapidly growing population, overgrazing, forest degradation, soil depletion, water scarcity, and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns. In 2019, Commonland teamed up with the local government, communities, and a diverse group of organisations to implement the *4 Returns Framework* with a view to improving community well-being, nature conservation, and sustainable economic development.

A scoping study of the hills of the Kabirdham district described the degradation of the forest and agricultural land, and a local artist (Prashant Art) designed a large artwork depicting the 4 Losses and the 4 Returns in the landscape. This visualisation provided inspiration for visioning and helped the communities' mobilisers and members to spark conversations about looking ahead and finding restoration options. The questions that arose included: how to move from degradation to regeneration, and how to turn 4 Losses into 4 Returns at the village and landscape level? Each village has a copy of the artwork, measuring 3.5 x 2 metres. On seeing it, some people start dreaming, others start thinking of practical solutions.

Artwork depicting the 4 Losses and the 4 Returns in the Kabirdham landscape in Chhattisgarh, India.

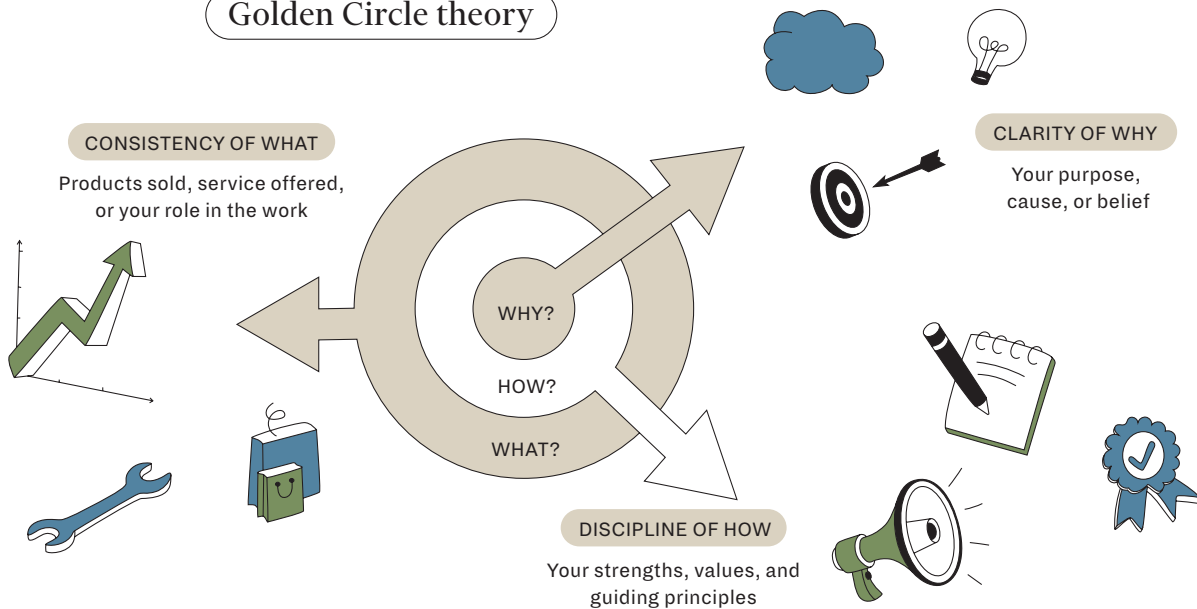
↓ Art: Prashant Art.



## Formulating a landscape vision

A future vision is a description of what you think the landscape should look like at a certain point in time. It is not a description of how you think we should get there. We make a distinction between “vision”, which is about why, and “approach”, which is about how and what. Simon Sinek’s *Golden Circle* theory illustrates the importance of differentiating the “why”, “how”, and “what”. For a visionary future state, we usually consider a 20-year period from the present day, in line with the *4 Returns Framework*. It’s important to note that this is about the desired future state, rather than a predicted one.

### Golden Circle theory



↑ Simon Sinek’s theory states that we can achieve more if we start everything with the question, “why?”

A vision needs to be clear, concise, easy to communicate, appealing, and flexible enough for each partner and stakeholder to run with it in their own way. It is less about what the landscape should look like and more about what qualities it should embody. For example, biodiversity, self-determination, and joy in the community are all values you may want to embody in the landscape, and that partners are motivated to promote together. But to be authentic, they must feel true to all the partners involved. The values are not fixed; they might alter over time as knowledge and understanding develop.



The process of formulating a vision statement usually requires repetition of some steps and can be time-consuming, especially when multiple parties are involved. At the outset, stakeholders may already have begun formulating a vision of the landscape.

To gather more data and perspectives on the landscape, it is helpful to build on the 3 Zones (see chapter *Defining the landscape* [page 105]), and doing the landscape and stakeholder analysis (see chapter *Understanding the landscape* [page 119]). The landscape and stakeholder analysis highlights the landscape's strengths and challenges. Understanding the 3 Zones will help you get a balance between the zones. Based on your shared values and understanding of possible futures, you should be able to agree on which one is preferable. As a next step, a shared vision statement can be developed during a series of meetings or workshops.

One or more people should be appointed to harvest the output of any workshops and together compose a proposal for a shared vision statement. Allow some months to refine and discuss this proposal. A landscape vision must remain flexible as new information becomes available; even when you have settled on a vision statement, it may need changing again after a few years.

① Find the manifesto on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), search for: *Waterford Bioregion Food Manifesto*

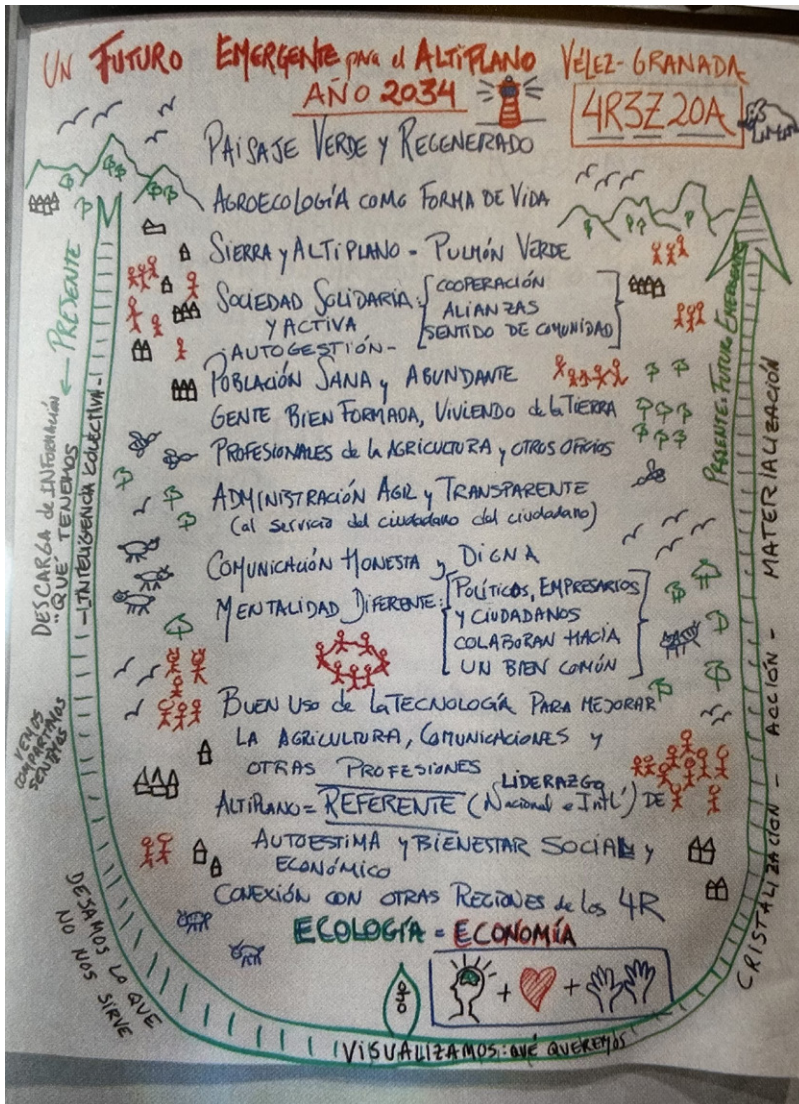
An example of a vision statement is the manifesto<sup>①</sup> that was co-created and co-written by stakeholder groups at a workshop in the Waterford landscape in Ireland. In the workshop, participants learned about the role of manifestos in history and the energy and passion they can give to readers. Facilitator Will Buckingham expressed it as follows:

“A manifesto is not a policy document. It is something much more unruly. Manifestos are designed to shake us up, to get us thinking, and to change not just our minds but also our hearts. They are not the summation of how far we have come. Instead, they are the starting points for change. They wake us from complacency. And they help usher in futures we can't yet imagine.”

WILL BUCKINGHAM, Co-director of Wind & Bones

A different example of a visioning workshop is the one that took place in the Altiplano, Spain, in 2014. A diverse group of representatives — including farmers, conservationists, and government ministers — came together and dreamed about creating a landscape restoration initiative in the Altiplano. They used *Theory U* to envision the Altiplano in 2034. The diagram that they produced together (below), shows that the initiative set out to act as a lighthouse for other Mediterranean landscapes. A couple of months after that workshop, AIVelAI was founded. Since then, AIVelAI has been building awareness to grow the movement of restoring the Altiplano. Members developed La Almendrehesa as an integrated farming concept and a 4 Returns company bearing the same name was launched in 2016 to market regenerative produce. In 2017, the AIVelAI territory was registered. Restoration activities continue to go from strength to strength in the Altiplano. Read more about it on the 4 Returns platform.<sup>2</sup> Find out about *Theory U* in the chapter *Creating spaces of belonging* [page 84].

<sup>2</sup> Read more about the AIVelAI territory on [4returns.commonland.com](http://4returns.commonland.com), search for: It's 2014 and AIVelAI Launch a 20-Year Vision



← The 20-year vision for the Altiplano Estepario landscape in Spain was laid out using the *Theory U* process in 2014.

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## A LETTER FROM THE FUTURE EXERCISE

3

Find guidance on this exercise on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Letter from the Future*

Another way to explore potential futures for your landscape is to conduct a Letter from the Future exercise, which is rooted in solution-focused coaching. This hands-on tool helps develop a shared vision, and foster collaboration and individual reflection. It guides participants through envisioning their future selves in relation to the landscape and articulates the steps needed to reach those goals. It aims to tap into the solutions you already have, even if subconsciously, for the challenges you face. By delving into personal and shared visions, participants gain insights into their motivations and values, contributing to a deeper understanding of the group's collective vision. This exercise encourages active participation and sparks meaningful conversations about the path forward. Find guidance on this exercise on the 4 Returns platform.<sup>3</sup>

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## ENVISIONING THE FUTURE WITH THE 3 ZONES

4

Learn more about the 3 Zones exercise on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Defining the 3 Zones*

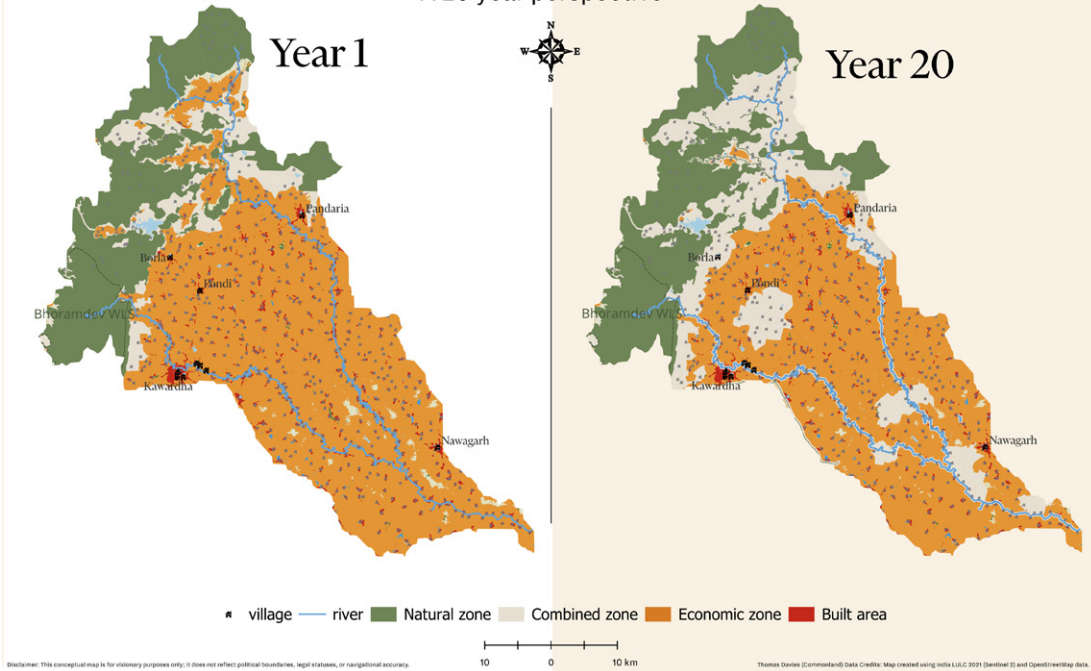
The 3 Zones exercise could also help in envisioning the landscape's future (see chapter *Defining the landscape* [page 105]). Although the exercise focuses mainly on the current spatial configuration of the 3 Zones in your landscape, it can also be used to envision them in five, ten, or 20 years from now. Looking at the maps where the current positions of the 3 Zones are drawn, start thinking about the future. How would the 3 Zones ideally be characterised and located 20 years from now? What returns would be provided ideally in 20 years in each zone? Which key interventions or changes would this require? Find guidance on the 3 Zones exercise on the 4 Returns platform.<sup>4</sup>

This approach was used to envision the future at the Kabirdham landscape in central India (see *Landscape story: A banner to inspire conversations in Kabirdham Central India* [page 145]). Using the *4 Returns Framework* and the 3 Zones exercise, stakeholders created a map revealing a strategic overview of the landscape across two decades that incorporates villages, land use, and protected regions. The initial state (year one) of the landscape is depicted on the left side of the map (next page). The right side is a blueprint for potential development, envisioning a balance between economic growth and environmental stewardship in year 20.

Validated by a coalition of civil society organisations, the map is a testament to collaborative planning at a landscape scale. It is a living document, designed to evolve with ongoing contributions from stakeholders, ensuring that the vision for the landscape adapts to the insights and inputs of those investing in its future.

# The Kabirdham Landscape

A 20 year perspective



↑ A long-term vision of the Kabirdham landscape created using the 3 Zones approach.

## Communicating the landscape vision

When everyone is on board with the vision statement, it's time to start spreading the word. A robust vision statement is a powerful tool for attracting more support and engagement. But before you communicate, it's important to consider how you'll express your own role within that vision. When organisations and coalitions communicate a vision clearly, there's a risk that people perceive it as a commitment rather than an aspiration. A promise rather than a dream. You must stress that bringing the vision to life requires collective effort. The creation of the vision is only the beginning of a challenging journey. It's a call to action, not an advertisement.



## LANDSCAPE STORY: TOWARDS A LANDSCAPE VISION

The Rufiji Delta in Tanzania is a biodiverse ecosystem vital for local communities and the environment. However, it faces threats such as infrastructure development, destruction of riverside vegetation, and climate change. Wetlands International, Kibiti District Council, and the Rufiji Basin Water Board started a stakeholder alignment process to tackle these challenges.

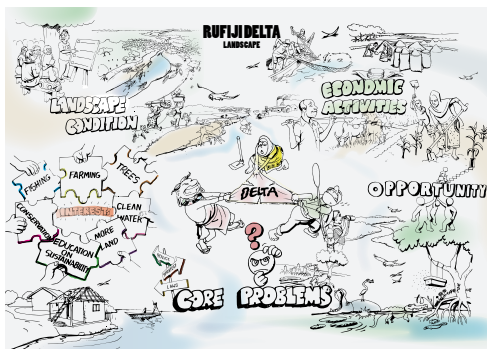
Using the 4 Returns and consensus-building approaches, stakeholders from various sectors collaborated to address conflicting interests and co-create a vision for the landscape. A series of participatory workshops aided constructive dialogue and negotiation and resulted in a visual representation of the output (below). Diverse voices — from rice farmers advocating for sustainable practices to Indigenous Maasai communities championing responsible grazing — contributed to the dialogue, emphasising shared interests in holistic landscape management.



↑ A visioning workshop in Kibiti, Tanzania. Photography: Wetlands International Tanzania.

Moving forward, continued stakeholder engagement and inclusive governance will be vital. The outcomes inform a comprehensive landscape proposition, integrating the 3 Zones for achieving the 4 Returns within the landscape. A longer-term ambition is to create a shared 4 Returns landscape plan. Stakeholders also agreed to set up a platform for ongoing collaboration, ensuring proactive management and addressing challenges that emerge. Anchored in the 4 Returns

*Framework* and guided by mutual gains consensus-building, stakeholders have laid the foundation for sustainable landscape management. Ongoing dialogue and inclusive decision making will be key to realising a shared vision for the Rufiji Delta landscape.



← This artwork, or visual harvest, was created at a visioning workshop in Kibiti, Tanzania. Photography: Wetlands International Tanzania.

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## What's next?

We have laid the groundwork for a shared landscape vision and explored strategies for uniting stakeholders behind a common purpose, with insights from Ireland, Spain, Tanzania, and India. The next chapter will guide you towards action, with a landscape proposition and landscape plan.

# From vision to action

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- ➔ A landscape proposition can offer clear guidance to mobilise resources and stakeholders towards creating a 4 Returns landscape plan.
- ➔ The 4 Returns landscape plan is your strategy for at least 20+ Years. Its development should be based on a stakeholder-driven process, ensuring collaborative engagement with key partners.

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## Planning for the future

Now that you've developed a good understanding of the landscape and its players, and formulated a vision for the next 20+ Years, it's time to put your plans into action and turn your vision into reality. Who should be involved, what steps are needed, and how will you deal with the uncertainty that comes with long-term planning? The road ahead might feel overwhelming and is likely to present some surprises as more stakeholders join you and other information emerges.



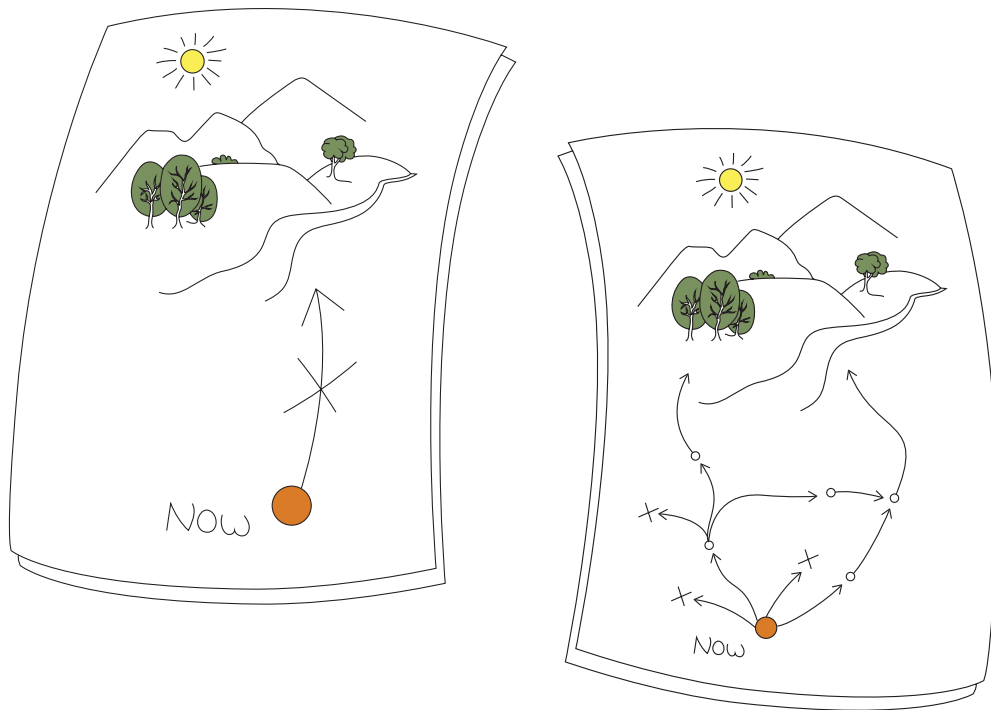


↑ We're starting a journey from the current situation (now) to the vision (desired future).

You are navigating uncharted territory, so you need to stay flexible and adjust your plans along the way. Some ideas won't work out as planned and you'll need to tweak your strategy accordingly. But others will be successful, and you might want to expand them. There are often multiple pathways to consider taking to reach your goals. Take one step at a time, setting out rough high-level milestones for the long run, but only planning in detail for the near future. It is wise to build a habit of monitoring and evaluating regularly, adjusting as needed, and learning as you go.

“Vision without action is daydreaming. Action without vision is merely passing time. Only when vision and action are combined can we change the world.”

NELSON MANDELA



A lot of innovation, experimentation, and learning will have to take place. One thing we know for certain: despite our best efforts, it will not be an easy, clearcut linear pathway. Multiple roads can lead to Rome. The best way to deal with this unpredictability is to use an adaptive approach to planning, allowing for repetition, and reflecting and adjusting regularly.

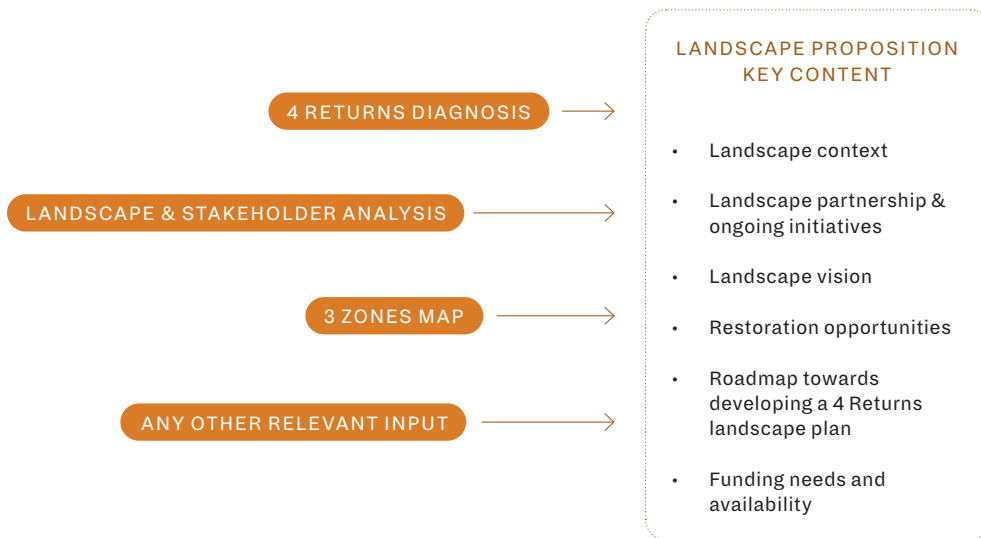
This chapter explains the two key documents that will guide your landscape restoration process. A landscape proposition will move you from vision to action in the short term, while a landscape plan supplies a long-term outlook and eases a stakeholder-driven process. You can also use the tools and guidance in the chapter *Strategic planning tools* [page 168].

## Creating a landscape proposition

A landscape proposition is an early stage, action-oriented document of the landscape restoration process. It is a concise report developed from activities with landscape partners and key stakeholders, such as partnership building (see Element 1, *Landscape partnership* [page 68]), stakeholder alignment, identification of restoration opportunities (see Element 2, *Shared understanding* [page 101]), and the co-creation of a landscape vision (see chapter *Creating a shared vision for the landscape* [page 142]). It collates essential information on the landscape and restoration goals, and, based on the landscape vision, sets out steps to develop a more detailed landscape plan at a later stage. The proposition is

context-specific and can benefit from the processes for strategic planning as described in the chapter *Strategic planning tools* [page 168]. The right moment to develop a landscape proposition depends on context; it could be in a first design cycle, or after a few revisions.

## KEY COMPONENTS OF THE LANDSCAPE PROPOSITION



↑ Information from earlier assessments and workshops now feed into a landscape proposition.

The landscape proposition (above) combines earlier assessments and workshops, such as the 5 Elements Scorecard, the 4 Returns diagnosis, the landscape and stakeholder analysis, a carbon quick scan (if applicable), a description of the 3 Zones, and a stakeholder co-created landscape vision. Central to the landscape proposition is the landscape vision which gives a clear objective for the landscape to partners and stakeholders. Both the vision and the proposition may be revised as a wider group of stakeholders become engaged and more information becomes available, but it is important to have a vision to keep clarity of purpose for the landscape and partners.

5 Learn more about the how to create a landscape proposition on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Landscape Proposition*

In addition to the landscape vision, other essential components include: high-level information on the landscape context, the partnership, and ongoing initiatives; key restoration challenges and opportunities; and a one-to-two-year roadmap that lists the activities and funding needed to develop a landscape plan. A template and detailed guidance on creating a landscape proposition can be found on the 4 Returns platform.<sup>5</sup>

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## KEY USES OF THE LANDSCAPE PROPOSITION

The landscape proposition includes a roadmap for developing a landscape plan and identifies what funds are needed or available. So, it can be used to:

- Communicate restoration ideas to wider stakeholders, investors, and policymakers to create the 4 Returns impact in a landscape
- Mobilise resources needed for the next development phase — mainly creating a stakeholder-owned landscape plan
- Inform an agreement between partners on the coordinated actions needed to create a landscape plan
- Mobilise more stakeholders to support or join the landscape restoration process
- Suggest short-term actions (one-to-two years) to develop a landscape plan that delivers a broadly shared landscape vision

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## IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

It's important to understand what the proposition is, and what it is not. Here are a few important considerations:

- The proposition is often written from the perspective of a limited number of key landscape partners and more stakeholders are likely to become involved over time.
- Early actions can be included in the proposition, but activities might need adjusting as more stakeholders join the planning process.
- Similarly, any emerging vision for the landscape should be broad at this stage so that more inclusive goals can be set later during the multistakeholder process.
- Funding to develop a landscape proposition also should be flexible to allow for changes as both the vision and proposition become enriched by new stakeholders.
- The proposition does not replace the landscape plan but is a useful basis for creating one.

With a landscape proposition in hand, you're ready to prioritise opportunities, align capabilities with goals, and head towards your envisioned future. You have set the groundwork for an understanding of the landscape and how the 4 Returns could work in that landscape. Next, we'll delve deeper into creating a landscape plan, taking the next steps towards turning your vision into reality.

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HOW DOES A  
PROPOSITION FEED  
INTO A PLAN?

Remember, a landscape proposition includes a roadmap for developing a landscape plan and identifies what funds are needed and available. So, the proposition precedes but does not take the place of a more detailed plan. A 4 Returns landscape plan is a document that sets out your restoration activities aligned with the landscape vision. It builds on the landscape proposition and defines activities, targets, budget, and finance sources over the long term. It is important to take time developing a landscape plan to ensure that it is co-created and agreed upon with stakeholders, with roles and responsibilities assigned. Developing a 4 Returns landscape plan from scratch can take between one and three years.

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Thinking long term:  
the 4 Returns  
landscape plan

A landscape plan is the strategy for at least the next 20 years. Key landscape details must be communicated well to all stakeholders to unite local people, create awareness of governments, and raise funds. Every landscape plan has the same structure following the narrative of the 5 Elements, 4 Returns, 3 Zones, and 20+ Years. This storyline, combined with a bottom-up stakeholder commitment, is important to facilitate exchanges between different landscape partners worldwide and creates the basis for a holistic landscape industry.

Developing a 4 Returns landscape plan from scratch can take between one and three years. This is because it should be based on an inclusive and thorough co-creative process. The landscape plan process emphasizes the crucial role of collaboratively developed plans that are endorsed by key partners, to truly get on the same course toward a shared vision.

Key components of a landscape plan include a comprehensive description of the landscape, its partnerships, stakeholders, planned activities, and required landscape financing to support the 4 Returns landscape restoration over a 20-year timeframe. Another important part of a landscape plan is a 4 Returns monitoring plan that includes the generic key performance indicators (KPIs) per return. Typically, the initial version spans around 30 pages, excluding supporting visuals and data.

The landscape plan is a living document that evolves with changing circumstances and the ambitions of the landscape partnership, remaining flexible while staying focused on the long-term goal of positively impacting all landscape stakeholders. While the landscape plan strives to incorporate the perspectives of a diverse range of stakeholders in a landscape, early versions often reflect the viewpoint of a limited number of landscape organisations for efficiency. However, as more stakeholders join the landscape, the plan evolves. Thus, while it adapts, it remains a dynamic, never

fully finalised resource, always evolving to meet the landscape's needs. This is one of the ways in which the holistic approach to landscape restoration comes to life.

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## Facilitating effective conversations

Creating an impact on a landscape requires the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders. From a funding perspective, philanthropists, investors, and governments all require a clear understanding of the 4 Returns to engage effectively with your landscape. Therefore, a landscape plan plays an essential role in demonstrating what activities are being undertaken and how they align with funders' objectives.

A landscape plan cuts through complex information and enables effective conversations with policymakers, funders, and investors by providing essential details. It serves as a source document for organisations involved in fund mobilisation, marketing and communication, policy influence, and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). Acting as a concise summary for external stakeholders, it fosters meaningful dialogues and partnerships, highlighting opportunities for engagement with policymakers, funders, and investors.



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## Timing the plan

A landscape plan becomes necessary when you want to form relationships with potential external stakeholders. This need may arise from a funder's request, the development of a new long-term strategy, or a fundraising need. There might be a sense of urgency around creating the plan, but it's best to start *only after* you have:

- ➔ A shared understanding of the landscape and its stakeholders
- ➔ A landscape vision based on a collective visioning process

- A landscape proposition
- *A Theory of Change* (see chapter *Strategic planning tools* [page 168])

Each of these steps requires thorough attention. Read the relevant chapters to understand why each step matters and what it entails.

## Getting started

Once the decision to develop a landscape plan is made, you can begin by developing a common understanding of the purpose and scope of the landscape plan, and defining clear roles and responsibilities for its development.

Start by determining if a landscape plan is necessary and what its intended purpose is. You can then start by meeting those directly involved in the development of the landscape plan. Address the “why”, “what”, “when”, and “who” of developing it. Organise a workshop with landscape partners, contributors, and potentially other relevant stakeholders. Hold an open dialogue on the purpose and added value of a landscape plan, as well as the roles of each contributor. It is important to co-create from the start. Split chapters based on core competencies and available information, and organise ongoing reviews and editing by the landscape partnership and other lead contributors.



The AlVelAl team in a landscape planning meeting, Spain.  
Photography: Commonland.



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## DEFINING ROLES

Clearly defined roles are crucial in the development of your landscape plan. When assigning roles, it's essential to consider the representation of different partners, their availability, and the expertise they bring to the table.

For example, you may choose to assign the following roles:

- ➔ **Project coordinator.** Creates steps and timelines; communicates between contributors; organises and facilitates meetings; manages the feedback process based on the key performance indicators (KPIs) of the monitoring framework
- ➔ **Lead contributors.** Co-creates, writes, edits, and reviews the landscape plan; typically drawn from the landscape partnership; landscape stakeholders, advisors, or external partners may also join this team
- ➔ **Supporting contributors.** Reads along and offers opinions; often drawn from landscape partners, external organisations, or members of specific stakeholder groups

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## TIMELINES AND PROCESS

The time taken to complete your landscape plan will vary, primarily because of its intensive multi-stakeholder nature, which demands ongoing efforts to incorporate diverse perspectives. Landscapes in their early stages, for instance, may need to extend the timeline to gather the necessary information. Additionally, other variables influencing the timeframe include the available capacity, financial resources and information, and the contributors' "buy-in".

When considering these variations, you can draft a timeline that provides a rough estimate to guide you. Here's a timeline for creating a landscape plan broken down into more general stages that might be helpful.

### Stage 1: Initial agreement:

- ➔ Agree upon the need for a landscape plan
- ➔ Host a stakeholder-alignment workshop to establish high-level agreement on the vision, roles, responsibilities, and value of the plan

### Stage 2: Planning and preparation:

- Organise a planning workshop to define the purpose, objectives, and division of roles
- Compile available resources and initial research for gap analysis

### Stage 3: Drafting and review:

- Collect research and gap analysis to identify required resources
- The first draft of the landscape plan, including documentation
- Review feedback from all contributors

### Stage 4: Refinement and finalization:

- Develop second draft of the plan with a detailed roadmap and budget
- Collect second round of reviews and feedback
- Finalize and circulate the landscape plan to contributors and partners

### Stage 5: Defining next steps:

- Meet with landscape partners and contributors to discuss next steps, and guidelines for sharing and updating the landscape plan

### COMPILE RESOURCES

More is better when compiling information — it gives you more to work with, even if it means you'll need to (re)organize it later. Ensure that all co-creators of the landscape plan can access relevant resources through shared databases and drives. The more information you have upfront, the easier it is to draft the plan. For instance, you may have already collected:

- ➔ Progress reports, annual reports, or impact reports
- ➔ Landscape assessments, research papers, articles, theses
- ➔ Strategy documents built up during your strategy development process
- ➔ Short, medium, and long-term action plans
- ➔ Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) data
- ➔ Partnership agreements and other contracts
- ➔ External communications

### GUIDANCE ON CONTENT

The following content should ideally be present in all landscape plans. Please include it so far as it is useful. The uniqueness of your landscape will mean you adapt it to your circumstances.

#### ① Landscape partnership and relevant stakeholders

- ➔ An overview (mapping) of local partnerships and other key landscape stakeholders including brief descriptions, roles and responsibilities, and the relationships between them
- ✚ Use information from the landscape and stakeholder analysis, the landscape proposition, or *A quick-start guide to stakeholder mapping*, all described in the chapter *Understanding the landscape* [page 119]

## ② Landscape description and analysis

- Assessment of the physical characteristics (geology, hydrology, ecosystems, and biodiversity, such as fauna, flora, etc.)
- Assessment of the socioeconomic characteristics (demographics, political structure, socio-cultural and political history, trends), and economic characteristics of the landscape (most significant income streams and analysis thereof)
- Assessment of land degradation issues
- Significant short and long-term challenges and developments
- Significant short and long-term opportunities
- + While collecting this content, use information from the landscape and stakeholder analysis or the 4 Returns diagnosis, both described in the chapter *Defining the landscape* [page 105].

## ③ Landscape vision

- Briefly describe the vision for the landscape developed by the key stakeholders (landowners, landscape partnership, funders, government, etc.).
- An imagining of the landscape in five, ten, and 20 years (also in relation to the 4 Returns). You can watch a short video for inspiration for a five, ten, and a 20-year vision on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com).<sup>6</sup>
- + See chapter *Creating a shared vision for the landscape* [page 142] for more information on this type of content.

<sup>6</sup> Find inspiration on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), search for: *El Sueño de AlveAl*

## ④ 4 Returns strategy

- Describe the landscape strategy based on the *4 Returns Framework for landscape restoration*,<sup>7</sup> as applied to the unique circumstances of each landscape, such as the 4 Returns (and the 4 Losses), the 5 Elements, and the 3 Zones. Introduce the strategy you would use to accomplish your goals.
- + See chapter *Strategic planning tools* [page 168] for more information on this type of content.

<sup>7</sup> Find it on [commonland.com](https://www.commonland.com), search for *The 4 Returns Framework for Landscape Restoration*

## ⑤ Achievements to-date

- Outline what has been accomplished in the landscape so far based on the MEL. This will provide context to the status of activities and experiences to date. Connect this to impact metrics and descriptions where available.
- + Use input from the landscape and stakeholder analysis or the landscape proposition to guide you (see chapter *Understanding the landscape*, [page 119]).

## ⑥ Roadmap

- A five-year, ten-year, and 20-year outline of what will be done, in what timeframe, and by whom. Include expected results and links between planned activities, details of the scale of activities, data collection process, and expected impact. See chapter *Strategic planning tools* [page 168] for more information.
- + The 4 Returns KPIs (see chapter *Monitoring 4 Returns impact* [page 274]) help to create landscape-specific or tailor-made KPIs per return, and thus help to monitor progress.

## ⑦ Funding requirements

- An overview and description of funding needs and an inventory of the required funding. Address the funding required to implement the landscape plan.
- An overview of investable opportunities in a blended landscape investment portfolio. Learn more about this in the chapter *Landscape finance* [page 187].

⑧  
Find the template on  
[4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Template for a  
Landscape Plan*

You can find a template for your landscape plan following this outline on the 4 Returns platform. ⑧

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## Updating your landscape plan

As more stakeholders join the landscape, the plan evolves. Therefore, you will need to update your landscape plan over time, ensuring it remains dynamic and responsive to the evolving perspectives of an increasingly diverse range of stakeholders. This ongoing adaptation ensures that the plan remains a living document. You might need to update your landscape plan when:

- The vision and strategy changes
- Roadmap and planned activities evolve
- Funding requirements change
- A major event must be reviewed
- You change the monitoring approach

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## Lessons learned

Commonland and its partners' experience developing 4 Returns landscape plans in Haiti, South Africa, the Netherlands, and Spain have provided the following lessons:

**Common understanding and agreement are critical.** Work on the plan is time and energy intensive. A common agreement is needed to prioritise it. Ensure amends do not become top-down requests from funders or investors without landscape partners agreeing to their need, value, and purpose.

**Clarify roles and responsibilities.** Agree and communicate the roles and responsibilities of landscape partners and contributing organisations before starting work on the development process. This is what the stakeholder alignment and planning workshops are for. See Defining roles above.

**Build trust.** When contributors and organisations trust each other the landscape plan is more pleasant, effective, and efficient. Trust is built when commitments are kept, differences are appreciated, and humour is enjoyed.

### + FURTHER READING

⑨ Find it on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Peat Meadow Landscape Plan*

Find the first version of a landscape plan for the Dutch Peat Meadow landscape on the 4 Returns platform.<sup>⑨</sup> It is a living document which is updated annually to reflect changing challenges, opportunities, and needs in the landscape. If you have any questions or suggestions about the plan, feel free to always reach out to the Wij.land team at [contact@Wij.land](mailto:contact@Wij.land) or the Commonland team at [info@commonland.com](mailto:info@commonland.com).

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## What's next?

In this chapter on creating a landscape proposition and landscape plan, we explored the power of these two documents in guiding us towards our long-term visions while fostering unity and facilitating information exchange among global landscape partners. Understanding the prerequisites and ongoing evolution of these plans ensures their effectiveness, while stakeholder-driven processes are crucial for success. With a comprehensive understanding of the landscape, inclusive partnerships, and a long-term landscape plan, we can move forward. The next chapter will offer hands-on approaches to develop targeted strategies for holistic restoration through strategic planning, thereby bridging the gap between vision and action.

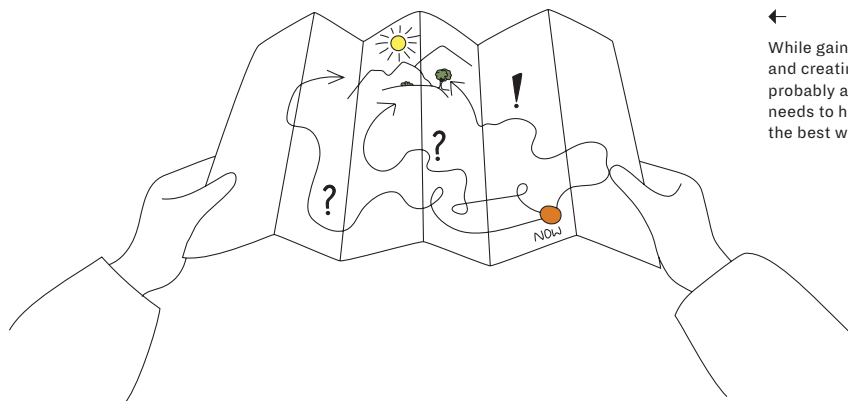


# Strategic planning tools

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

- Guidance on the application of strategic planning for different phases in your landscape restoration process
- Useful tools and frameworks will be introduced such as the SWOT analysis, the problem tree, a *Theory of Change*, qualifying opportunities, and learning loops.

A valuable method for turning broad visions into practical actions on the ground is **strategic planning**. In landscape restoration, strategic planning can be used like a roadmap. It helps break down complex goals, prioritize actions, allocate resources effectively, and ensure stakeholder participation. By gathering input from various stakeholders and using existing knowledge, strategic planning makes restoration efforts more effective and adaptable. Useful tools to guide this process will be explained in this chapter. Strategic planning has all kinds of uses, from organisational strategies to landscape partnerships. Most of this chapter will therefore be rather generic and broadly applicable. When we refer to a **strategy**, this can be broadly interpreted, as a landscape plan or any other strategy you develop along the way.



←  
While gaining a shared understanding and creating a shared vision, there are probably already many ideas about what needs to happen to get there. But what is the best way?

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## STEPS FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

To begin with strategic planning for landscape restoration, it is helpful to address at least these four questions, which will be explained in more detail below:

- ➔ Who are we?
- ➔ Where are we now?
- ➔ Where do we want to go?
- ➔ How will we get there?

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## WHO ARE WE?

As discussed in the chapter *Cultivating a lasting partnership* [page 72], no organisation nor partnership can be everything to everyone. Every organization has its areas of expertise and weaknesses. With strategic planning, it helps to start focusing on your strengths, even if you feel a strategic need to start doing something you are currently not good at. Acknowledging your weaknesses and leveraging your strengths is crucial for understanding your organization's identity and purpose.

A great tool for this is a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis. If you are partnering with one or multiple organisations, a SWOT analysis can be a useful exercise for everyone to do for themselves, share, and compare. Subsequently, a SWOT analysis can be done for the collective partnership. This will provide clarity on how all organisations can be complementary and supportive to each other.

### STRENGTHS

Internal factors that let the organisation excel

### OPPORTUNITIES

External factors that have the potential to boost the organisation

### WEAKNESSES

Internal factors that hinder the organisation in its operation

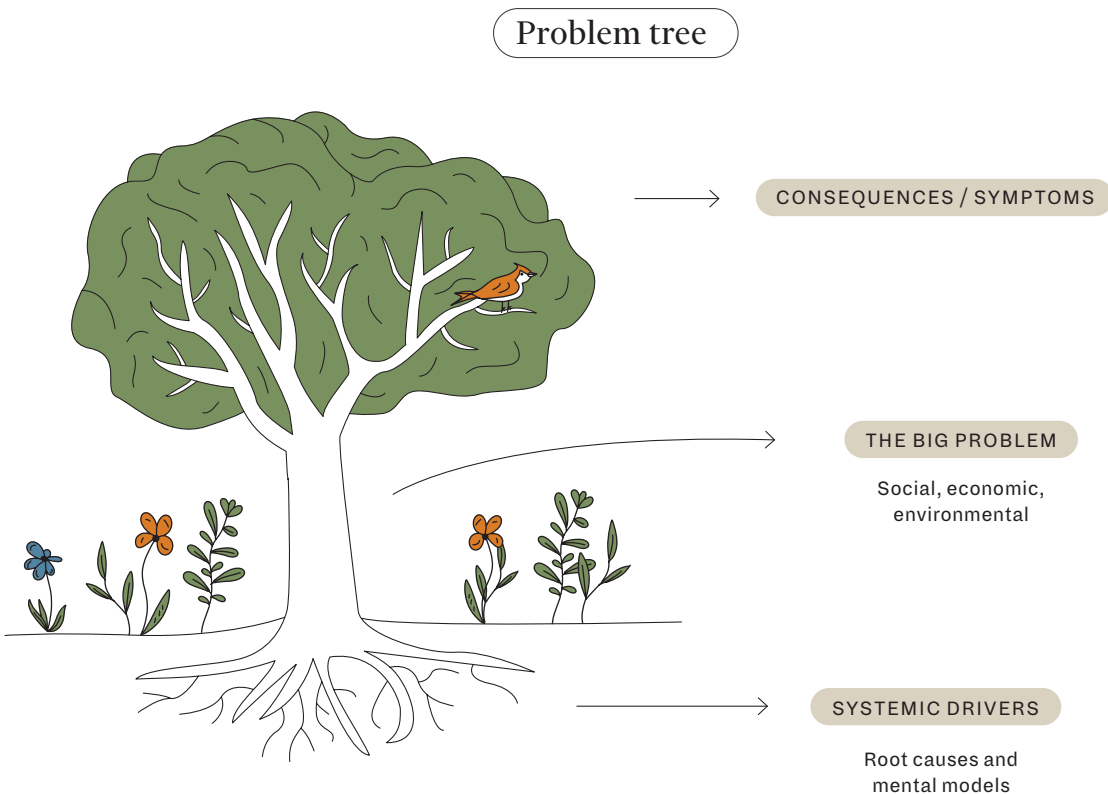
### THREATS

External factors that have the potential to inhibit the organisation

## WHERE ARE WE NOW?

The second question aims to provide context for the strategy. What is the current landscape situation? What are the primary challenges? What solutions or interventions have already been implemented or tried? If you have already performed a landscape and stakeholder analysis [page 126] and a 4 Returns diagnosis [page 123], answering the, “Where are we now?” question should be easier.

This question can help with analysing landscape issues using the metaphor of a “problem tree”: the branches symbolize visible symptoms, the trunk is the main problem, and the roots represent the underlying causes. You might identify several significant problems, which may mean it is more like a “problem forest”. Perhaps some have shared root systems.



## WHERE DO WE WANT TO GO?

To further develop the strategy, we introduce a third question: where do we want to go? This is about your desired future, rather than the journey to get there. Where do we envision the landscape 20+ Years from now? What does that future look, feel, sound, and smell like? Based on your shared values and understanding of what kinds of futures may be possible, it should be possible to formulate your desired future. If you have already developed your

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Find the definitions on [conservationstandards.org](http://conservationstandards.org), search for: *Open Standards for Nature Conservation*

11

Find the 3 Zones exercise in the tool *Defining the 3 Zones* on [4returns.commonland.com](http://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Defining the 3 Zones*

shared landscape vision (see chapter *Creating a shared vision for the landscape* [page 142]), answering this question should be straightforward and can focus on formulating your goals and direction of travel. You can find the definitions of the vision statement, as well as the goals and objectives, in Annex 2 of the Conservation standards.<sup>10</sup>

Understanding the 3 Zones (see chapter *Defining the Landscape* [page 105]) in your landscape can help to envision what a restored landscape might look like, shaping your vision for the future. By building on the 3 Zones exercise,<sup>11</sup> you can predict how your restoration activities will affect these zones over the next five, ten, or 20 years. For example, you might expand the combined zone through increased regenerative production and management, or create buffer zones around conservation areas to protect natural zones. Using maps that show these zones can be helpful, as they can visually represent your restoration goals. This can guide your actions and make it easier to communicate and explain your restoration plans to (local) people.

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## HOW WILL WE GET THERE?

Now, we reach the most exciting phase: the journey toward your envisioned future. Much of this journey cannot yet be planned for in detail, but we can enhance our understanding of the necessary steps along the way. Drawing from the insights gained through previous components such as the SWOT analysis, landscape and stakeholder analysis, 4 Returns diagnosis, 3 Zones maps, and your vision, you should have sufficient information to collectively discuss the best strategy to pursue.

A surprisingly effective and practical approach for mapping the path to the future is by envisioning yourself in that desired future state. This technique, known as **backcasting**, involves imagining the desired future for your landscape. Then, consider the key moments or changes necessary to reach that future. How feasible are these as stepping stones from your current position or circumstances? Games are often helpful in making backcasting more realistic.

Developing milestones can effectively guide landscapes toward their envisioned future. A topic of critical importance is understanding how your organisation needs to change to grow into and sustain that desired future. What changes are needed in organisational structure, team dynamics, finances, and operations to enable the work that needs to be done? Who do you need to collaborate with? Creating a *Theory of Change* can help to link your vision to tangible activities.



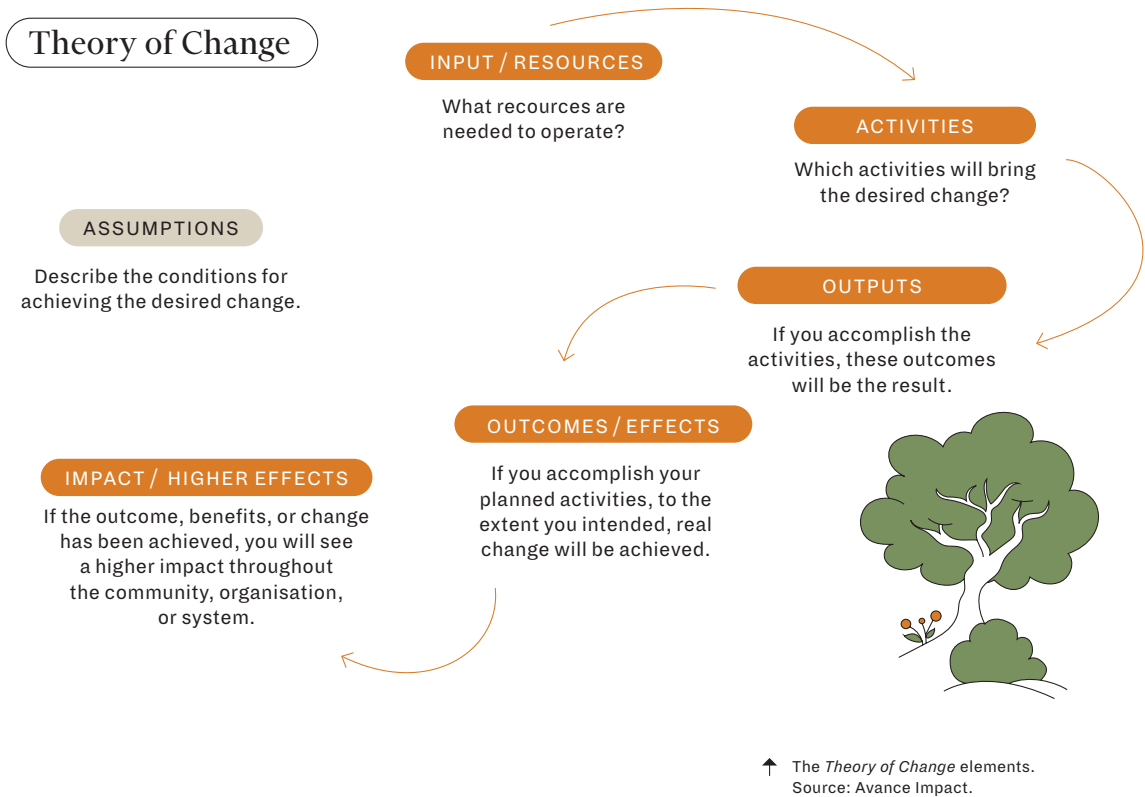
↑ Farmer Maikel Lara on his farm, Altiplano Estepario, Spain. Photography: Gabriela Hengeveld, Commonland.

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## Theory of Change

A useful tool for translating your vision into action is a *Theory of Change* (ToC). The core of a *Theory of Change* is so-called **impact pathways** or **result chains** that logically link the ultimate aim (vision) to concrete activities and help make explicit certain assumptions you may have about how certain activities lead to certain outcomes.

When you use the ToC for strategy development you start with defining your ultimate goal and answering a set of questions that help to build the **change logic** from your activities to the ultimate goal. You can see what that looks like in following figure. Once you have developed the ToC as part of your strategy, you can also use it as a basis for impact measurement. More on that in the chapter *Monitoring the 4 Returns* [page 274].



In its simplest form, developing a *Theory of Change* follows a specific sequence of questions, recommended for discussion in every landscape:

- ① **Problem analysis.** What are the problems and needs in the landscape that need to be tackled?
- ② **Prioritise.** From these problems or needs, what do we focus on and what are our objectives? Document clearly why you prioritised some things over others.
- ③ **Which high-level changes are needed to reach these objectives? Which stakeholders need to change their behaviour and in what way? This is your **impact** or **higher effects**.**
- ④ **Stakeholders.** On which stakeholders do we focus our efforts or interventions, and which do we not? Again, document clearly how you prioritised.
- ⑤ **What is needed to create these behavioural changes? These changes are called **outcomes** or **effects**.** Conduct research (as thoroughly as possible) to identify intervention pathways that have effectively addressed the problems or needs you are trying to address.

- ⑥ What do we need to implement these pathways in our context? These are your **outputs**.
- ⑦ What do we need to do to get to these outputs? And who of the partners is doing what? These are your **activities**.
- ⑧ What **resources** are needed to execute these activities?
- ⑨ Which critical **assumptions** can you discover? How will you address those in your strategy?

Here are some points of attention for developing a *Theory of Change*. First, it is important to have a skilled and neutral facilitator for these conversations. Much of the *Theory of Change* development occurs during workshops involving your organisation, partner organisations, and often some external stakeholders. Having a neutral facilitator can greatly enhance this process.

Second, it is important to document your choices, prioritisations, and assumptions. As explained in the previous chapter, *Creating a shared vision for the landscape* [page 142], we are consciously choosing an iterative way of planning which involves reflection, learning, and adapting. If decision-making processes are not transparent and well-documented, it will become challenging later on to determine if those decisions were effective or require adjustments.

Lastly, when setting goals, it is crucial to formulate them on the level of impact rather than just the level of output. For instance, simply training a certain number of farmers in sustainable agricultural practices does not guarantee that these practices will be implemented, let alone achieve the broader landscape-level change you are aiming for. If you set your goal based solely on outputs (such as the number of trained farmers), you may achieve success in that regard but fall short of attaining the impact you desire.

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## DEVELOPING YOUR THEORY OF CHANGE

⑫ Find the template for the *Theory of Change* on [4returns.commonland.org](https://4returns.commonland.org), search for: *Theory of Change Template*

Having shared some information on developing a *Theory of Change*, you can start creating your own. You can find a template for developing a quick 4 Returns-inspired *Theory of Change*<sup>⑫</sup> on the 4 Returns platform. Hivos also provides more in-depth guidance<sup>⑬</sup> on the process of developing a *Theory of Change*.

To get an idea of a *Theory of Change* that is aligned with a 4 Returns landscape vision, let's explore an example from AIveAI Association. Their *Theory of Change* can be found on the 4 Returns platform.<sup>⑭</sup> AIveAI's *Theory of Change* was developed in 2023 and



13

Find the guidelines *Theory of Change Thinking in Practice* on [hivos.org](http://hivos.org)

14

Find AIVelAI's *Theory of Change* on [4returns.commonland.com](http://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Theory of Change AIVelAI*

builds upon their existing strategy and experience in the Altiplano Estepario landscape in Spain since 2014. Its aims are:

- ➔ Serving as a starting point for monitoring and learning
- ➔ Providing a framework for communicating their impact theory in fundraising settings
- ➔ Offering guidance for setting annual targets in the organisational plan
- ➔ Facilitating internal conversations about the strategy

An impact monitoring expert facilitated the process of developing this *Theory of Change*. It was designed by a small project team, who collected feedback from the entire AIVelAI team. To explore their envisioned impact, follow the impact pathway elements in the *Theory of Change*. From the bottom up, it reveals the activities they implement in the landscape (the roots of the tree), how these generate the various returns both within and outside the landscape (the leaves of the tree), leading to their ultimate aim (the clouds). The *Theory of Change* is designed to be easily understandable and therefore doesn't show all the complexity behind the relationships between activities and returns. These are detailed in a more comprehensive version that can be used by the team.

“A *Theory of Change* is a good way to visually summarise what we do and where we want to go. For us, it's valuable to synthesise our objectives, actions, and envisioned achievements for the future into a single image. This allows not only our team, but also people who don't know us, to see clearly what our vision is.”

LAURA NUÑEZ, Monitoring and evaluation, AIVelAI Association

## Qualifying and prioritising opportunities

Now that you've developed a landscape vision and a strategy to achieve it, which includes desired activities, you may find that there is a lot you could do. Unfortunately, only limited time and resources are available, so it is important to make clear choices. To help provide a framework for these choices, we recommend the framework for "qualifying" opportunities by ProSocial World. When your "why" is in place, you can "qualify" different opportunities in terms of how they fit with both your vision and capabilities. You can change factors in both vision and capability to see how they fit in with your case.

**Fit with vision.** The first step involves comparing the possible opportunities with the vision you have created. Define the criteria you will be using for this comparison. In your local sphere of influence, ask, "What would it look like if we had a positive impact?" These are your criteria for success. They need to be observable or measurable. Those put forward can be evaluated for their "fit with vision" according to these criteria. Defining these criteria for success allows you to decide on the best projects to pursue.

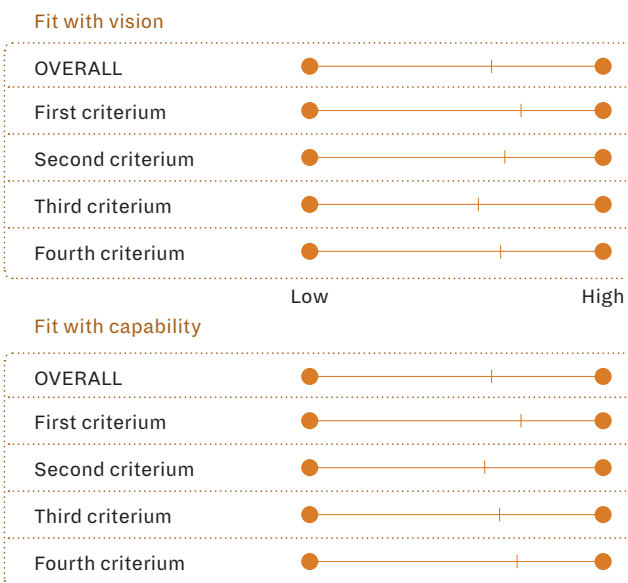
**Fit with capability.** Once you have decided which opportunities are the best in terms of their "fit with vision", the next step is to ask, "Do we have the capability?". The SWOT analysis mentioned earlier can be used as a yardstick for this step. If a potential project is not a "fit for capability", no matter how attractive it is in terms of "fit with vision", it is not a good idea to pursue it because you will be setting yourself and others up to fail.

### Qualifying your opportunities

To qualify an opportunity, it needs to be benchmarked against your success criteria and the capability you have to pursue the opportunity. Framework by ProSocial World.

How "fit" is your opportunity?

- ➔ "Fit with vision"
- ➔ "Fit with capability"



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## MINDSETS TO IDENTIFY PRIORITY ACTIVITIES

This is where the mentalities for holistic landscape restoration that were shared in the chapter *How to get started* [page 55] come in handy. These may help in figuring out which activities should have priority.

**Think big, start small, act now.** Landscape restoration consists of slow processes, and to keep the inspiration high it is important to create some tangible short-term results while working on the bigger outcomes that take more time to realise. What small thing could you do next week that will already get you a tiny bit closer to your goal? Start with “low-hanging fruit”, the easiest or most readily achievable restoration opportunities. These are typically the tasks or initiatives that can be tackled quickly and yield immediate results, helping to build momentum and motivation for larger-scale and longer-term activities.

**Build on existing initiatives.** Create ownership and connections, and make use of, or strengthen, existing initiatives rather than setting up something completely new from scratch. And finally, follow the energy, **work with the willing**. Most people are initially resistant to change. Rather than trying to convince them, it can be a more effective approach to work first with those who are open to change and create lighthouse examples with them, that will then help entice others to join in.

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## Embedding an action plan

The last generic step in the strategic planning process is to create an action plan for allocating resources and plotting major milestones over time. This action plan is usually included in the strategy itself and can link to other planning and coordination tools.

The action plan lays out practical steps for the near future, typically covering one to three years. While aiming to stay flexible, during this timeframe, you can have a good idea of what to expect and can plan in more detail. Putting together an action plan is similar to creating a project plan but with a special focus on organisational development and governance.

The following steps are suggested to create an action plan:

- ➔ Break the milestone(s) for the first one to three years up into more specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals.
- ➔ Identify tasks and prioritise them.
- ➔ Allocate resources (financial, human, etc.).
- ➔ Plan organisational development and alignment, as well as partnership governance.

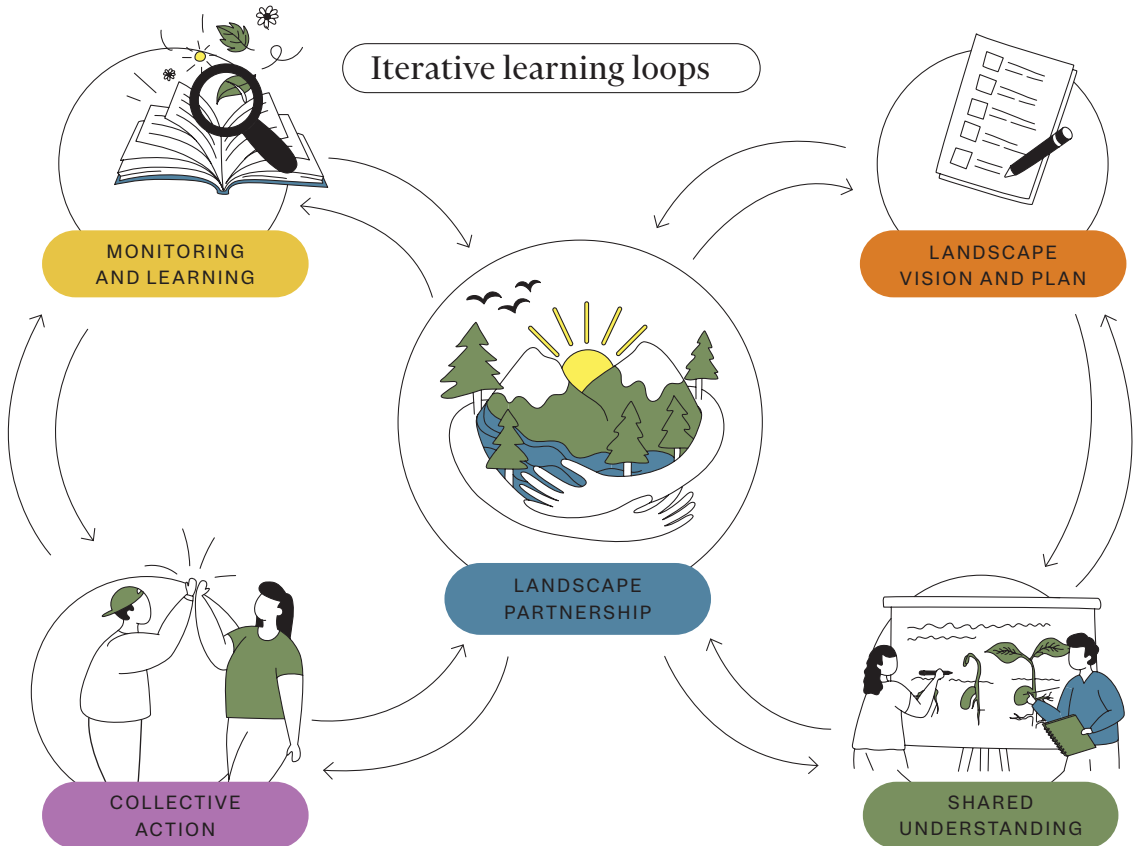
**15** Find the framework on [conservationstandards.org](https://conservationstandards.org), search for: *Open Standards for Nature Conservation*

Element 4 will dive deeper into landscape finance in general, which is about the long-term financial plan for the landscape. For an action plan, however, it's useful to also take quick first steps to gain the finance needed to support action. We'd like to refer to step three of the Conservation Standards<sup>15</sup> for guidance on this practical part of financial planning. It guides you through how you refine budgets, identify potential funding sources, develop funding proposals, and obtain financial resources.

### ORGANISING FOR THE LONG TERM IN SHORT-TERM CYCLES

Having created an action plan, the cycle isn't closed. We view large-scale landscape restoration as an iterative process: a programme of activities set up as a series of the so-called "design cycle". The design cycle helps break up the audacious long-term goal into clear bite-sized chunks and allows for flexibility to change directions under changing circumstances. You can see the 5 Elements as one cycle. Over a year, there can be one — or even several — iterations of the cycle, and as such, together with our partners, you keep reflecting, learning, and adapting. Each iteration focuses on a clear, digestible piece of the long-term vision, which helps to get into "action mode". A practical way to implement this iterative process is to build shorter-term planning cycles into the long-term vision and process.

The restoration process is not a linear path that you can plan, but a succession of iterative learning loops.





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A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.



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## What's next?

In this element, we've transitioned from dreaming about our ideal landscape to putting concrete plans into motion through strategic planning. By bridging the gap between our vision and practical action steps, we've equipped ourselves with tools like the *Theory of Change*, which helps us map out the journey ahead amidst uncertainties. The emphasis on flexibility reminds us that adaptation is crucial along the way. In Element 4 we delve into different aspects of the action phase: covering landscape finance, carbon finance, regenerative business, regenerative agriculture, and policy influencing.

# Take collective action

## Start implementing your landscape plan and create a long-term finance and business development plan.

Actions lead to results. Results are needed to make a positive impact but also to justify further investment, enabling more action, results, and impact. The purpose of this element is to ensure the implementation of the interventions in the 4 Returns landscape plan. This is all about mobilising the inspirational, financial, and human capital that will allow your plan to happen. And it's about coordination between the various stakeholders. Visionary leadership should enable participatory approaches and effective decision-making.

Element 3 covered how to move from vision and planning to the action phase. This element is where the action starts. You'll find deep dives into matters that become important in the action phase. The actions in your landscape restoration initiative depend on what your landscape needs, as outlined in the landscape plan. This section covers the most common themes and topics, but it's not exhaustive. For guidance on other topics, try the 4 Returns platform.<sup>1</sup>

This section begins with the chapter *Landscape finance* [page 187], which delves into essential concepts and financing options for a sustainable landscape restoration programme, including investments, philanthropy, government funding, and payments for ecosystem services (PES).

The next chapter *Carbon finance* [page 207] targets carbon project developers looking to mix their projects into holistic landscape restoration programmes. It explains: the main rules of carbon project finance; its role in paying for environmental services; and its application in landscape restoration, within the *4 Returns Carbon Finance Framework*.

Moving forward, in the chapter *Regenerative business* [page 227] we explore regenerative business development practices in a landscape context, drawing insights from developers experienced in the *4 Returns Framework*.

<sup>1</sup> Find the 4 Returns platform on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com)

In the chapter *Regenerative agriculture* [page 237] we trace its historical roots, outline core principles and practices, and examine areas of contention.

Lastly, the chapter *Policy Influencing* [page 250] underscores strategies and actions for advocating policy changes within national, regional, or international networks, as integral components of holistic landscape restoration efforts.



## RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND METHODS

The report, *Towards financing large-scale, holistic landscape restoration in Europe: recommendations for EU policy actors to attain inspirational, social, natural, and financial returns*, co-authored by a coalition of 19 environmental organisations, focuses on landscape finance as an approach for supporting holistic landscape restoration to aid the implementation of initiatives such as the European Green Deal.

→ [commonland.com/publications](https://commonland.com/publications),  
search for: *Financing Large-scale Holistic Landscape Restoration*

*The Carbon Quick Scan*, created by Wetlands International, Commonland, and the Landscape Finance Lab in 2021, will help you decide whether it is worth delving deeper into a specific carbon initiative.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *The Carbon Quick Scan*

*A quick-start guide to fundraising for holistic landscape restoration projects*, by Commonland, provides step-by-step guidance for developing a fundraising strategy for a HLR project.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *A Quick-Start Guide to Fundraising for Holistic Landscape Restoration Projects*

The report *Responsible use of carbon credits: how project developers can mobilise buyers*, developed by Wetlands International, in collaboration with Commonland and the Landscape Finance Lab, and published by the VCM Global Dialogue in 2023, provides due diligence guidance to support more equitable voluntary carbon markets.

→ [vcm-gd.org](https://vcm-gd.org),  
search for: *Responsible Use of Carbon Credits*

The *4 Returns Carbon Feasibility Study Report Template*, developed by Commonland and Wetlands International in 2024, outlines the different aspects to take into account when assessing the feasibility of a carbon project as part of a landscape restoration programme and related activities.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *4 Returns Carbon Feasibility Study Report Template*

*The Carbon Finance Framework*, published by Wetlands International, Commonland, and the Landscape Finance Lab in 2024, structures your 4 Returns carbon project in line with the 5 Elements and integrates it within the landscape development process.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *The Carbon Finance Framework*

The report *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance: Developing landscape-scale carbon projects*, co-authored by Wetlands International and Conservation International in collaboration with Commonland, the Landscape Finance Lab, and Silvestrum in 2024, guides the reader through the complexity associated with developing carbon projects at a landscape scale.

→ [wetlands.org](https://wetlands.org),  
search for: *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance*

The *4 Returns landscape business model canvas*, created by Commonland in 2021, helps consider the landscape and business perspectives in developing a business model.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *4 Returns Landscape Business Model Canvas*

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) promotes the development and use of policy instruments in biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services.

→ [ipbes.net/policy-tools-methodologies](https://ipbes.net/policy-tools-methodologies)

The series of massive open online courses (MOOCs) by the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM), and Commonland – share knowledge on business opportunities and entrepreneurial competencies in the context of landscape restoration.

→ [coursera.org](https://coursera.org),  
search for:

- *Landscape Restoration Sustainable Development*
- *BMI Sustainable Landscape Restoration*
- *Entrepreneurial Competencies Landscape Restoration*

The knowledge hub of the Global Landscapes Forum is a large database of resources on sustainable landscapes. This is a useful place to find the resources and evidence to help make your policy case stronger.

→ [globallandscapesforum.org/knowledge](https://globallandscapesforum.org/knowledge)

Policies that support forest landscape restoration (FLR) by IUCN describes a range of FLR-supportive policies, complemented by case studies from countries where FLR-supportive policy has had a positive impact.

→ [iucn.org](https://iucn.org),  
search for: *Supportive Policies are Key to Forest Landscape Restoration*

## ENVISAGED OUTCOMES

- ① **Interventions included in the 4 Returns landscape plan are initiated.** Implementation is tracked through generic and tailor-made key performance indicators (see Element 5). Stakeholder attention and momentum are ensured through a communications strategy.
- ② **Landscape investment portfolios are created to attract finance and investments.** These are used to raise funds that support landscape goals.
- ③ **Regenerative business case development.** The outcome is achieved by sharing landscape investment projects with prospective funders including the private sector, governments, and philanthropists.

# Landscape finance

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- ➔ Basic concepts and options for landscape finance, including investments, philanthropy, governmental funding, and payments for ecosystem services (PES)
- ➔ Landscapes require blended finance systems to suit different needs and stages of development. Investment financing emerges as viable business cases as your landscape evolves, but process funding is required to establish landscape partnerships and develop opportunities.
- ➔ Long-term, trust-based donor partnerships fit the 20+ Year timescale of the 4 Returns.

Effective holistic landscape restoration initiatives need reliable long-term funding that suits their timing, scale, and expected returns. They need funding that allows them to invest time and attention in establishing, growing, and fostering multi-stakeholder landscape partnerships for long-term success (see chapter *Establish a landscape partnership* [page 68]). However, most landscape initiatives depend on grant funding on a project-by-project basis. The search for funding is time-consuming and shifts focus away from action in the landscape. Philanthropic and public grants alone are not sufficient for landscape restoration initiatives to reach scale. So, attracting private capital through investments and blended finance mechanisms is often required.

To reach the quantity and type of funding needed to scale up landscape restoration worldwide, there is a need to:

- ➔ Move towards process-level funding — unrestricted, long-term funding that landscape partnerships can rely on
- ➔ Use concessional capital, such as grants and subsidies, to unlock private sector finance, including large-scale investment capital

Landscape finance can be defined as the provision and management of all the financial resources necessary to carry out actions and processes that enable long-term holistic landscape restoration. It encompasses financial streams to support nature restoration, sustainable land use, and development of viable investment opportunities within a landscape.<sup>2</sup> It draws from related fields including impact investing, conservation finance, place-based impact investing, blended finance, and inclusive green growth.

<sup>2</sup> Bertels, J. et al, 2023. *Towards financing large-scale holistic landscape restoration in Europe: recommendations for EU policy actors to attain inspirational, social, natural, and financial returns*. A policy brief published by Commonland, The Nature Conservancy, Gold Standard, and Climate-KIC.

A restored landscape will benefit many stakeholders and reduce risks for governments, companies, and people. This is why we prefer to compare landscape finance with the long-term finance of large infrastructure projects, such as high-speed trains, tunnels, or entire new cities. By combining green and grey infrastructure, landscape restoration parallels traditional infrastructure in investment and challenges but enhances climate resilience, cost efficiency, and societal benefits. It emphasises the importance of acting at a landscape level in infrastructure planning to mitigate long-term environmental and economic risks.



↑ The Simalaha landscape, Zambia. Photography: The Way Between, Grounded.



WHO IS THIS  
CHAPTER FOR?

Landscape finance knowledge shouldn't be limited to financial specialists. Anyone working on a landscape-scale restoration project can benefit from understanding the role of finance in effective landscape restoration projects.

Breaking down  
barriers

There are significant barriers to landscape finance, including the fact that often environmental and social benefits are not considered in deliberations about how to allocate funding. This is true of most non-financial benefits. It is especially the case when it comes to private sector investment. Public and philanthropic funding does consider these benefits, but they are difficult to measure. This results in funded projects where financial returns are of foremost importance even when consideration of other returns would make it clear that they are less effective overall. Fortunately, taking a landscape approach can reduce some of the barriers (see following table [page 191]).



SYSTEMIC

Not all environmental and social benefits, which are often public rather than private benefits, can be monetised, resulting in relatively low financial returns. To date, only carbon value is tradable and this can result in perverse outcomes that do not truly benefit the entire ecosystem.

The holistic nature of the landscape approach values environmental, social, and inspirational returns alongside financial returns, recognising the true value of an investment. Policies that recognise and incentivise environmental and social benefits explicitly would further reduce this barrier.

PUBLIC FINANCE

Restoration is sometimes limited to small environmental budgets, while the impact extends to many other sectors.

Taking a landscape approach considers all the interconnected aspects of a landscape and how they interact to address multiple challenges.

As such, the impacts for many sectors (e.g. sustainable development, infrastructure, climate, agriculture, and forestry) becomes clear and finance from multiple budgets can be attracted. This can be further supported through greater collaboration within governments and financial institutions.

PRIVATE FINANCE

Restoration projects are too small to be attractive to investors, with nature-based projects requiring only 1-10 million USD compared to the 50-100 million USD generally required by institutional investors.

While a landscape approach does not necessarily increase the size of individual projects, they can provide aggregation points for investment and develop a landscape investment portfolio, bringing together the funding needs of multiple actors to provide an investment opportunity that also fits with institutional investor requirements.

Projects require a long investment horizon (10-20 years), and there is a lag between restoration activities and seeing returns through ecosystem improvements.

HRL provides opportunities for blended finance, with more patient capital with lower return requirements playing a targeted role to reduce the discount rate associated with long investment horizons, which can bring these investments within investor return expectations.

Restoration is considered high risk due to limited experience and track record, social risks including land tenure and community engagement, governance and reputational risks.

Social, governance, and reputational risks are reduced through the inclusive nature of the multi-stakeholder partnership, which drives the development of the landscape plan and related actions accounting for land tenure and community rights. Performance risks are lowered by operating in a setting with aligned stakeholders, aggregating across the portfolio, providing investment opportunities with diverse revenue streams, and blending public and private finance.

Corporate investors are inhibited by the lack of a regulatory framework, which prevents them from being able to report against sustainability targets, so they are unable to make recognisable and credible claims for their investment that support landscape outcomes.

Landscape partnerships play a vital governance role in HRL, including monitoring and evaluating restoration outcomes against landscape plans and visions. With political support to establish harmonised accounting and reporting frameworks, the landscape could be a point of integration for relevant metrics (for instance in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)) and could oversee monitoring activities.

↑ Reducing restoration finance barriers through a landscape approach. Credits: Lear, E. Bertels, JS, and Ferwerda, WH.

①

Ding H, Faruqi S, Wu A, Altamirano JC, Anchondo Ortega A, Verdone M, Zamora Cristales R, Chazdon R & Vergara W, 2017. *Roots of Prosperity: The Economics and Finance of Restoring Land*. World Resources Institute.

②

King J, Bromfield T & Milborrow I, 2023. *Accelerating Finance for Nature: Barriers and recommendations for scaling private sector investments*. PWC.

③

ISEAL, 2023. *Joint Landscape Position Papers*.

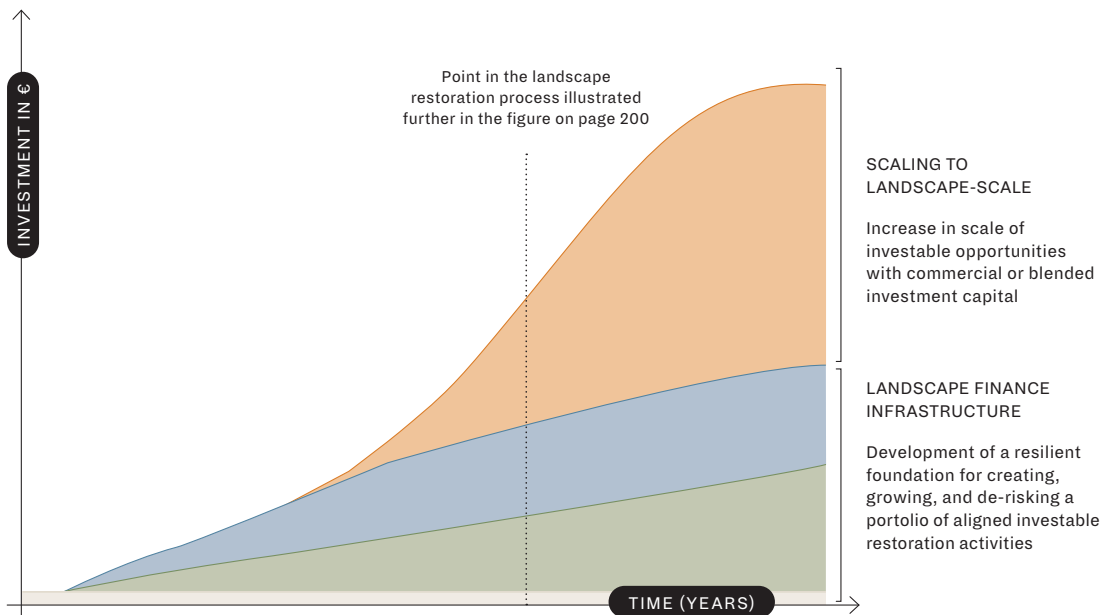
↓ Women harvesting, Chattisgarh, India. Photography: Els Remijn.



## LANDSCAPE FUNDING CHANGES WITH TIME

Different types of funding are needed at different points in time (see illustration below). As the risk of investing reduces over time, landscape-level funding may shift from being reliant primarily on grant funding (with no expectations of financial returns) towards private funding (when business cases and projects have been developed that can attract capital which expects a financial return). Additionally, as landscape action expands, the scale of funding could also increase. Most importantly, flexible (unrestricted) and long-term grant funding for landscape partnerships, also called “process funding”, is critical for driving holistic, large-scale landscape restoration and unlocking other types of large-scale finance, such as private capital.

### Typical landscape funding needs



- **SCALING UP SUSTAINABLE BUSINESSES**

Commercial or blended investment capital, concessional or high risk impact capital

- **EARLY-STAGE SUSTAINABLE BUSINESSES**

Concessional or high-risk impact capital, philanthropic and grant finance, subsidies and tax benefits

- **ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION AND AGRICULTURAL BIODIVERSITY**

Philanthropic and grant finance, subsidies and tax benefits, concessional and high-risk impact capital

- **MULTI-STAKEHOLDER LANDSCAPE PARTNERSHIP**

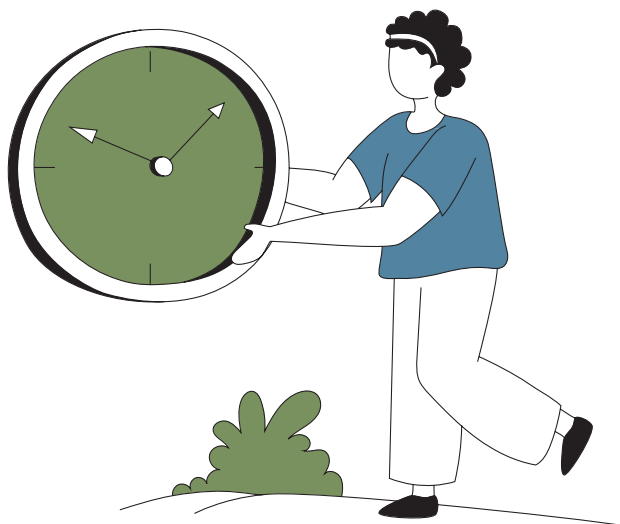
Philanthropic and grant finance

↑ The *Landscape Finance Framework* illustrates how the funding needs of different types of activities (in bold) and funding sources (in italics) develop over time. This financial framework is based on holistic landscape restoration following Commonland’s *4 Returns Framework*. It covers multiple land uses, including natural, productive, and urban areas; operates over a long time frame of at least 20+ Years; is of sufficient size to ensure the ecological foundation can be restored, so a minimum of 50,000 to 100,000 hectares; and generates the 4 Returns — natural, social, financial, and inspirational. Strong governance through a landscape partnership is essential to holistic landscape restoration success. (Credit: Ferwerda, WH, and Bertels, JS).

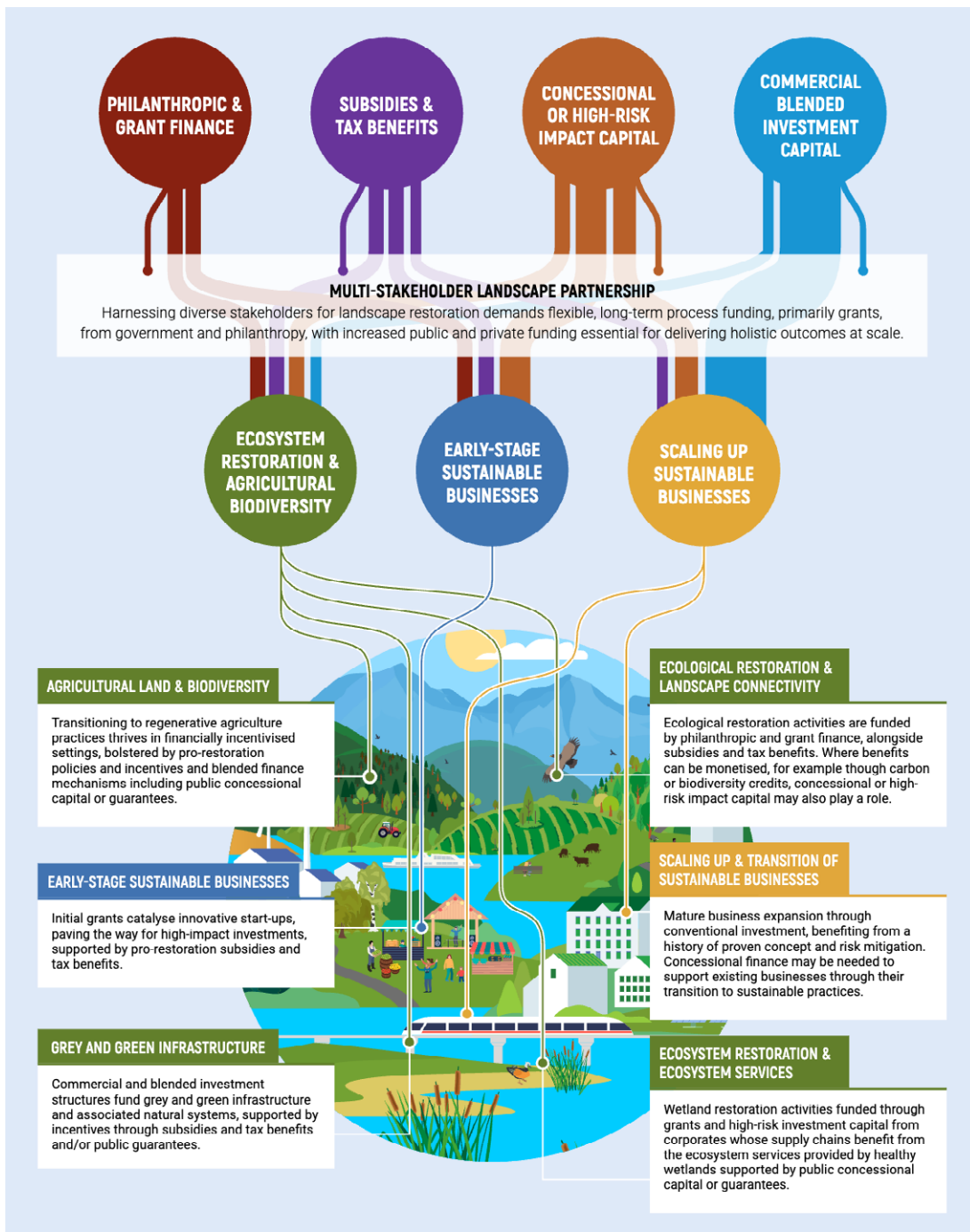
### Process funding:

- ➔ Provides landscape partnerships with reliable funding every year, which allows them to hire permanent staff and keep the lights on, regardless of what project funding they find
- ➔ Allows the development of viable investable businesses and projects, which in turn can raise private investment
- ➔ De-risks investments by providing low-cost capital to landscape actions that are not yet investable or not expected to generate revenues

Why various funding options are required, and how they can be channelled to diverse actions that contribute to holistic landscape restoration efforts, is illustrated on the next page.







↑ Envisioned future scenarios in which a *Landscape Finance Framework* has been implemented in a landscape, showing how funds flow to diverse categories within the landscape. Credit: Bertels, J. et al, 2023. *Towards financing large-scale holistic landscape restoration in Europe: recommendations for EU policy actors to attain inspirational, social, natural, and financial returns*. A policy brief published by Commonland, The Nature Conservancy, Gold Standard, and Climate-KIC.

## LANDSCAPE STORY: FLEXIBLE, UNRESTRICTED FUNDING

Since 2015, AlVelAl has been working on an ambitious 4 Returns landscape restoration initiative in an area spanning one million hectares in the Altiplano Estepario, Spain.<sup>①</sup> Commonland has supported AlVelAl since the beginning, with long-term and unrestricted grant funding. AlVelAl was able to roll out initiatives to help farmers transition to regenerative agricultural practices in the landscape, kickstart and support 4 Returns regenerative businesses, restore natural zones by optimising ecological functioning, and run projects to inspire others to join their restoration effort. Having initial funding without restrictions on its use has helped AlVelAl raise the same amount from third-party donors and investors.

① *Recommendations on delivering the European Green Deal through landscape restoration: Inspirational, social, natural, and financial returns. Find it on [commonland.com/publications](https://commonland.com/publications), search for: Financing Large-Scale Holistic Landscape Restoration*

To tackle the challenges of attracting investment, such as the higher risk of new business models, AlVelAl promoted the development of a 4 Returns business environment to commercialise regenerative products from the landscape, including La Almenrehesa for almonds, Hábitat for olive oil, and AlVelAl Foods to support commercialisation of regenerative products.<sup>②</sup> These businesses attract investment funding in the landscape that complements the broader landscape restoration initiative. The objective continues to create a thriving regenerative economy which can generate financial returns for the landscape.

② *Learn more on [4returns.commonland.org](https://4returns.commonland.org), search for: Nurture a Network of Co-innovation*

This example highlights the role of flexible, unrestricted funding in kick-starting landscape restoration efforts, which can lead to additional funds from donors and investors. The development of a 4 Returns business environment illustrates how innovative business models can attract investment in regenerative practices. This is a successful strategy for creating a sustainable, regenerative economy that benefits both the environment and the local community. However, it's important to note that an entrepreneurial environment and spirit is critical, alongside appropriate legal structures for the businesses.



← Products from businesses that are initiated or supported by AlVelAl, Spain.

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## Main sources of funding

This section offers an overview of the main sources of funding that could be relevant to your landscape restoration initiative. Each section explains a funding type, its relevance, and how to learn more. You can also find steps for getting started and case studies for inspiration.

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### PHILANTHROPY

#### What is it?

Philanthropy literally means love of humanity (“phil” = loving, “anthrop” = humanity) and relates to gifts or donations from individuals (donors, supporters) or organisations (foundations or funds).

Philanthropic donations are a good option for starting a holistic landscape restoration programme because private supporters (as opposed to public funding) often have more flexibility to be innovative. A private donor or organisation can choose to take risks and be involved long-term. They are also more likely to fit the holistic nature of landscape restoration because they are not bound by a ministry or department. They can support unrestricted (not yet determined, or long-term) costs, as opposed to earmarked projects, because they do not have to justify their support to taxpayers or shareholders.

Given the long-term nature of 4 Returns landscape restoration — at least 20 years — it is important to develop **long-term, trust-based** partnerships with funders. This is because restoring natural processes, as well as changing human systems, takes time. To create real impact together in a world where we work with nature-based solutions, it makes sense to let nature lead the financing too.

For the same reason, to let nature lead the way, it is helpful to receive **unrestricted donations**. This means the funder does not specify how the money must be spent. Unrestricted donations are important because of their explorative nature. Many lessons are learned along the way, and it may be necessary to adjust your way of working. Unrestricted funding as a basis for your operation allows for testing, experimenting, and building social networks (see *Landscape story: flexible, unrestricted funding* on the previous page). This is also the most efficient way of donation-based funding, because less time and effort go into a strict stop-start reporting cycle that is characteristic of “project-led funding”. It means more funds can flow towards work on the ground.

**Project funding** is the most common way of funding work through philanthropic donations. These donations are dedicated to a project with a beginning and end, and with a restricted budget and specific deliverables. This can be helpful in landscape restoration, for example when acquiring capital (machinery or land), in



combination with a loan (to reduce risk), or for work that is meant to be transferable to the public domain (with funding becoming public in the long term).

There are many ways of raising philanthropic funding. An easy way to start is by [writing to foundations](#). In many countries, there are public indexes of all foundations that support charities, with a description of their mission and goals. Some have open application calls and others are by invitation only.

A popular option for start-up funding is a [crowdfunding campaign](#), for which there are many open online platforms. This requires a strategy, launch, and network to pitch your idea to. If you don't have a network yet, it is advisable to search for a platform where a receptive audience might already be tuned into your mission or sector.

Sometimes, a business can be a good partner for your organisation, and you can initiate a [sponsorship](#). Do note that many companies have their own foundation, a separate legal entity, which works parallel to a corporate social responsibility (CSR) team (often part of a marketing and communications department) that is based within the company structure.

Be aware that raising funds can take a lot of [time and dedication](#). Many organisations have an employee or volunteer who is dedicated to this, or their role may be combined with marketing and communications. Also, there can be a long wait before any funds arrive. It can take a year for the first donations to start coming in because foundations have funding cycles, and a network of donors takes time to build up. The position of a fundraiser often becomes stronger over time, and it may take three to five, or even ten years before major donations come in.

[Teamwork](#) is crucial to this process. No single person can raise funds on their own; the entire organisation needs to be involved. Financial colleagues need to help with budgeting priorities, field-work colleagues need to deliver content for applications, and marketing colleagues need to support communication and awareness building.

Together, you will have a larger network of potential funders. For the same reason, ask for help from a board or other governing body whose network could be useful for fundraising purposes. When you have a few supportive donors, who are engaged with your organisation and mission, they could become ambassadors and help with their network, knowledge, and experience.

### Is it relevant to you?

Anyone with a registered charity, who performs work, can receive charitable donations. Each country has its own process and laws around charities. Many countries allow tax benefits for charitable and nonprofit organisations.



### LEARN MORE

To find out more, or start fundraising for holistic landscape restoration, check out *A quick-start guide to fundraising for holistic landscape restoration projects*. It offers a practical solution for all landscape restoration practitioners who want to raise philanthropic funds for their holistic landscape restoration project or programme. Follow ten simple steps to gain ideas about what kinds of funds you could raise and how.



[4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *A Quick-Start Guide to Fundraising for  
Holistic Landscape Restoration Projects*

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## PUBLIC FUNDING

### What is it?

Typically, public funding is available through fiscal measures and is granted from either supranational institutions, such as the European Union (EU), or national, regional, or local government. The purpose of public funding can be to foster innovation, finance feasibility studies, fund relevant research, or in the context of landscape restoration, to restore, conserve, or regenerate nature. It is often in the form of grants that are not expected to be repaid. Compared with private funders, subsidies might require more detailed proposals in which all actions are outlined, and more extensive reporting. However, there are a lot of public grants available for landscape restoration, especially to aid the transition to a sustainable agriculture system. Subsidies can offer a great kick-start for a new product, service, business, or concept that has ecological and social value.

Commonland has suggested that policy actors, such as the EU, increase public funding to holistic landscape restoration, including: recognising landscapes and landscape actors in policy frameworks; increasing the options for public finance to play a catalytic role in landscapes; and ensuring infrastructure investments adopt holistic long-term perspectives, prioritising green infrastructure.<sup>3</sup> If we work to create a more enabling environment with aligned policies, as recommended in the report, it will be easier to develop large-scale landscape finance structures to advance holistic landscape restoration.

3

Find the report on  
[commonland.com/publications](https://commonland.com/publications),  
search for: *Financing Large-scale  
Holistic Landscape Restoration*

### Is it relevant to you?

Public funding is relevant if you have a programme, project, initiative, or plan that aligns with the strategic goals and policy of an area of interest to the relevant government or organization. Do a quick but thorough pre-assessment of your options before going all in. This could include communicating with the grant provider in advance to decide whether it is worth the effort of submitting a proposal. Also, be aware of the available funding in relation to the expected competition.



#### LEARN MORE

For Dutch projects, find more information on public funding at the Netherlands Enterprise Agency.

→ [rvo.nl/subsidies-financiering](https://rvo.nl/subsidies-financiering)

The European Commission's Single Electronic Data Interchange Area (SEDIA) lets you search for funding and tender projects based on programmes. The Dutch governmental website is useful for accessing European grants.

→ [ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders)

→ [government.nl/topics/european-grants](https://government.nl/topics/european-grants)

## INVESTMENT FUNDING

### What is it?

Investments in the context of holistic landscape restoration refer to finance allocated to support actions that, in addition to producing inspirational, social, and natural returns, can also generate financial returns. Investments will most likely require the potential for revenue generation to pay back investors at some point in the future — but innovative finance models such as impact bonds also exist.

Two main types of investment funding:

- ① **Debt financing** refers to borrowing money and repaying it, probably with interest. Usually, this type of funding is obtained through: loans, often directly from a single lender; bonds, often larger amounts and from many different lenders; and lines of credit, often from a local financial institution. Importantly, lenders do not have ownership in the company or project and do not share in its profits but are the first to be paid.
- ① **Equity financing** means selling ownership in the form of a portion of the company in exchange for investment. These investors become shareholders and are entitled to a portion of profits. They can also influence the management of the company, given that ownership typically comes with voting rights.

4

Find the more information on [convergence.finance](https://convergence.finance)

There are other types of investments, such as **convertible financing**, as well as many blended and innovative finance models with more complex structures. For further information, refer to the *Learn More* section [page 202]. **Blended finance** refers to the use of catalytic capital from public or philanthropic sources to increase private sector investment by allowing organisations with different objectives to invest alongside each other while achieving their own objectives, whether those are financial, natural, social, or inspirational returns.<sup>4</sup>

It's important to understand the distinction between sources of investment and the type of finance itself. For example, while governments often provide grant funding, they also allocate investment capital to government-aligned initiatives in the form of debt through development finance institutions, multilaterals, and export credit agencies. Other important sources of investment capital include: financial institutions; high-net-worth individuals; asset managers, who manage specific funds and might be impact-first or more commercial; institutional asset owners, such as insurance companies and pension funds; and local and multinational corporations.

Finally, of particular importance is corporate investment. The Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD) and the Science Based Targets Network (SBTN) offer pathways for corporations to embed nature in their decision-making frameworks. SBTN also makes landscape engagement recommendations. These initiatives provide structure for businesses to report on and manage their environmental impacts and needs. Aligning in this way aids the transition towards unrestricted, long-term funding for landscape partnerships.

#### **Is it relevant to you?**

Investment funding might be appropriate in your context when you have identified, developed, or are developing business cases (companies or co-operatives, for example) or projects (building a school or a hospital, or developing a renewable energy project, for example) that can generate revenues and therefore pay back an investor over time.

It is also important to analyse the existing sources of revenue for the landscape — its economic drivers — because probably that will be the best way to find investment opportunities. This might include revenues generated by sales of products from the area, for example loans to farmers to support a transition to regenerative practices, and local services such as ecotourism.



## LEARN MORE

The Adventure Finance Online Companion provides information and tools about investment financing.

→ [adventure.finance/online-companion](https://adventure.finance/online-companion)

### *Attracting Private Investments for Sustainable Landscapes: A Guide*

by WWF and IDH, March 2022, aims to inspire and enable people with an NGO background to step up as project organisers who can create opportunities that attract private investments in support of sustainable landscapes.

→ [idhsustainabletrade.com](https://idhsustainabletrade.com),  
search for: *Attracting Private Investments for Sustainable Landscapes*

Learn more about emerging finance models in the publication *Mobilizing finance across sectors and projects to achieve sustainable landscapes: Emerging models*, by EcoAgriculture Partners, WWF Landscape Finance Lab, the Coalition for Private Investment in Conservation, and 1000 Landscapes for 1 Billion People in 2020.

→ [landscapes.global/resources](https://landscapes.global/resources),  
search for: *Mobilizing Finance Across Sectors and Projects*

FAO's community of practice on finance for forest and landscape restoration offers a platform to exchange experiences between practitioners in different regions.

→ [dgroups.org/fao](https://dgroups.org/fao)

The report *Towards financing large-scale, holistic landscape restoration in Europe: recommendations for EU policy actors to attain inspirational, social, natural, and financial returns*, co-authored by a coalition of 19 environmental organisations — including the World Resource Institute, Gold Standard, The Nature Conservancy, EIT Climate KIC, Rainforest Alliance, and Commonland — focuses on landscape finance as an approach for supporting holistic landscape restoration to aid the implementation of initiatives such as the European Green Deal.

→ [commonland.com/publications](https://commonland.com/publications),  
search for: *Financing Large-Scale Holistic Landscape Restoration*

*Investing in Peatlands*, published by the Landscape Finance Lab, Climate Catalyst, and the EU Horizon 2020 WaterLANDS project in 2024, is a guide for nature-focused investors seeking peatland opportunities.

→ [landscapefinancelab.org](https://landscapefinancelab.org),  
search for: *Investing in Peatlands*

## PAYMENTS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES AND CARBON FINANCE

### What are they?

Payments for environmental services (PES) enables transactions between environmental service providers and those who use them. PES aids positive changes in land use for a healthier ecosystem. It targets services such as pollination, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, and water purification. Buyers fund custodians who provide these environmental benefits.

PES in landscape restoration supports multiple benefits, contributing to natural, financial, social, and inspirational returns. It aims to be more profitable than degrading practices and can be a policy tool. Types of PES include proxy payments, carbon credits, ecological services payments, biodiversity offset payments, water services payments, and ecosystem restoration payments. Each of these targets one or more environmental services and is funded by public money or by private sector action.

Stakeholders must be involved in planning PES. Often the price is based on opportunity cost. Farmers and land managers can support environmental preservation through PES, extending their impact and diversifying their income opportunities. An example is carbon farming, which aims to preserve and enrich agricultural soils to provide multiple environmental services to society.

### **Is it relevant to you?**

PES is relevant in the context of landscape restoration when you have identified projects with the potential to generate financial returns while enhancing ecosystem services. It is particularly beneficial if you are engaging with farmers or land managers to support environmental preservation efforts.

Consider these approaches when negotiating prices based on opportunity cost and use PES and carbon finance to secure sustainable funding for your landscape restoration initiatives.

### **Carbon finance**

A type of PES, carbon finance operates through carbon markets. The mandatory carbon market, established under the Kyoto Protocol, includes regulated systems, such as the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS). The voluntary carbon market allows organisations to purchase carbon credits to offset their emissions, following the greenhouse gas Mitigation Hierarchy. These markets offer credits for both emission reduction and removal and are essential in funding landscape restoration, but they require diverse income streams and time for effective implementation.



LEARN MORE

For additional information about PES and carbon finance, please refer to the chapter *Carbon finance* [page 207], which provides a guide on how to develop a 4 Returns carbon project using the *4 Returns Carbon Finance Framework*.

## LANDSCAPE STORY: COMMUNITY-LED LOCAL CARBON MECHANISM

Grupo Ecológico Sierra Gorda (GESG) led the development of a local carbon mechanism to channel payments for ecosystem services to smallholders at the Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve<sup>③</sup> in Mexico. The payments are in exchange for improved land management practices, such as allowing natural regeneration of the forest floor by removing free-grazing livestock. The financial resources are generated by the state government through a simple but effective annual tax on private vehicles.

The reserve covers 33% of the state of Querétaro, approximately 385,000 hectares. GESG creates community-based models to regenerate and conserve old-growth forests while providing diverse income for communities. More than 30 years of work are now resulting in community benefits and the protection of Mexico's beautiful natural heritage.

According to Laura Pérez-Arce, coordinator at GESG, the biodiverse carbon model is effective in regenerating forests while creating incentives for local landowners. She said: "We have developed a voluntary framework to offset carbon emissions, verified under the *Initiative for Climate Action Transparency* guidelines,<sup>④</sup> involving viable protocols and procedures, to quantify the amount of carbon in local oak forests. This framework has produced palpable economic benefits that override the opportunity costs."

GESG is supporting other local civil society organisations and state governments to replicate the model elsewhere and unlock this source of financing. Read more about the story in *Biodiverse carbon: a practical framework for regenerating natural heritage*.<sup>⑤</sup>

③

Learn more on [4returns.commonland.org](https://4returns.commonland.org), search for: *The Sierra Gorda Biosphere Reserve*

④

Learn more at [climateactiontransparency.org](https://climateactiontransparency.org)

⑤

Find it on [4returns.commonland.org](https://4returns.commonland.org), search for: *Biodiverse Carbon: A Practical Framework*



Grupo Ecológico Sierra Gorda works with landowners to regenerate unique cloud forest ecosystems by keeping cattle out. The regeneration of the forest is visible on the left side of the fence. Photography: GESG.





## Taking action

You now have an overview of the different types of funding for your landscape, and which are most suitable for the various phases of your initiative. From this, you can get started on strategic financing. Here are some steps to get started on your financing journey.

**Develop a shared landscape finance strategy.** Transformation needs transformative finance. As we've learned in this chapter, long-term, trust-based funding is needed. Funders are more likely to support an established landscape partnership than a single organisation. You'll need to work together with various partners in your landscape to develop a shared strategy, which should be adaptive and change over time. It needs the full support of all partners. Find tools to support this process in the *Integrated Landscape Management Tool Guide*.<sup>5</sup>

**5**  
Find the tool guide on [landscapes.global](https://landscapes.global), search for: *Integrated Landscape Management Tool Guide*

**Include a blended landscape investment portfolio in your landscape plan.** This allows for the landscape plan to be used by potential investors to see the opportunities for investment in the landscape. It includes providing a description of all investable opportunities, whether new or established companies, projects, finance for farmers directly, or others. Each opportunity should specify what type of funding or other support is needed. It could be process funding, project-specific grant funding, investments, government subsidies, or other kinds of support. Learn more in the chapter *Creating a shared vision for the landscape* [page 142] and find tools to support a blended landscape investment portfolio in the *Integrated Landscape Management Tool Guide*.<sup>6</sup> The *Landscape Investment and Finance Tool*<sup>6</sup> might also be helpful. It comprises a process and materials for defining, developing, and financing priorities.

**6**  
Find the tool at [liftkit.info](https://liftkit.info)





## LEARN MORE

*Local financing mechanisms for forest and landscape restoration* by FAO provides an in-depth study of how financial mechanisms can be coordinated to maximise the use of finance and the adoption of restoration actions at scale across the landscape.

→ [fao.org](http://fao.org),  
search for: *Local Financing Mechanism for Forest and Landscape Restoration*

FAO's free e-learning course on sustainable financing of forest and landscape restoration is for anyone interested in financing landscape restoration.

→ [elearning.fao.org/course](http://elearning.fao.org/course),  
search for: *Sustainable Financing of Forest and Landscape Restoration*

Find landscape finance strategy tools in the *Integrated Landscape Management Tool Guide*.

→ [landscapes.global](http://landscapes.global),  
search for: *Integrated Landscape Management Tool Guide*

The *Convergence blended finance primer* provides a helpful introduction to blended finance.

→ [convergence.finance/blended-finance](http://convergence.finance/blended-finance)

*The Little Book of Investing in Nature* by Global Canopy helps governments, NGOs, the private sector, and others compare options for financing conservation in a clear and consistent way.

→ [globalcanopy.org](http://globalcanopy.org),  
search for: *The Little Book of Investing in Nature*

*The How-To Guide for Blended Finance* by the Redesigning Development Finance Initiative, a joint initiative of the World Economic Forum and the OECD is a useful resource.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](http://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *A How-To Guide for Blended Finance*

*Landscape Enterprise Networks* connect buyers (governments and companies) to suppliers (land stewards and farmers) who are rewarded for their land and water management practices.

→ [landscapeenterprisenetworks.com](http://landscapeenterprisenetworks.com)

*Funding Options for Ecosystem Restoration in Central America and Africa* assesses funding sources that are relevant to local non-profit organisations implementing ecosystem restoration actions.

→ [globallandscapesforum.org](http://globallandscapesforum.org),  
search for: *Funding Options*

# Carbon finance

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- ➔ The potential of holistic carbon project finance for 4 Returns landscape restoration
- ➔ The voluntary carbon market, carbon credits, and the importance of third party verification processes
- ➔ Carbon standards and methodologies: governance of carbon markets through standard organisations, methodologies for quantifying emissions reductions and removals, and various carbon standards
- ➔ How to develop a 4 Returns carbon project following the *4 Returns Carbon Finance Framework*: covering elements such as partnership establishment, feasibility studies, project implementation, measurement of carbon in soils, and monitoring
- ➔ Helpful tools to get started with your carbon project, including the *Carbon Quick Scan*, the *Feasibility Study Report Template*, the *Landscape Greenhouse Gas Accounting Guidance*, and the *Responsible use of carbon credits* guidance

Harnessing voluntary carbon markets (find more explanation on this term below) can be an effective way to fund and scale up your landscape restoration actions. Holistic carbon project finance helps generate benefits aligned with the *4 Returns Framework*, including natural, social, and economic returns, and creates inspiration for land users through the possibility of a better future.

This chapter explores how to unlock carbon finance for landscape restoration. It describes how carbon projects on the voluntary carbon market can be used for landscape finance to create an additional revenue stream “from within” a landscape. We elaborate on the 4 Returns carbon credits, with a focus on carbon projects that can be combined with the landscape development process. This chapter provides guidance for landscape restoration practitioners interested in developing a 4 Returns carbon project within the context of holistic landscape restoration programmes. It can also be useful for carbon project developers looking to add the 4 Returns benefits (inspirational, natural, social, and financial returns) to standalone carbon projects.

We explain terms — such as “carbon markets,” “carbon standards,” “carbon methodologies,” and “project development frameworks” — then dive into the detail of how to develop a 4 Returns carbon project. Throughout the chapter we will link to tools to define the scope so you can start working on a 4 Returns carbon project for your landscape restoration endeavour.

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## Carbon credits for holistic landscape restoration

There are several ways to finance landscape restoration programmes through a blended finance approach. Payments for environmental services (PES) is one way of generating revenue streams within a landscape and can help turn landscape restoration into a self-perpetuating process that creates multiple benefits for communities and their environment (see chapter *Landscape finance* [page 187]). Carbon finance is an appealing ecosystem service finance that improves ecosystem health while mitigating climate change. While carbon markets are still in their infancy compared to other asset classes, and pricing and quality is still highly variable, they have gained popularity in recent years.

Social-environmental integrity is the touchstone of climate and market success. Supply of high-quality credits needs to be secured along with responsible corporate climate action that determines their demand and use.<sup>7</sup> Recently, criticism from the public has contributed to the continuous improvement of carbon markets and their services. Scrutiny leads to more scientifically rigorous standards and tools, fostering the development of more reliable carbon markets and better carbon offsets.

<sup>7</sup>

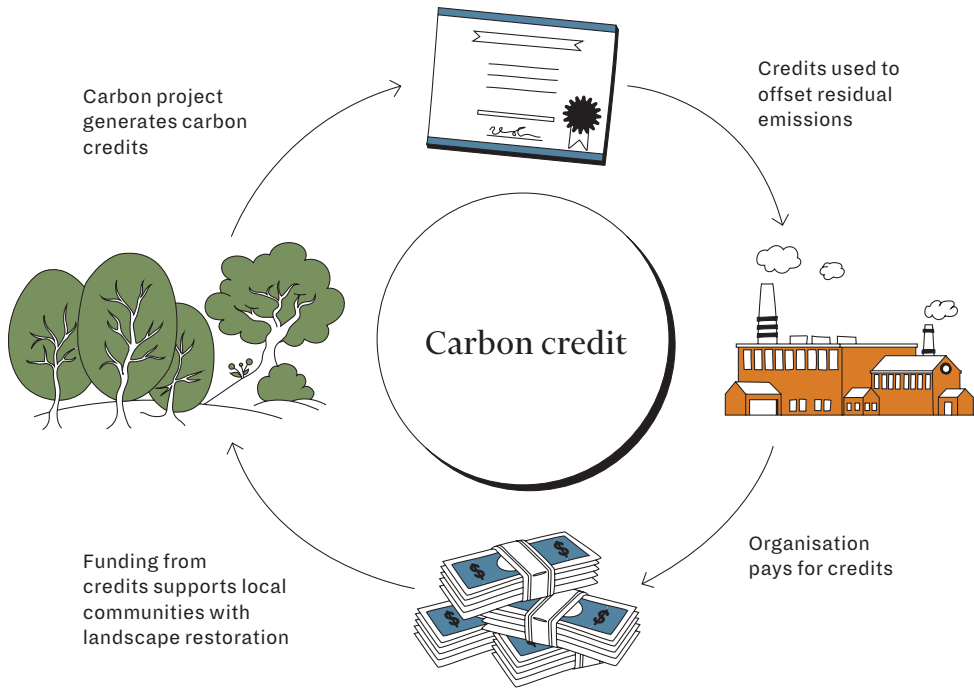
Find the report *The voluntary carbon market for safeguarding and restoring our wetlands* on [wetlands.org](http://wetlands.org), search for: *Voluntary Carbon Market*

8

Find the guide on [vcm-gd.org](http://vcm-gd.org), search for: *Responsible Use of Carbon Credits*

The 4 Returns carbon approach focuses on high quality supply (see below), and we promote responsible use of carbon credits through the guide *Responsible use of carbon credits: how project developers can mobilise buyers* developed by Wetlands International, in collaboration with Commonland and the Landscape Finance Lab.<sup>8</sup>

Financing landscape restoration initiatives through carbon projects is certainly not a panacea but an emerging option to support restoration. Revenue from carbon credits is a useful component to diversify revenue streams in landscapes as a part of alternative business models to de-risk the overall landscape restoration initiative.



↑ A simplified logic of carbon markets.

## MANDATORY AND VOLUNTARY CARBON MARKETS

There are two types of carbon markets: mandatory, or compliance, markets; and the voluntary carbon market. Cap and trade schemes, also known as emissions trading schemes, usually fall into the first category, with participants identified by governments based on carbon intensity, sector, or size. Under these schemes, a limit (cap) is set on the total amount of certain green-

house gases that can be emitted by the companies covered by the scheme — effectively setting a carbon budget. The cap is reduced over time so that the total permitted emissions fall. Within the cap, companies buy or receive emissions permits (or allowances) which they can trade with each other as needed. At the end of each year, companies must surrender enough allowances to cover their emissions or incur heavy fines. If a company reduces its emissions, it can keep any spare allowances to cover its future needs or sell them to another company that requires additional allowances.

Both individuals and organisations can choose to utilise carbon credits for offsetting emissions. However, responsible use of carbon credits involves adhering to a Mitigation Hierarchy designed for CO<sub>2</sub> emitters, which is informed by scientifically-based targets. Under the Mitigation Hierarchy, companies should set science-based targets for both the near and long term to address emissions across their value chains. Implementing strategies to achieve these targets should be prioritized as a first-order action before considering other measures or investments to mitigate emissions beyond their value chains. Wetlands International, in collaboration with Commonland and the Landscape Finance Lab, has developed a guide for the responsible use of carbon credits.<sup>9</sup>

9

Find the guide on [vcm-gd.org](http://vcm-gd.org), search for: *Responsible Use of Carbon Credits*

Voluntary carbon markets provide a market-based system to lower greenhouse gas emissions while promoting the protection and restoration of natural ecosystems and enhancing the resilience and income of communities. So, they are a crucial stepping stone in achieving the *Paris Agreement* goals through landscape restoration. The agreement, signed in 2015, is an international treaty aimed at limiting global warming to well below two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

A wide range of methodologies is available to harness the voluntary carbon market, including: various carbon standards; credit registries; measurement, reporting, and verification (MRV) providers; and carbon credits traders and brokers. Some are provided by non-profit and for-profit actors to help measure greenhouse gas emissions and carbon sequestration.

Different methodologies can be combined using the *Landscape Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Accounting Guidance* by Wetlands International and Conservation International in collaboration with Commonland, the Landscape Finance Lab, and Silvestrum. The guidance offers a set of steps and decisions underpinning the development of a landscape-scale Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) project.<sup>10</sup>

10

Find the *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance* on [wetlands.org](http://wetlands.org), search for: *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance*

Carbon projects aim to mitigate greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), and nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O). All greenhouse gases are converted into CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalents using global warming potentials. One carbon credit represents one metric ton of carbon dioxide equivalent that has been avoided or removed from the atmosphere. Broadly, there are two types of credits — emission reduction and emission removal.

Emission reduction credits are generated from project actions aimed at lowering the greenhouse gas balance of a system. They are determined by comparing retrospective emissions data for the baseline activity with the emissions of a project scenario. Certain projects are committed to reducing emissions through the adoption of sustainable land management practices. These efforts focus on safeguarding ecosystems like forests and wetlands, thereby safeguarding carbon reserves. Wetlands, especially peatlands, which constitute the world's terrestrial area with the largest natural carbon stores, play a critical role in storing significant amounts of carbon within their soils and biomass. However, when wetlands degrade, they release substantial amounts of CO<sub>2</sub>, methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), and nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) from their soils, contributing to global warming. Furthermore, adjustments to agricultural methods help in preserving the carbon already stored in the environment. Another important initiative is the reduction of emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. This endeavour promotes the conservation and sustainable management of forests to combat climate change by decreasing greenhouse gas emissions. It's worth noting that mangroves typically contain five times as much carbon as a similar area of rainforest.

**Avoided emissions** are those that would have emerged had it not been for a project action, for example, use of improved cooking stoves or renewable energy systems.

Emission removal credits involve storing additional carbon in land-based systems, such as afforestation, reforestation, and natural revegetation (ARR), soil carbon enhancement in agriculture, and ecosystem restoration. Also, wetland conservation and restoration have the potential to remove CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere through photosynthesis and sequester it as carbon in organic matter. In some cases, this removal can contribute to net-negative emissions of the entire carbon “project boundary”.

Emission removal credits become a more complex endeavour, and thus more difficult to achieve, when the project boundary is taken into consideration. While removal through carbon sequestration occurs in many land-based carbon projects, not all removed carbon can be traded as an emission removal credit. This is because credits are always issued for the total balance of a project boundary and not for the individual com-



ponents (reductions and removals). This means that ongoing, albeit reduced, emissions from farm practices often outweigh the CO<sub>2</sub> removed through soils. Additionally, removals must be permanent for 50-100 years, which makes carbon credits that include emission removals a challenging way of achieving net-zero emissions.

Due to this complexity around achieving verified emission removals, credits created from emission reductions, including avoided emissions, make up the largest share of carbon credits available in registries.<sup>11</sup>

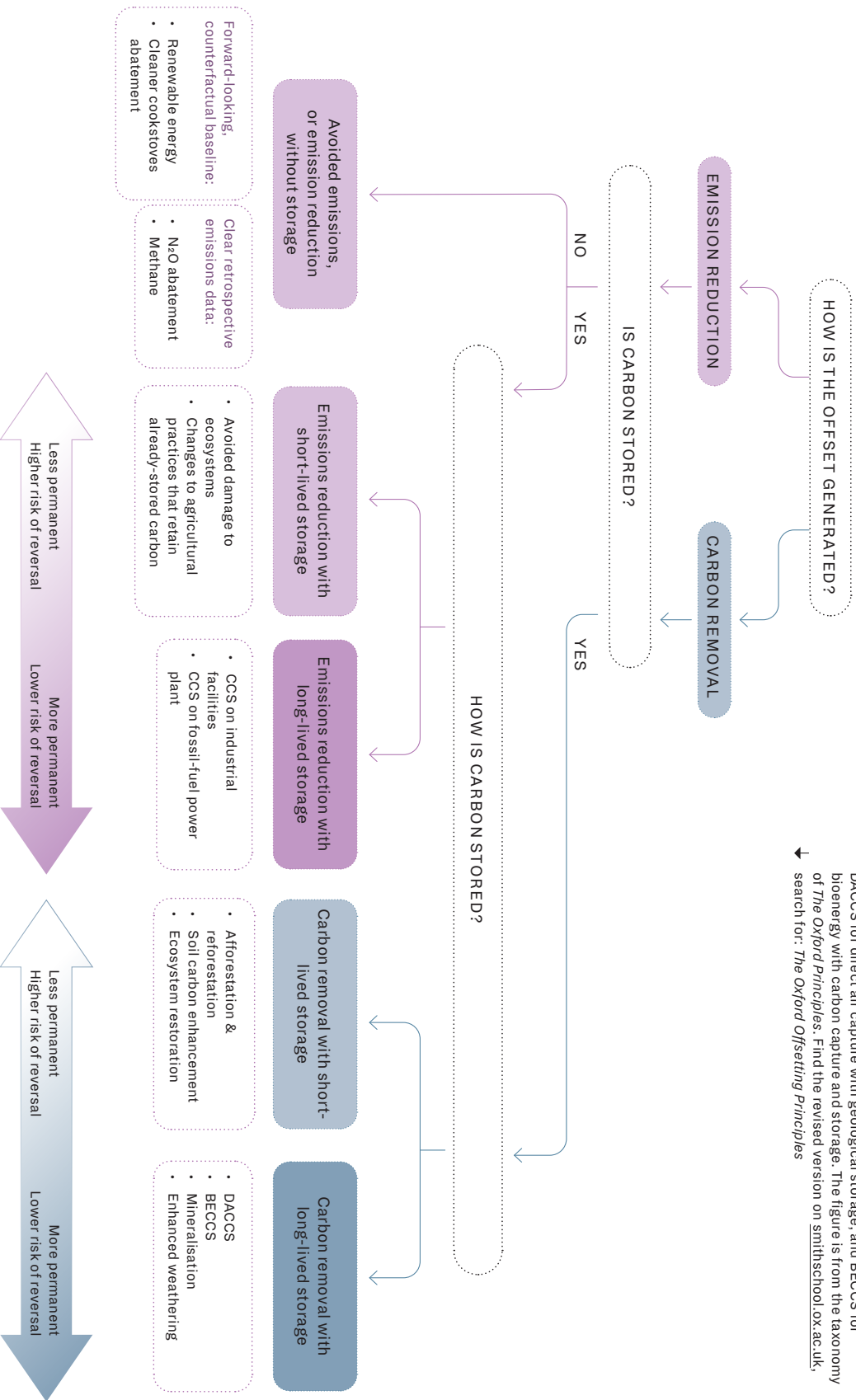
<sup>11</sup>

Find it on [ecosystemmarketplace.com](https://ecosystemmarketplace.com), search for: *State of the Voluntary Carbon Markets 2023 Report*

Healthy soil has the potential to capture carbon while being the foundation for sustainable food production. Photography: Wide Open Agriculture.  
↓



Taxonomy of carbon offsets according to *The Oxford Principles for Net Zero Aligned Carbon Offsetting, 2020*. CCS stands for carbon capture and storage, DACCS for direct air capture with geological storage, and BECCS for bioenergy with carbon capture and storage. The figure is from the taxonomy of *The Oxford Principles*. Find the revised version on [smithschool.ox.ac.uk](https://smithschool.ox.ac.uk), search for: *The Oxford Offsetting Principles*



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## CARBON STANDARDS, METHODOLOGIES, AND CERTIFICATION FRAMEWORKS

A governing body made up of **standard organisations** sets rules and protocols for certifying projects and verifying carbon credits. The organisations' carbon crediting programmes provide the framework for the development, implementation, and verification of carbon projects that contribute to climate change mitigation. For a project to be verified, developers must follow rules and explain how the project reduces or removes emissions. For large projects, it is best to use standard organisations that are endorsed by the International Carbon Reduction and Offset Alliance (ICROA) and ensure that the crediting programme is aligned with the core carbon principles of the Integrity Council for the Voluntary Carbon Market (VCM). Examples of standards and programmes include the Gold Standard, the Verified Carbon Standard (VCS), and Plan Vivo, all of which ensure robustness, transparency, credibility, and effectiveness for the creation of carbon credits through their ICROA endorsement.

A standard organisation also provides carbon project methodologies. A methodology is a set of rules and procedures that regulate how greenhouse gas emissions, their reduction, and removal components are quantified, verified, and monitored. Project methodologies are the core guidelines for accounting, quantifying, and monitoring the carbon benefits of project actions.<sup>12</sup> Later in this chapter, we will see how projects are developed following these methodologies and what requirements need to be fulfilled.

Clear rules stabilise the use of carbon projects to unlock investments for landscape restoration programmes. So, policymakers play a critical role in creating a favourable environment for carbon projects to de-risk their development by introducing clear legislation and frameworks for nature-based solutions. They also introduce PES into landscape climate planning for multi-jurisdictional projects. These help to avoid sudden modifications in carbon market policies.

<sup>12</sup> Find the *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance* on [wetlands.org](http://wetlands.org), search for: *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance*

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## HOW TO DEVELOP A 4 RETURNS CARBON PROJECT

Here we present an approach to guide landscape restoration practitioners and other project developers in the development of carbon projects. These can be either projects that are part of a 4 Returns landscape restoration, or standalone holistic projects that follow the main purpose of yielding the 4 Returns benefits.

While many projects are developed with climate change mitigation as the main goal, 4 Returns carbon projects primarily aim at generating natural, social, financial, and inspirational returns. In addition to cooling the climate, 4 Returns carbon projects foster the restoration of landscapes by improving soil health and

biodiversity, by generating employment opportunities and income for land users, and by inspiring them through unique business opportunities and innovative land use practices.

Through 4 Returns carbon projects, stakeholders gain a sense of being able to contribute to landscape restoration, while reducing the sensation of being largely dependent on external support; it incentivises them to become the main actors of the restoration process and improves their resource base.

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## PLANNING YOUR 4 RETURNS CARBON PROJECT

13

See the grouped projects of VCS on [verra.org](http://verra.org), go to: *Verified Carbon Standard* → *Grouped Projects*

14

Find the *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance* on [wetlands.org](http://wetlands.org), search for: *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance*

Landscape carbon projects require careful planning. For landscape restoration, it often makes sense to start with a small project and grow it to the ecosystem scale and eventually the entire landscape scale. Like this, landscape restoration practitioners or carbon project developers can review success in a pilot project and let it grow organically. The most common international carbon standards allow carbon projects to grow organically over time.<sup>13</sup>

Different carbon project types can be combined within individual ecosystems or across the ecosystems of a landscape. So, developing a landscape-scale carbon project requires a combined approach that integrates different methodologies across multiple ecosystems and scales.<sup>14</sup> It can range from targeting large, homogenous land areas dominated by one ecosystem, for example forest carbon, to combining the paddocks of numerous landowners with varying plot sizes in heterogenous land areas, for example agricultural carbon.

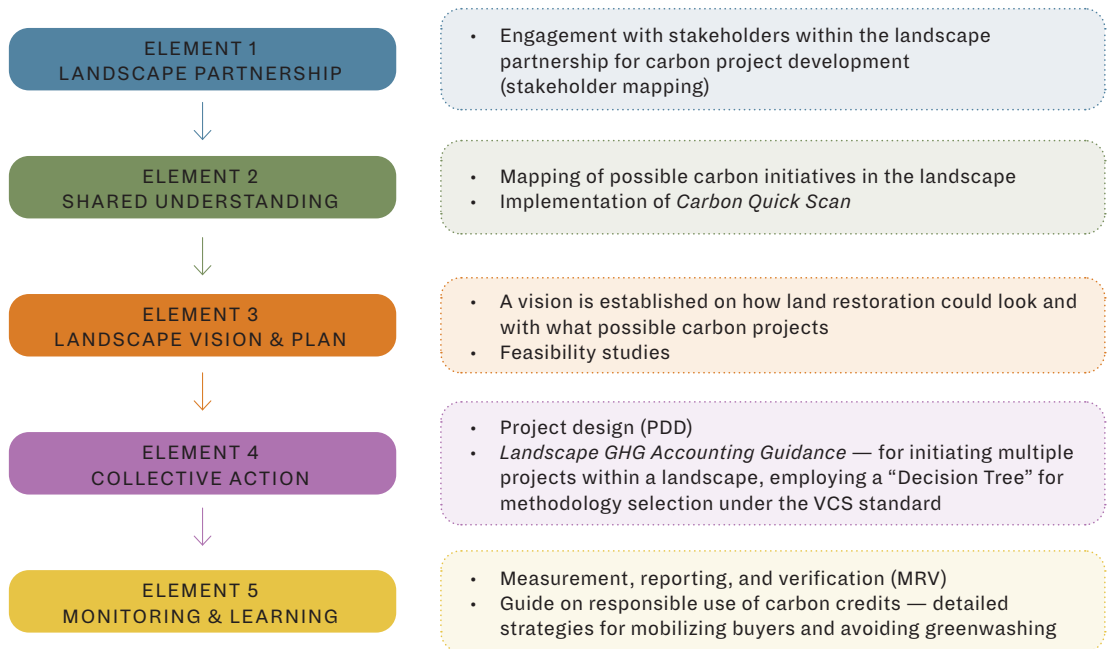
Developing a carbon project takes time. The carbon project cycle evolves from the preparation stage, which includes scoping with *Carbon Quick Scans*, through the feasibility stage to project certification. The implementation of the project, with recurring MRV cycles, covers the longest period. Each MRV cycle generates carbon credits that are traded and retired by organisations that seek to improve their greenhouse gas footprint.

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## DEVELOPING YOUR 4 RETURNS CARBON PROJECT

Your 4 Returns carbon project will be structured in line with the 5 Elements and integrated with the landscape development process. We refer to this integrated process as the *4 Returns Carbon Finance Framework*. This framework forms the basis for developing 4 Returns carbon projects in a landscape.

## 4 Returns Carbon Finance Framework methodology



↑ *4 Returns Carbon Finance Framework* along the 5 Elements. The tools mentioned in this figure are referenced in this chapter and in the *4 Returns Carbon Finance Framework* tool. Find the tool on [4returns.commonland.com](http://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *4 Returns Carbon Finance Framework*

### Element 1

**Landscape partnership.** The purpose of establishing a landscape partnership is to develop a strong coalition of stakeholders across different sectors and communities, based on a shared vision. Fruitful collaboration will be imperative for the success of your 4 Returns carbon finance project. Ideally, carbon project partnerships are integrated into existing landscape partnerships (see chapter *Cultivating a lasting partnership* [page 72]). Sometimes carbon project development can act as a lever for initiating new landscape partnerships.

### Element 2

**Shared understanding.** When developing a carbon project, the primary goal among landscape stakeholders should be to establish a shared understanding about the *4 Returns Framework* among all stakeholders involved — especially land users and landscape restoration practitioners. The focus should extend beyond theoretical frameworks and produce tangible outcomes, specifically fostering shared intentions among partners and crafting a dynamic stakeholder map that includes all groups having an interest in the project.

- ③ **Identifying stakeholders.** Stakeholders in carbon offset projects vary based on a project's location and scope. Local, regional, or national governments may be involved, alongside local communities, companies, NGOs, universities, forest users, and owners, as well as representatives from the agriculture sector. When the main actors have been identified, the next step is to map other carbon actions in the project area. At an early stage, it is fundamental to spot opportunities to align project objectives and assess the possibility of upscaling or interconnecting different areas. The chapter *Understanding the landscape* [page 119] includes useful tools for stakeholder mapping.
  
- ③ **Mapping carbon actions in the landscape.** The objective is to identify potential actions that impact carbon balance across the landscape. Depending on the project area, this could include combining different types of carbon credits from different types of project actions, calculated using combinations of methodologies explained in the *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance*.<sup>15</sup> Economy of scale is important because it helps make possible the big projects that would not be feasible at a smaller scale. You should explore project synergies on a landscape level to maximise the impact of carbon finance. For more guidance on mapping actions across the landscape, see chapter *Defining the landscape* [page 105].

<sup>15</sup> Find the *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance* on [wetlands.org](http://wetlands.org), search for: *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance*

<sup>16</sup> Find the *Carbon Quick Scan* on [4returns.commonland.com](http://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Carbon Quick Scan*

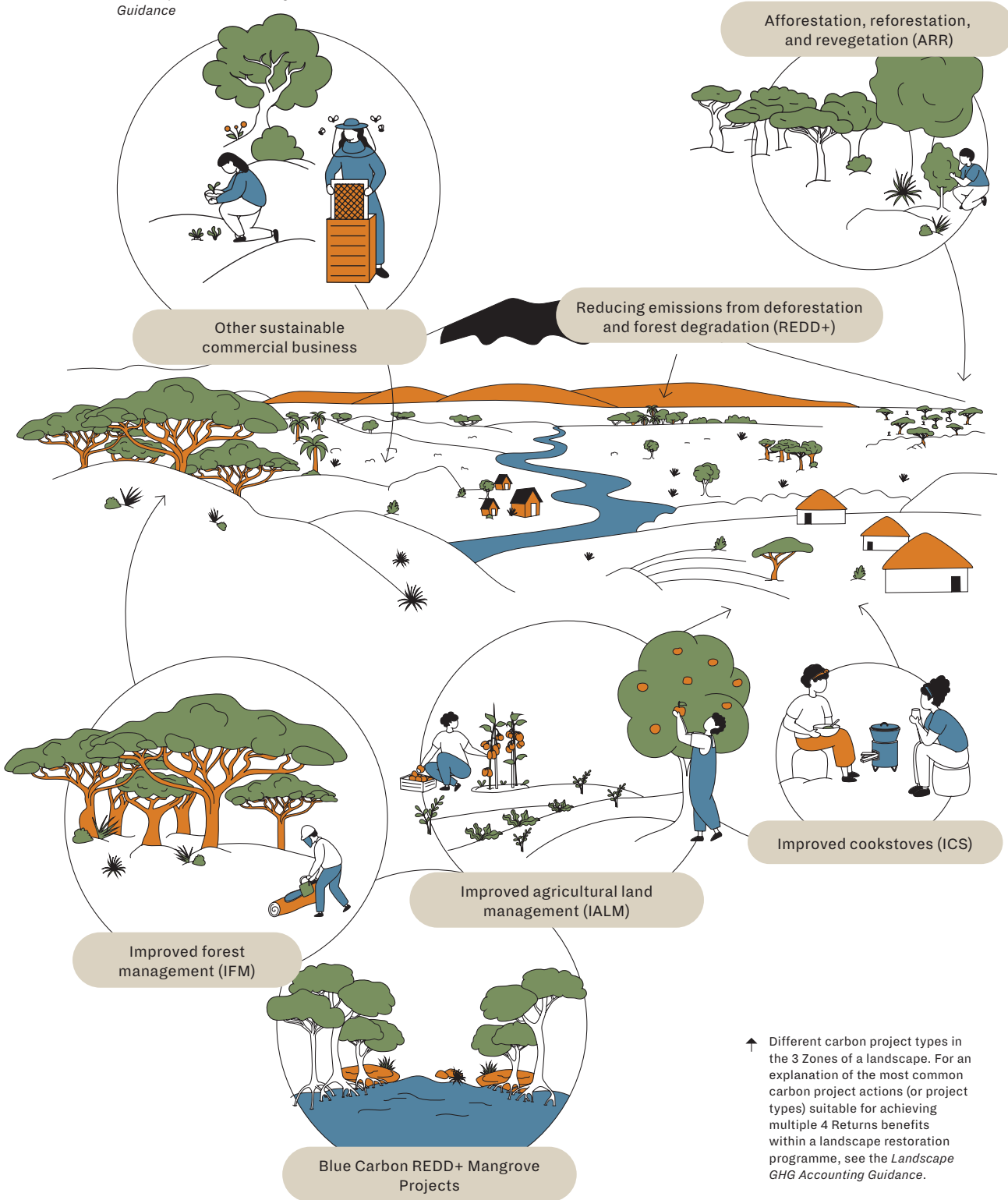
At this stage, the focus should be on identifying opportunities in a landscape, aiming to understand where it is best to direct efforts and investments towards carbon project development. A *Carbon Quick Scan*<sup>16</sup> will help you decide whether it is worth delving deeper into a specific carbon initiative. This tool is also useful in the landscape to compare different carbon project types. It assesses the enabling environment of potential carbon project types, and for each project type a separate scan is conducted.

*Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance* provides a detailed overview of methodologies for a wide range of carbon project types that can be used for 4 Returns carbon projects. The most relevant ones for landscape restoration are from the agriculture, forestry, and other land use (AFOLU) sectors, as well as the energy demand and efficiency sectors. AFOLU has the widest range of actions to choose from. All these project types involve different interventions in an existing system, such as the preservation or restoration of ecosystems (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) and wetlands restoration and conservation (WRC)), a change to a more sustainable land management practice or land use (improved agricultural land management (IALM), improved forest management (IFM), afforestation, reforestation, revegetation (ARR)) or the introduction of improved cookstoves (ICS) to households within communities in the landscape. More

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Find the *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance* on [wetlands.org](http://wetlands.org), search for: *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance*

project actions for restoring landscapes are detailed in the guidance document.<sup>17</sup>



↑ Different carbon project types in the 3 Zones of a landscape. For an explanation of the most common carbon project actions (or project types) suitable for achieving multiple 4 Returns benefits within a landscape restoration programme, see the *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance*.



The core components or items-to-be-assessed of a *Carbon Quick Scan* are shown below. Other components can be added if needed and the scan can be adapted to different cases individually. The most promising projects are selected based on a final score, which is the average of all components of equal weight. This quick scan is not stand-alone and should be used together with the other 4 Returns carbon tools to ensure a holistic approach.

① Host country acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation of the host country's willingness to embrace the initiative</li> <li>• Examination of national carbon trading policy</li> </ul>
② Land tenure and use rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scrutiny of policies and agreements regarding land tenure, use rights, and the ownership of carbon rights</li> <li>• Identification of land ownership and usage agreements, with a focus on formalised agreements and potential conflicts</li> </ul>
③ Stakeholder acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation of the receptiveness of organisations and local populations to collaborate, with a demonstration of added value to their interests</li> </ul>
④ Suitable project proponent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment of the proponent's capacity to initiate, design, implement, and sustain the carbon project. Which of the landscape partners is best placed to be the project proponent, given that carbon projects are long term (&gt; 30 years) and require professional project management and MRV?</li> <li>• Consider stakeholder participation in the project governance set-up.</li> </ul>
⑤ Carbon potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantify the carbon impact of the project on a high level based on the information listed in the <i>Carbon Quick Scan</i> template.</li> </ul>
⑥ "Additionality" or carbon impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preliminary estimate of the carbon impact of the project in comparison with the baseline scenario</li> <li>• Investigate if the emissions reductions or removals would occur without revenue from the sale of carbon credits.</li> </ul>
⑦ Permanence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preliminary examination of strategies ensuring the project endures and its long-term climate mitigation outcomes</li> </ul>
⑧ Business case is satisfactory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preliminary analysis of the cost-benefit ratio, encompassing intervention costs and carbon revenue benefits</li> </ul>

↑ Components of a *Carbon Quick Scan* assessment.

### Element 3

**Landscape vision and plan.** Progressing from the *Carbon Quick Scan*, you can now embark on crafting a landscape vision and landscape plan to regenerate degraded landscapes. Carbon projects play a crucial role in this journey, forming one part of the integrated landscape finance that will enable the landscape plan. It is best to combine carbon projects with other types of projects and sustainable businesses that contribute to the same vision and goals of landscape restoration.



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Find the *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance* on [wetlands.org](http://wetlands.org), search for: *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance*

It is time to conduct a *Feasibility Study*. As outlined in the *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance*,<sup>18</sup> this involves defining project boundaries, as well as establishing a baseline and project scenarios. Then you can estimate the carbon credit potential by comparing the most **additional** project scenario with the baseline. Additional refers to the reduction in the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> released into the environment that happens only as a result of trading carbon credits. Following-up on the *Carbon Quick Scan*, this section addresses key elements of a feasibility assessment, such as leakage, permanence, and additionality, in more detail. The study should also inform the choice of a suitable methodology for implementing the project. A carbon project is additional if the emissions reductions or removals would not have occurred without revenue from the sale of carbon credits. Additionality is intrinsic to the environmental integrity of a carbon project.

Feasibility assessments unfold in two stages: a preliminary exploration called the pre-feasibility assessment, which offers insights into basic project viability; and a comprehensive study, the full feasibility assessment, which contributes to the initial stages of project design and development. The feasibility assessment, with an estimate of available capital, must precede the project and can be used to attract investors or donors. A template for the presentation of the *Feasibility Study* for a 4 Returns carbon project can be found here.<sup>19</sup>

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Find the *Feasibility Study Report Template* on [4returns.commonland.com](http://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Feasibility Study*

A *Feasibility Study* has two main elements.

- ① The core element is the estimate of the amount of GHG reduction or carbon sequestration in natural ecosystems from the most additional and suitable project action that prevents the release of GHG, or actively removes CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from the atmosphere. The balance between reductions and removals is the final GHG balance for both baseline and project scenario, from which we calculate the total amount of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents (tCO<sub>2</sub>e) to become carbon credits. The revenue generated through these carbon credits is instrumental in covering project costs and ensuring project sustainability, for example future funding of MRV and project management costs.
- ② The second component of the *Feasibility Study* is financial viability, a critical feature of project success! This is assessed by calculating the expected revenue from carbon credits, estimating implementation and transaction costs, and exploring other funding streams. Inclusivity is key, so it's important to identify all stakeholders and ensure their voices are heard. Legal and land tenure assessments are undertaken to navigate potential risks.

#### Element 4

**Collective action.** At this stage, project implementation should be the focus. The *Carbon Quick Scan* will have pinpointed actions that will render high carbon benefits, and the *Feasibility Study* provides definite figures for expected credits and the cost and benefit of the project.

A successful carbon project requires actions on the ground to ensure project interventions are implemented well. To define the roles and responsibilities of such a complex, multi-stakeholder process, and to ensure that requirements defined by the standards for independent verification are met, agreements and contracts between the project owner and implementing partners need to be set up.

A project design document is central to project certification. It details the various aspects of a carbon project and follows a structure. It entails the calculated estimate of the amount of greenhouse gas emissions avoided, reduced, or removed from the atmosphere, the assessment of additionality, and a project monitoring plan, including the approach used for measurement, reporting, and verification. This official document leads to project certification after successful validation through the carbon standard hosting the GHG programme. To ease the process, standard organisations usually provide templates for project developers. Verra has created a template for a project design document of the Verified Carbon Standard.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup>

Find it on [verra.org](https://verra.org), go to:  
Programs → Verified Carbon  
Standard → VCS Program Details  
→ Rules and Requirements

#### Element 5

**Monitoring and learning.** Measurement, reporting, and verification (MRV) is an important link within the carbon project development chain because it proves that the emission reductions are real and can become credits. Project developers need to conduct MRV repeatedly throughout the entire project. Within a carbon project, the crediting cycle is repeated every one to five years, depending on the type of eligible action, the type of carbon pool, and carbon emissions which are measured. Some carbon project types require different MRV cycles in one project, for example IALM. MRV is necessary to provide a scientific basis for quantifying the amount of emission avoidance, reduction, or removal, resulting from an eligible activity implemented during a carbon project's lifetime.

It consists of three separate parts, all of which are milestones toward the successful creation of real, verified carbon credits.

- ① Measuring is the method by which greenhouse gases avoided, reduced, or removed, and the CO<sub>2</sub> sequestered in different pools, are quantified using state-of-the-art methods. VCS prescribes **stratified random sampling** (stratified sampling is a method of sampling from a population that can be partitioned into subpopulations) to collect data for such assessments, but often also Tier 2 emission factors should be used. You could take a pure measurement approach (measure and re-measure) or combine a quantification model (measure and model) into the project MRV.
- ② Reporting refers to analysing, summarising, and describing results in a format suitable for presenting the amount of carbon credits generated within the current monitoring cycle. This is usually done with a verification report, which is submitted to the standard organisation.
- ③ The last step involves verification of the results, checking their correctness, first by an external, independent auditor, and finally by the auditing team of the carbon standard organisation.

The amount of carbon credits is determined by each MRV cycle. The verification report details how the specific amount of GHG reduced for each cycle was achieved. The credits are then stored in the registry of the carbon standard organisation and interested organisations can purchase them to offset residual emissions resulting from their activities. Increasingly, buyers want to be sure they are buying carbon credits that create the expected impact. Our guiding document on responsible use of carbon credits<sup>21</sup> helps buyers navigate the complex world of available carbon projects and offers criteria to ensure real, verified carbon credits of high quality.

<sup>21</sup> Find the guiding document *Responsible use of carbon credits: how project developers can mobilise buyers* on [vcm-gd.org](http://vcm-gd.org), search for: *Responsible Use of Carbon Credits*

### Methods of measuring carbon in vegetation and soils

There are different ways of measuring the carbon present in vegetation and soils. The traditional method involves directly measuring carbon or greenhouse gases using a sampling scheme and emission factors, with subsequent measurement using standardised methods in a laboratory. An emerging technology enables the measurement of carbon by analyzing various light spectra reflected from surfaces covered with vegetation or bare soil. We distinguish between “proximal” and “remote” sensing.

**Proximal sensing** involves using a handheld device to scan the surface of an area measuring the amount of reflection from emitted near- or visible-infrared spectra of light (NIR or VIR). An example of measuring soil carbon using proximal sensing can be found in the webinar *Advanced MRV for Soil Carbon*.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Find the webinar on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), search for: *Advanced MRV for Soil Carbon*

23  
Find out more on  
[globalmangrovetwatch.org](http://globalmangrovetwatch.org)

**Remote sensing** works similarly but on a much larger scale. It is the science of obtaining information about an object or an area from a far distance. Typically, information is gathered from aircraft or satellites. Numerous remote sensing products exist, all derived from remote sensors which detect the energy that is reflected from Earth (for example, Global Mangrove Watch<sup>23</sup>). Monitoring natural resources is one of the main applications of remote sensing, and while it has been proven to work relatively well for above-ground carbon pools, there is current research directed at making the technology applicable for monitoring soil organic carbon reliably. When using remote sensing for carbon projects, it is important to source remote sensing products from the most reliable satellites and to utilise automated data processing and analysis to handle large datasets.

Landscape restoration stakeholders and partners usually are interested in how successful the restoration programme and its actions are. For a 4 Returns landscape initiative, a set of indicators need to be collected, analysed, and presented (see chapter *Monitoring the 4 Returns* [page 282]). The MRV process can be combined easily with a landscape restoration monitoring plan.

**Digital soil mapping** is the state-of-the-art approach to establishing robust soil carbon maps and can also be used to map out carbon in above-ground vegetation, such as for ARR projects. More information can be found in the *Soil Organic Carbon Mapping Cookbook*.<sup>24</sup>

24  
FAO, 2018. *Soil Organic Carbon Mapping Cookbook*. Y. Yigini, G.F. Olmedo, S. Reiter, R. Baritz, K. Viatkin, and R.R. Vargas, (Eds). 2nd Edition, Rome. Find it on [fao.org](http://fao.org), search for: *SOC Mapping Cookbook*



The report *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance: Developing landscape-scale carbon projects*, co-authored by Wetlands International and Conservation International in collaboration with Commonland, the Landscape Finance Lab, and Silvestrum in 2024, guides the reader through the complexity associated with developing carbon projects at a landscape scale.

→ [wetlands.org](https://wetlands.org),  
search for: *Landscape GHG Accounting Guidance*

The report *Responsible use of carbon credits: how project developers can mobilise buyers*, developed by Wetlands International, in collaboration with Commonland and the Landscape Finance Lab, and published by the VCM Global Dialogue in 2023, provides due diligence guidance to support more equitable voluntary carbon markets.

→ [vcm-gd.org](https://vcm-gd.org),  
search for: *Responsible Use of Carbon Credits*

In 2022, Commonland and Wij.land spoke in a public session about the potential of a carbon market in landscape restoration. In *Fourteen pressing questions and answers on the carbon market*, you can find the most frequently asked questions from this session, including their answers.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Fourteen Pressing Questions and Answers on the Carbon Market*

*The Carbon Offset Guide* is a useful resource for all those wishing to understand how carbon offsetting works in detail. It is a joint effort of the Stockholm Environment Institute and the Greenhouse Gas Management Institute.

→ [offsetguide.org](https://offsetguide.org)

Several protocols for crediting soil carbon have emerged to tackle the topics complexity. To help clarify today's market, CarbonPlan systematically reviewed 14 soil carbon protocols on 33 technical dimensions. In *A buyer's guide to soil carbon offsets*, you will find the results of this research and help for evaluating your soil carbon offsetting choices.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *A Buyer's Guide to Soil Carbon Offsets*

*The Oxford Principles for Net Zero Aligned Carbon Offsetting* detail best practice principles which should be applied with carbon offsetting in organisations.

→ [smithschool.ox.ac.uk](https://smithschool.ox.ac.uk),  
search for: *The Oxford Principles for Net Zero Aligned Carbon Offsetting*

The 2022 publication *Voluntary Carbon Markets for Wetland Conservation and Restoration* by Wetlands International is an invaluable reference for those involved in environmental conservation efforts.

→ [wetlands.org](https://wetlands.org),  
search for: *The Voluntary Carbon Market for Safeguarding and Restoring our Wetlands*

*Soil C Sequestration as a Biological Negative Emission Strategy* summarises the global potential of improved agricultural land management for soil carbon sequestration.

→ [frontiersin.org](https://frontiersin.org),  
search for: *Soil C Sequestration as a Biological Negative Emission Strategy*

An accurate definition of the terms commonly used in relation to agricultural carbon project types can be found in the publication *Carbon sequestration in soils and climate change mitigation — Definitions and pitfalls* by Global Change Biology.

→ [onlinelibrary.wiley.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com),  
search for: *Carbon Sequestration in Soils and Climate Change Mitigation*

*Methods for Measuring Greenhouse Gas Balances and Evaluating Mitigation Options in Smallholder Agriculture* is the ultimate guide to measure, estimate, model, and assess greenhouse gas emissions, as well as to scale up from points to farms and landscapes.

→ [samples.ccafs.cgiar.org](https://samples.ccafs.cgiar.org),  
go to: *Measurement Methods*

For an overview of the usefulness and robustness of novel methods for MRV in carbon projects watch the webinar *Advanced MRV for Soil Carbon*.

→ [youtube.com](https://youtube.com),  
search for: *Advanced MRV for Soil Carbon*

## LANDSCAPE STORY: CARBON CREDITS AND COOKING STOVES

The Simalaha African Improved Cookstove Programme is combating deforestation in the largest cross-border conservation area on earth, the Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier (KAZA) Conservation Area. The flagship project was launched in 2020, providing 10,000 fuel-efficient cooking stoves to low-income households in the Simalaha Community Conservancy with a loan from the COMON Foundation. It has been a resounding success. By reducing the demand for firewood, they are not only safeguarding the forest but also improving the lives of those who depend on it.

For communities in and around the Simalaha Community Conservancy, cooking using wood or charcoal on open fires is a way of life. However, this practice poses significant health risks due to the inhalation of smoke, and it also places a heavy burden on women who spend countless hours collecting firewood each day. The mission is to help conserve forests by decreasing the amount of wood used as cooking fuel, while simultaneously providing the community with a sustainable revenue stream through carbon credits. Their approach not only addresses environmental challenges but also improves the quality of life for rural women.

In addition to these social and environmental wins, the project now also promises to help lift people out of poverty through a new stream of income opportunity. The economic objective of this initiative involves turning any reductions in greenhouse gas emissions into carbon credits, which can in turn be “sold” for a monetary return to the communities.

⑥  
Learn more on [commonland.com](https://www.commonland.com), search for: *African Improved Cookstoves Programme*

Commonland is financing and programme managing the project as a carbon project developer with Peace Parks Foundation implementing the project on the ground. The project can be extended twice, bringing the total possible duration to 15 years. This extended timeline will allow this project to continue mitigating deforestation and supporting local communities in the long term.<sup>⑥</sup>



→  
A member of the Simalaha Community Conservancy uses an improved cooking stove.



# Regenerative business

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- ➔ Regenerative businesses have the power to transform economic activity towards restoring the land.
- ➔ Business strategies for landscape restoration include analysing farm business models, collective bargaining, vertical value chain integration, value addition, and creating markets for regenerative products.
- ➔ The main steps to setting up a 4 Returns business include mapping existing businesses and value chains in the landscape, identifying needs and opportunities not met by current market dynamics, exploring historical economic trends for insights, developing a business idea focusing on solving mapped challenges, and scaling up.
- ➔ Lessons learned include: start small and ensure the business model works before scaling; validate assumptions; consider branding and marketing strategies; and the importance of flexibility, quality, landscape partnerships, and co-innovation networks.

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## Regenerative business is a catalyst

Long-term grant funding is vital for kickstarting landscape restoration. However, only limited private (philanthropic) and public (government) funds are available, and they cannot sustain restoration projects indefinitely. To accelerate transition and create long-lasting outcomes, attractive regenerative business cases are needed to mobilise investment, enable sustainable financing, and support the work. A successful regenerative business can contribute to all 4 Returns: inspiration, social, natural, and financial.

Our current economic system does not serve the regeneration so desperately needed for our landscapes, communities, and planet to thrive. As a regenerative business, you are part of a movement that is building a new system that we call the regenerative economy. Rather than extracting from the land and each other,

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Find it on  
[respond-accelerator.com](https://respond-accelerator.com),  
go to: *Regenerative Economy*

this approach emphasises producing, consuming, and redistributing resources in harmony with the planet. To learn more about what this means, and how you can contribute to this new system as a regenerative business, we recommend *The Regenerative Economy Report* from Circle Economy.<sup>25</sup>

Regenerative businesses can be found in a variety of sectors — regenerative agriculture, agroforestry, real estate, tourism, carbon, and water services — to name a few. On a wider scale, regenerative business transforms economic activity, so the economy itself turns from degrading land to restoring it.

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## Setting up a 4 Returns business

In this section, we delve into the steps of regenerative business development, drawing insights from the experiences of others who have ventured into 4 Returns business development. While not exhaustive, the guide focuses on aspects specific to the 4 Returns context, providing practical guidance for navigating the complexities of creating businesses that generate returns for nature, society, economy, and inspiration.

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### MAP BUSINESSES AND VALUE CHAINS

The first step is mapping existing businesses and value chains in the landscape. This helps identify allies, opportunities for collaboration, as well as gaps and needs. Look at the business activities taking place across your landscape. Map them by sector and activity. Are there natural allies for landscape restoration?

Spot a need that is not being filled by the market or find an existing business that can be altered to fulfil the 4 Returns. Value chains connected to farms are worth looking into — especially to detect business challenges that can be overcome. Other sectors to explore include tourism, logging, and PES schemes, such as water provision or carbon credits.

We also recommend investigating the history of how the economy in the landscape developed; this can deliver valuable insights into what markets and drivers have influenced the landscape.

Many strategies can release revenue from landscape restoration. The following are examples currently used in 4 Returns landscapes across the world.

- **Farm business model.** Work with farmers to analyse the farm as a business. Regenerative agriculture can save costs, increase productivity, and diversify income — improving the farm’s business model.
- **Collective bargaining.** Individual farmers often have little bargaining power compared with the buyers of their products. Support farmers in organising to arrange better terms so they can invest in rehabilitation.
- **Vertical value chain integration.** In most agricultural value chains, only a small fraction of the price a consumer pays ends up with the farmer. By shortening the route to the consumer, additional revenue can be generated for the farmer. This is known as vertical value chain integration. It cuts out middle actors.
- **Value addition.** Another strategy is to add value to raw materials through processing or packaging them. More of the ultimate retail value is then captured for the farmer or producer.
- **Creating markets.** Smart ways of packaging and selling products — such as teas or botanical extracts from agroforestry — can create demand for regenerative products. There currently is no market for a lot of regeneratively produced products. If consumers can be convinced to pay a premium for regenerative products over conventional products this can also create financial incentives to regenerate the landscape. Read more about this in the story *Entrepreneurs accelerate the transition* by Willemijn de longh.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup>  
Find the story on  
[4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Entrepreneurs  
Accelerate the Transition*

To generate revenue, many of the principles of good practice in regular business apply. What sets our mission apart is landscape restoration and the purpose-driven heart of the 4 Returns.





↑ Honeybush tea after processing in the Langkloof, South Africa. Photography: Reblex photography, Commonland.

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## DEVELOP A BUSINESS IDEA

<sup>27</sup> Find the toolkit on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Innovation Test and Prototype Toolkit*

<sup>28</sup> Find the innovation grid on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *The Business Model Innovation Grid*

This initial scoping prepares you for coming up with a business idea. Address one or more of the challenges that have been mapped, reducing the negative impact, and increasing the positive impact. Simpler is better. Generally, the less you must change, the greater the chance of success. The innovation test and prototype toolkit and the business model innovation grid are useful design and workshop tools for this step.<sup>27</sup><sup>28</sup>

## VALIDATE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Look closely at the idea you have developed. What assumptions have you made that are critical to its success? In this step, you'll research the real-world situation underpinning these assumptions. Validate the assumptions underlying your assessment of:

- The problem
- The product
- The market
- The willingness to pay



### MORE INFORMATION

Find more information on these steps in the *Lean Validation Playbook*.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *The Lean Validation Playbook*

If your idea involves regenerative agriculture or landscape restoration, the article *Building the investment case for business-driven landscape restoration* published in SER News can be a useful resource to show the validity of investing in ecosystem restoration.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Building the Investment Case for Business-Driven Landscape Restoration*

## START BUILDING THE BUSINESS MODEL

A business model canvas can help you turn your business idea into a business model. The 4 Returns landscape business model canvas<sup>29</sup> helps you do this in the context of a landscape vision. It has two layers:

<sup>29</sup> Find the the canvas on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *4 Returns Landscape Business Model Canvas*

- A landscape layer to zoom out and see the needs and opportunities of the landscape
- A business layer to focus on your business's core, with the landscape vision in mind



You don't need to fill in all the boxes of the business model canvas at once but seeing these together may help "put the puzzle together".

↑ The Regeneration Academy hosted a one-week regeneration crash course in 2021, which included a workshop about business model design that used the 4 Returns landscape business model canvas. Photography: Regeneration Academy.

From your business model canvas, identify the skills and resources you need, and which are still missing in your business. Think about a strategy to fill these gaps. One way to add skills and resources is to find key partners to work with. Map and stay aware of the business cases of your partners (farmers, processors, investors). How can you be of value to them?

## “Don’t set up a new business, improve an existing one!”

GIJS BOERS, Founder & CEO of Grounded

Start small and create good quality. Make the business work, before scaling it up. After launch, making the business work is often the most difficult phase. 90% of start-ups fail. Steer away from high capital investments and lease existing capital, such as processing machinery, if needed. Grow organically with your supply and demand.<sup>30</sup>

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Read more about focusing on making the business work on [4returns.commonland.com](http://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Business for Landscape Restoration Means Being Unconventional*

Making a business work starts with a good idea but depends on the people doing the hard work. Having the right people on the team makes or breaks a business.

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Find out more on [ec.europa.eu](http://ec.europa.eu), search for: *The European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework*

The *EntreComp Framework*<sup>31</sup> by the European Commission offers a comprehensive description of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that people need to be entrepreneurial and create financial, cultural, or social value for others.

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Find it on [coursera.org](http://coursera.org), search for: *Entrepreneurial Competencies for Landscape Restoration*

The Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) *Entrepreneurial competencies for landscape restoration*<sup>32</sup>, by RSM and Commonland will help you to become an entrepreneurial professional by developing and cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset yourself.

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### SCALING UP

How and when to scale are issues that we won’t explore further here. The essential point is that only where revenue streams are proven, you should consider scaling.

The regenerative story is powerful, and consumers connect with it. It means businesses can sometimes achieve product price premiums which provide an incentive for farmers to join and position their products in a different market.

Create a brand that sets you apart from the competition. Marketing needs to address two pillars: the quality of the product itself, and the impact the product has on the consumer (making it desirable) and on the producer (showing it is a responsible product).

33  
Find the tools on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Innovation Management Tools*

In many of these steps, from problem discovery to strategy to business model validation, the innovation tools<sup>33</sup> by the Board of Innovation may be useful.

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## Lessons learned from 4 Returns businesses

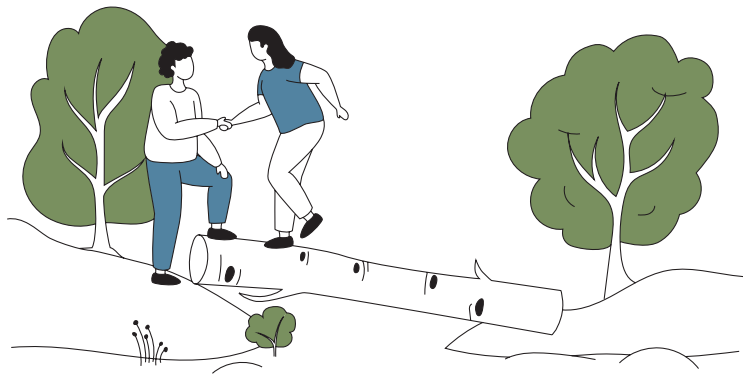
34  
Find the *5 lessons for business-driven landscape restoration* on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *5 Lessons for Business-Driven Landscape Restoration*

A group of 4 Returns implementing organisations (AlVeIAI, Wij. land, Wide Open Agriculture, Living Lands, and Grounded) went on a collective learning journey in 2021 to explore what they have discovered in seven years of business development using the 4 Returns approach. Find below their main lessons learned. To dive deeper, you can find five stories<sup>34</sup> on the 4 Returns platform by Commonland's Willemijn de Jongh that capture the topics discussed in more detail.

- ➔ It can be much easier to improve existing businesses — which already have clientele, suppliers, a skilled team, an office, licences, bank accounts, and more — than to set up new ones from scratch.
- ➔ Don't overextend. Setting up a business or changing a business involves a lot of assumptions. Start by confirming those assumptions at a small scale first; it is much easier to adapt based on the lessons you learn and much cheaper should things go wrong.
- ➔ Stay flexible because circumstances change frequently. You need to be wary of these changes and adapt to them.
- ➔ Never forsake quality; customers will not come back, even if you have a great impact story, if you don't have the quality to back it up.

- Be part of a landscape partnership. Making money is not the sole purpose of a 4 Returns business, but those businesses must be viable. That's why many 4 Returns businesses operate inside a landscape partnership where each organisation works from its strength towards a common vision. In a landscape partnership, other organisations can absorb the costs of, for example, broad stakeholder engagement or physical restoration work, with businesses left to focus on 4 Returns actions that can turn a profit. Remember — an unviable 4 Returns business makes no impact.
  
- It can also be interesting to join an entrepreneurial co-innovation network. Wij.land and AlVelAI, for instance, have set up self-propelling co-innovation networks of business partners who develop regenerative businesses. Read about the lessons learned about co-innovation networks in landscapes on the 4 Returns platform.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Find the lessons on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Nurture a Network of Co-Innovation*



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## Wrap-up

Regenerative business has the potential to catalyse the transformation of a landscape. Setting up a business, and making it work in competitive markets and value chains, is not easy. But it is an unmissable part of a holistic transformation and contributes to a regenerative economy.



## LANDSCAPE STORY: THE FIRST STOCK LISTED 4 RETURNS BUSINESS

Wide Open Agriculture partnered with Commonland in 2015 to develop and deliver on the 4 Returns for Southwest Australia. It became the world's first globally listed company that uses the *4 Returns Framework*, with a market capitalisation of €26 million as of February 2024. It is now Western Australia's leading regenerative food and agriculture company. In 2019, it launched its commercial food brand, Dirty Clean Food, to build a new channel for consumers to support regenerative farming. It successfully disrupted the food and agriculture market in Western Australia and is expanding its reach globally.

A key learning for both Wide Open Agriculture and Commonland has been that regenerative businesses are just part of the 4 Returns journey. Since 2018, the network of 4 Returns partners in Southwest Australia has grown to include Indigenous organisations, conservation entities, universities, and social impact initiatives, that, alongside Wide Open Agriculture, share a vision for the landscape. The shared vision for this landscape partnership includes putting people and land first when it comes to economic development.

This network of partners approach allows Wide Open Agriculture (WOA)<sup>®</sup> to focus on its key business goal of becoming financially viable, while its social and environmental impact adds value and differentiates it from the competition.



Learn more about WOA on [wideopenagriculture.com.au](https://wideopenagriculture.com.au)



OatUp regenerative oatmilk from Dirty Clean Food. Photography: Wide Open Agriculture.



## LEARN MORE

In the report *Business for Sustainable Landscapes* by the *Landscapes for People, Food, and Nature* initiative, you will learn more about the status quo and opportunities for business participation in landscape partnerships.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Business for Sustainable Landscapes*

An open-hearted account of the challenges that Grounded faced in the Baviaanskloof can be found in this 3-part blog series.

→ [grounded.co.za/baviaanskloof-soil-restoration](https://grounded.co.za/baviaanskloof-soil-restoration)

If you want to learn more about the steps and processes of setting up a business with a landscape approach, follow this series of MOOCs by RSM and Commonland: *Sustainable Landscape Restoration with a Business Approach*, *Business Model Innovation for Sustainable Landscape Restoration*, and *Entrepreneurial Competencies for Landscape Restoration*.

→ [coursera.org](https://coursera.org),  
search for:

- *Landscape Restoration Business Approach*
- *BMI Sustainable Landscape Restoration*
- *Entrepreneurial Competencies Landscape Restoration*

*The WWF Landscape Sourcing Report: Sustainable Business Using the Landscape Approach* makes a case for the private sector to adopt landscape approaches to sustainably strengthen and increase cost-effectiveness within supply chains.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *The WWF Landscape Sourcing Report: Sustainable Business Using the Landscape Approach*

FAO's e-learning course on *Developing bankable business plans for sustainable forest-based enterprises* aims to improve participants' understanding of investments and financing to facilitate socioeconomic benefits for stakeholders in forest value chains.

→ [fao.org](https://fao.org),  
search for: *Developing Bankable Business Plans*

# Regenerative agriculture

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- ➔ Regenerative agriculture can be a valuable part of a landscape restoration initiative. Its holistic view matches well with the *4 Returns Framework*.
- ➔ The movement also has its “growing pains”, including lack of clarity about definitions, evidence gaps, and challenges in the market infrastructure.
- ➔ However, there is a lot of energy in the movement, and significant steps are being taken to address the evidence and market barriers. Adapting to your context and learning from each other’s experiences will be essential when adopting regenerative agriculture as part of your wider landscape restoration initiative.

Five billion hectares of the world’s land area is dedicated to agriculture — that’s 38% of the global land surface and half of the world’s habitable land.<sup>36</sup> Transforming agriculture so that it contributes to regeneration of the land is therefore an essential part of restoring landscapes.

A long-dominant view in agriculture — rooted in industrialisation — sees the farm as a factory. This view emphasises the maximisation of yield per hectare, efficiency, and input-output thinking.

<sup>36</sup>

Find more information on [ourworldindata.org](https://ourworldindata.org), search for: *Key Insights on the Environmental Impacts of Food*

Many conventional agricultural practices, therefore, prioritise the use of synthetic inputs, monoculture cropping systems, and intensive tillage and water use, which can lead to soil degradation and negative impacts on the landscape.

The growing movement of regenerative agriculture challenges this view. It recognises the farm as an ecosystem that promotes yields for the long term without degrading the land and with less greenhouse gas emissions. It promotes adoption of practices that promote soil health and biodiversity, conserve water and ecosystem balance, and leave the land a little better each year. The harmonious relationship created between agriculture and nature leads to healthier soils, increased yields, and a more resilient landscape. Agriculture can help transform damaged landscapes into thriving ecosystems.

Regenerative agriculture addresses the causes of degradation and recognises the interdependence of social, economic, and ecological systems. This includes empowering local communities, promoting food security, and supporting the preservation of traditional knowledge and practices. That is why it fits so neatly into the *4 Returns Framework*.

Regenerative agriculture, including approaches such as agroforestry and rotational grazing, are powerful tools for the combined zone. Transitioning land from conventional to regenerative farming practices can create a buffer zone where natural, economic, and cultural ecosystems can coexist.

Regenerative agriculture is a large, rapidly developing field with lots of existing resources. This chapter will help you navigate the context and relevance of regenerative agriculture for holistic landscape restoration. We will cover its history, main principles and practices, and some key lessons learned.

“For us, advocating the benefits of regenerative agriculture and supporting regenerative farmers is our way of creating positive change.”

BEN COLE, former Managing director, current Non executive director,  
Wide Open Agriculture



↑ Arantza Ilarduya de Diego collecting almonds for research at Cortijo el Ciruelo, Altiplano Estepario, Spain, in 2022. Photography: Gabriela Hengeveld, Commonland.

## Historic concept

37

See the following story on [thecounter.org](https://thecounter.org), search for: *Regenerative Agriculture Needs a Reckoning*

38

Find out more on [wri.org](https://wri.org), search for: *Regenerative Agriculture: Good for Soil Health, But Limited Potential to Mitigate Climate Change*

The principles and practices of regenerative agriculture are not new. Many of them have been used by Indigenous cultures for centuries, working in harmony with the natural world rather than against it to produce food sustainably and regeneratively.<sup>37</sup>

The term “regenerative agriculture” has its roots in the 1970s when a group of farmers and researchers began to explore alternative approaches to conventional agriculture. In the 1980s, Robert Rodale was the first to propose regenerative organic agriculture as a “beyond sustainable” approach.

In the decades that followed, the regenerative agriculture movement has grown and evolved. Today it has gained widespread recognition and support from farmers, researchers, policymakers, and consumers. An increasing body of research demonstrates the benefits of these practices to soil health<sup>38</sup> and several ecosystem services.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup>  
Find out more on [sciencedirect.com](https://www.sciencedirect.com), search for: *Agroecological Management Improves Ecosystem Services in Almond Orchards Within One Year*

<sup>40</sup>  
Read more on [kisstheground.com](https://www.kisstheground.com)

<sup>41</sup>  
Find out more on [generalmills.com](https://www.generalmills.com), search for: *Keeping Our Planet Healthy*

<sup>42</sup>  
Find out more on [pepsico.com](https://www.pepsico.com), search for: *PepsiCo Announces 2030 Goal to Scale Regenerative Farming Practices*

<sup>43</sup>  
Find out more on: [nestle.com](https://www.nestle.com), go to: *Sustainability → Nature → Regenerative Agriculture*

<sup>44</sup>  
Find out more on [unilever.com](https://www.unilever.com), go-to: *Planet & Society → Protect and Regenerate Nature → Regenerating Nature*

<sup>45</sup>  
Find out more on [impact.economist.com/sustainability](https://www.impact.economist.com/sustainability), search for: *Regenerative Agriculture Oversold*

<sup>46</sup>  
Read the lessons on [4returns.commonland.com](https://www.4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Regenerative Agriculture: 6 Biggest Lessons Learned*

<sup>47</sup>  
Read more on [regen10.org](https://www.regen10.org)

Recently, the Kiss the Ground documentary,<sup>40</sup> and the adoption of regenerative agriculture by large corporations, such as General Mills,<sup>41</sup> PepsiCo,<sup>42</sup> Nestle,<sup>43</sup> and Unilever,<sup>44</sup> have brought the subject to a larger audience. While this is promising for the scaling potential of regenerative agriculture, it also raises concerns about potential greenwashing and lack of supporting evidence.<sup>45</sup> Read more about the evidence gap on the 4 Returns platform.<sup>46</sup> Fortunately, efforts are being undertaken to gain understanding and agreement in the field. An example is the Regen10 network,<sup>47</sup> which is bringing together a diverse range of stakeholders to build evidence and provide tools and guidance. They are developing an outcomes-based framework that is holistic, agnostic of practices, and designed with farmers for use by farmers.



## Agroecology, agroforestry, permaculture: seeing the trees through the forest

48  
Titttonell, P., El Mujtar, V., Felix, G., Kebede, Y., Laborda, L., Luján Soto, R., & de Vente, J., 2022. *Regenerative agriculture — agroecology without politics?* *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, Vol. 6. Find it on [frontiersin.org](https://www.frontiersin.org), search for: *Regenerative Agriculture — Agroecology Without Politics?*

Regenerative agriculture is not the only way to prevent harm, or to restore nature. There are many different approaches and sub-movements, each with its own unique perspectives and practices, such as organic farming, biodynamic agriculture, conservation agriculture, agroforestry, and holistic grazing.

Agroecology is an area often equated with regenerative agriculture. However, it frequently differs in its political position on social issues such as rights and access to natural resources. Some regenerative agriculture projects, such as those initiated by corporate players, do not take a position. For others, however, it can be a central theme of their project. The article *Regenerative agriculture — agroecology without politics?*<sup>48</sup> explains this in more detail.

What binds all these approaches together is that they restore the relationship between agriculture and nature. Regenerative agriculture is different for everyone, so everyone needs to figure it out for themselves and find their own place in it.

Swales on the contours of La Junquera, a farm in Spain. Swales are a regenerative method designed to slow the flow of water and halt soil erosion. They also act as a biodiversity corridor. Photography: ↓ Gabriela Hengeveld, Commonland.



→  
Ponds on regenerative farm La Junquera in Spain. Ponds act as small dams to support swales. All ponds offer support for biodiversity because the presence of even a small amount of water, or wet mud, creates habitat for wildlife — essential during the dry season. Photography: Tom Lovett, Commonland.



## Principles and practices

<sup>49</sup>  
Find out more on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Regenerative Agriculture — A Grounded Definition*

<sup>50</sup>  
Find out more on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Regenerative Agriculture: 6 Biggest Lessons Learned*

Many principles are considered part of regenerative agriculture. The ecosystem in which you farm, the history of your farm, and your goals for the landscape have a great influence on which regenerative agriculture principles and practices will be beneficial. It is useful to define what regenerative agriculture should look like in your context to achieve the desired outcomes of improving soil health, conserving water, and reducing emissions. See, for example, Grounded’s definition<sup>49</sup> and other examples of different interpretations.<sup>50</sup>

“At Grounded, our definition of regenerative agriculture takes into account the diverse landscapes in which we operate, and the diverse perspectives of the skilled individuals we work with and who make up our team.”

DANIEL FOURIE, Regenerative agriculture support, Grounded



51

Find out more on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Swales: An Earthwork Method for Resilient Agriculture*

52

Find out more on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Ponds: Creating Biodiversity Oases in a Semi-Arid Landscape*

53

Find the document on [eitfood.eu/reports/regenag-manual](https://eitfood.eu/reports/regenag-manual), fill in the form, and open the *Olives* report

54

Find out more on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *What is Regenerative Agriculture in a Dutch Context?*

Consider also which practices fit best in your landscape.<sup>50</sup> For example, for semi-arid landscapes, such as the Altiplano Estepario in Spain where ALVeIAI is catalysing a movement of regenerative agriculture, soil erosion is an obvious threat. Practices include reducing erosion (such as reduced tilling and ground cover) and increasing the soil's water-holding capacity (such as swales,<sup>51</sup> ponds,<sup>52</sup> and keyline design<sup>53</sup>). Also, consider any local research results. The story *Practical lessons on regenerative farming in a Mediterranean climate from 4 years of research* details the studies into effective practices in the Altiplano Estepario.

In the Dutch Peat Meadows where Wij.land works, soil erosion is much less visible. But this landscape has serious challenges, such as soil subsidence, a loss of soil life and an imbalance of minerals. Practices like zero tillage, groundwater table management, and growing herb-rich grasslands are more suitable here.<sup>54</sup>

“It’s not going to be uniform, and that’s a good thing. We should celebrate that.”

WILLEMIJN DE IONGH, Landscape developer, Commonland

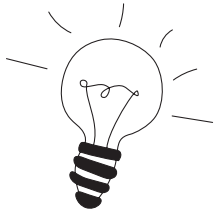
55

Find out more on [soilheroesfoundation.com](https://soilheroesfoundation.com), go to: *Projects* → *Guidebook for Farmers*

56

Find the article by the Regeneration Academy on [wikifarmer.com](https://wikifarmer.com), search for: *Regenerative Agriculture: What is it? Who is it For?*

There is not a “one size fits all” solution. Various practices suit different contexts. For a good overview of practices and their benefits, see the *Guidebook for Farmers* by the Soil Heroes Foundation.<sup>55</sup> But before choosing your practices, reflect on the principles of regenerative agriculture. Because each farm and context are unique, it is these principles that bind practitioners together. The following principles are widely agreed upon (text adapted from the Wikifarmer article by the Regeneration Academy<sup>56</sup>).



- ① **Understand your context.** Consider your own specific conditions in terms of land, soil, climate, crops, location, access to machinery, financial resources, cooperatives, traditions, and market opportunities. Next to your objectives, these will influence the decisions you make.

“The revegetation we are doing is just a skeleton, to create the structure for nature to continue the work. To let nature do its thing.”

PETER MCKENZIE, Regenerative farmer, Southwest Australia

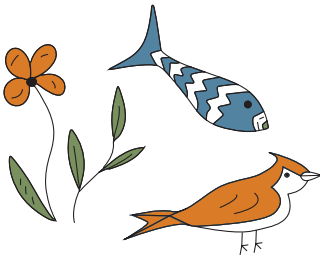
- ② **Improve soil quality and health.** The transformation comes when you change your focus from feeding the plant to feeding the soil. Taking care of the soil will secure the base from which all other parts of the farm will flourish. Some of the basic measures are to minimise disturbance, ensure sufficient soil cover, and feed living soil appropriately. Examples of such practices are no-till, planting cover crops, using crop rotations, and integrating livestock.



Healthy soil in the Dutch Peat Meadows landscape in the Netherlands where Wij.land promotes the transition towards regenerative agriculture. Photography: Tom Baas.

- ③ **Improving water management.** Water is becoming scarcer. Using and harvesting this resource efficiently is key to success. Wetlands on farms promote biodiversity hotspots. The use of key-line design, ponds, and swales can help your farm retain and absorb rainwater.

- ④ **Biodiversity.** Biodiversity creates balance on your farm from both ecological and economic points of view. Enhancing biodiversity below and above ground promotes the correct cycling of nutrients and creates natural pest control. Diversity in crop production is a good strategy to spread risks and bring economic stability to a farm. Creating hedges, crop rotations, the inclusion of perennials, livestock integration, and restoring natural zones are biodiversity-increasing practices.



“The biodiversity on this farm is its heart.”

SYLVIA LEIGHTON, Regenerative farmer, Southwest Australia

- ⑤ **Holistic decision making.** Take the entire ecological system into account and balance economic, social, and environmental considerations when planning and making decisions.

Sometimes a sixth principle is added:

- ⑥ **Create community and social impact.** Consider the local and international communities around you. How can you create a positive impact within them? Perhaps it's by growing healthy food, sharing knowledge, and enhancing local economies or creative spaces. Connecting with others can create meaningful relationships, moments of inspiration, and greater impact by enhancing resilient communities.



Lunch after the tour around La Junquera, during an open house in September 2022. Photography: Gabriela Hengeveld, Commonland.



## Lessons from practice

57

Watch the online programme on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), search for: *4 Returns Unfolded — Regenerative Agriculture in Landscape Restoration*

58

Find out more on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Regenerative Agriculture: 6 Biggest Lessons Learned*

In 2021, Commonland facilitated an online learning programme<sup>57</sup> to hear from our landscape partners in Spain, the Netherlands, Australia, and South Africa on what had been learned about regenerative agriculture over the previous six years. Read the full story by Willemijn de Jongh,<sup>58</sup> which includes many examples collected from practice.

Key lessons shared by our partners:

- **Think big, start small, and act fast.** When problems such as land degradation and biodiversity loss seem great, we want to do as much as possible at once. However, with regenerative agriculture there remain many unknowns. And out of enthusiasm, ambition, and a can-do mentality we sometimes outrun ourselves and overestimate the potential of a particular technique.
- **Regenerative agriculture is one term — not one solution.** It is not an end point, nor is it a silver bullet solution. Regenerative agriculture takes place on a continuum guided by a set of principles and should be considered differently in each context.
- **Regenerative agriculture needs to be adapted to a specific landscape.** Ideally, the practice leaves a positive impact on the ecosystem and contributes to the regeneration of the surrounding landscape. That requires an intricate understanding of the local ecosystem. Because transitioning to regenerative agriculture means adopting a different set of principles, it is important to find out what works where.
- **There is a serious expertise, knowledge, and science gap.** It is important to develop better understanding on how to implement regenerative agriculture. As the practice develops traction, there is hope that peer-reviewed research will also increase. Currently, it is difficult to find the right expertise and evidence-base to support a particular practice or approach. That results in a lot of trial and error, piloting, learning, and failing forward.
- **Farmer-centric networks are the way to go and soil health is the key to every farmer's heart.** Soil is the basis of a farmer's business, and soil health is a wonderful way to open a conversation with a farmer. Local landscape partners work on farmer-to-farmer learning through on-farm demonstration workshops, pilots and trials, and off-farm events with knowledgeable specialists.

Working in a step-by-step pilot approach is an effective way to keep momentum building. In this way, people within the farmer network move from being skeptics towards curious experimentation.





*Regenerative Agriculture FAQ* is a story on the 4 Returns platform, which offers answers to a few of the most pressing questions in the field. Is there certification for regenerative agriculture? Can regenerative agriculture help mitigate climate change? Is regenerative agriculture economically viable? Can regenerative agriculture be applied at the scale needed to meet human and planetary needs?

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Regenerative Agriculture FAQ*

*The Regeneration Agriculture Manual* by EIT Food and the Regeneration Academy is a crop-specific guidebook designed to help farmers transition from conventional or organic production systems to regenerative agriculture

→ [eitfood.eu/reports/regenag-manual](https://eitfood.eu/reports/regenag-manual)

The Regenerative Agriculture page on the platform Regeneration offers a great number of resources.

→ [regeneration.org](https://regeneration.org),  
search for: *Regenerative Agriculture*

*An Agroforestry Guide for Field Practitioners* by the World Agroforestry Centre provides both proven concepts and good practices for field practitioners to integrate agroforestry into land restoration in general and sloping land management.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *An Agroforestry Guide for Field Practitioners*

The Landscape Rehydration Hub by Mulloon Institute and RegenWA collects West Australia-specific landscape rehydration resources including case studies, educational videos, and manuals.

→ [regenwa.com](https://regenwa.com),  
search for: *Landscape Rehydration Hub*

The Netflix documentary *Kiss the Ground* features activists, scientists, farmers, and politicians, making the case for regenerative agriculture to balance our climate, replenish our vast water supplies, and feed the world.

→ [imdb.com](https://imdb.com),  
search for: *Kiss the Ground*

The documentary *The Biggest Little Farm* is the story of documentarian John Chester and his wife Molly's work to develop a regenerative farm on 200 acres outside Los Angeles.

→ [imdb.com](https://imdb.com),  
search for: *The Biggest Little Farm*

Regen10's outcomes framework is a farmer-centric, outcomes-based framework that supports the transition to a regenerative food system.

→ [regen10.org](https://regen10.org),  
search for: *Progress Report: Zero Draft Outcomes-Based Framework*

*Protocolo de Agricultura Regenerativa* (in Spanish) is a guide by AIVeIAI and TUI Care Foundation about the definition, objectives, and techniques of regenerative agriculture.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Protocolo de Agricultura Regenerativa*

The short movie *Regenerative agriculture* is part of the documentary *Head, Heart and Hands* which tells the story of regenerative pioneers in the Altiplano Estepario landscape that are part of the AlVeIAI movement.

→ [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com),  
search for: *1/4 Agricultura Regenerativa*

The course *Your Path Forward in Regenerative Food and Agriculture* is created for people who want to invest in, start, and build companies or want to use their position in existing food and agriculture corporations to move the needle in the regenerative sphere. The course features the *4 Returns Framework* to describe the different values to bring to the table as an investor.

→ [foodhub.nl](https://www.foodhub.nl),  
go-to: *Courses* → *Your Path Forward in Regenerative Food and Agriculture*



#### PODCASTS WE RECOMMEND:

*Investing in Regenerative Agriculture*

→ [investinginregenerativeagriculture.com](https://investinginregenerativeagriculture.com)

*Farmerama Radio — The voices of regenerative farming*

→ [farmerama.co](https://farmerama.co)

*The Regenerative Agroforestry Podcast*

→ [regenerativeagroforestry.org](https://regenerativeagroforestry.org)

*The RegenNarration*

→ [regennarration.com](https://regennarration.com)



# Policy influencing

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- ➔ Many policies and trade agreements favour the conditions that lead to land degradation, the loss of biodiversity, social and economic inequalities, and the exploitation of natural resources to maximise profits per hectare.
- ➔ Fortunately, anyone who is actively influencing a policy or decision-making process has the potential to influence policy outcomes. Landscape partnerships with a diverse base of members are well-positioned to influence policy.
- ➔ This chapter illustrates some of the approaches and actions you can take to influence policy as part of a subnational, national, regional, or international network.

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## What policy does for people

We all use formal and informal rules to organise ourselves in communities and as societies. All of us are affected by policy to the extent that these rules regulate behaviour and affect many areas of life. For example, rules in the form of legislation define what constitutes a crime, who can inherit land, and how communities can use natural resources.

Many policies and trade agreements favour the conditions that lead to land degradation, the loss of biodiversity, social and economic inequalities, and the exploitation of natural resources to maximise profits per hectare.

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## What is policy influence?

In this chapter, **policy** refers to public policies — laws, regulations, plans, processes, and actions that are undertaken to achieve relevant policy goals — whether supranational, federal, state, or local. The private sector and other organisations also use policy and decision-making, but these will not be our focus. We refer to **policy influence** as a deliberate effort to bring change to public policy decisions and processes based on a particular agenda.

In democratic societies, people can influence policy as they interact with policy decision-making processes. This could be by responding to consultations, joining protests, voting, or writing to political representatives. Non-governmental organisations, networks, and associations can play a significant role in policy influence when they make it part of their mission or goal.

Public policy has an impact on land and water management, and on how people access natural resources and interact with nature. These policies may be decided at various levels of government in different countries depending on the extent of decentralisation. While not all government administrations create or amend the policy, governments at all scales oversee policy implementation and are, therefore, important policy actors. National and supranational governments might also provide the funding, tax relief, and legislation to support land restoration and regenerative agriculture.

Governments can create an enabling or disabling environment for holistic landscape restoration. For example, supportive policies may focus on providing clear and secure rights to, and tenure of, land and natural resources. More broadly, enabling policies also address governance structures and processes of decision-making that shape power relations and interactions between different stakeholders. Policies that ensure inter-institutional coordination and inclusive decision-making are important because these will facilitate locally led initiatives. Of particular importance for holistic landscape restoration are policies that support integrated and systemic landscape approaches, such as the 4 Returns.

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## Who can influence policy?

Anyone who is actively influencing a policy or decision-making process has the potential to influence policy outcomes. Given the amount of work and variety of skills that policy influencing takes, landscape partnerships with a diverse base of members are well-positioned to influence policy. Their direct experience, knowledge, and ability to produce evidence endow them with credibility and legitimacy.

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## Approaches to policy influence

Policy influence requires clarity on what it is that you want to achieve and the most suitable approach to pursue it. It can take many forms and be applied not only to legislation but also to non-legislative elements such as regulation (for example, setting standards), budgetary and resource allocation (for example, subsidies), and decisions about representation in decision-making (for example, consulting specific groups in the process of policymaking).

Policy influence strategies vary depending on the types of policy instruments we seek to target. For example, we can attempt to decrease the costs of transitioning to regenerative agriculture by targeting economic instruments, such as subsidies that set the incentive for land use. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) table of policy instruments (below) shows examples that address climate change and ecosystem degradation in the agriculture and forestry sectors.

Policy influence can be sought through formal and informal channels. Engaging with formal channels may include responding to consultation processes, formally submitting to committees, or providing advisory services. Informal channels can involve events or discussions and include protests or activism.

Regulatory (command-and-control) approaches	Economic instruments	Information and other voluntary instruments	Other
Land use or spatial planning tools and requirements (e.g. <i>Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA)</i> and <i>Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA)</i> )	Price-based instruments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taxes (e.g. on carbon, groundwater extraction, pesticide, and fertiliser use)</li> <li>• Charges or fees</li> <li>• Subsidies to promote biodiversity (e.g. public investments in green technology)</li> </ul>	Ecolabelling and certification (e.g. organic agriculture labelling schemes, sustainable forest or timber certification)	Trade measures, such as lowering tariffs on climate-friendly and/or biodiversity-friendly products, reduce export subsidies
Rules and standards for water, soil quality, and land management	Reform of environmentally harmful subsidies (e.g. decouple farm support from commodity production levels and prices)	Green public procurement (e.g. ensuring government procurement is from sustainable sources)	R&D (e.g. to decouple GHG emissions and food production, biomass energy carbon capture and storage)
Standards and controls on overuse of agrochemicals and fertilisers in production	Payment for ecosystem services (including REDD+) and agri-environment measures (e.g. retirement of degraded cropland or subsidization of conservation-friendly production practices)	Voluntary approaches (e.g. negotiated agreements between businesses and government for nature protection or voluntary offset schemes)	Inclusive national planning, incorporating climate and biodiversity concerns, national and local governments, non-party stakeholders
Restrictions or prohibitions on use such as moratoria on deforestation (e.g. as used successfully by Brazil to slow deforestation); protected areas; CITES	Biodiversity offsets or biobanking (e.g. payment-in-lieu or project based offsetting)	Fiscal transfer schemes (e.g. transfer of resources between different governments in the same country)	Development assistance (e.g. coherent consideration of nexus areas in natural resource management, forestry, and biodiversity projects)
Concessions for sustainable forest management	Tradeable permits (e.g. carbon emissions, water rights)		Capacity building (including education and training)
	Property rights and secure and tenure, liability instruments, non-compliance fines		

↪ Examples of policy instruments to address climate change and ecosystem degradation in the agriculture and forestry sectors. Source: OECD, 2020. *Towards sustainable land use: aligning biodiversity, climate, and food policies*. OECD Publishing, Paris.

## How to influence policy

Influencing public policy takes time and commitment. There are no assurances that your efforts will lead to policy change or that any changes will be those expected. This should not discourage you because governments must be made aware of the issues people are facing. If successful, policy influence can be one of the most effective ways to create vast change, at a scale that is far greater than any intervention on the ground.

There are many existing guidelines and resources on how to go about policy influencing in general rather than specifically about landscape restoration. Regardless of whether you work at local, national, or supranational levels, there are four widely accepted strategies that, if used consistently, will increase the likelihood of policy-influencing success.

- ① **Develop deep knowledge about the policy subsystems** — such as those related to relevant issues (for example, climate, environment, agriculture), the macro-political system that shapes decisions in policy subsystems (rules of the game) — and the processes that lead to change (for example, events and negotiations).

There are excellent reports that can help you understand issues better at the global level, for example, the UNCCD's *Global Land Outlook*.<sup>59</sup> At regional and national levels, for example, the UNCCD holds 197 country profiles<sup>60</sup> that include national programmes and plans.

59

Find it on [unccd.int](http://unccd.int),  
go to: *Our Work & Impact*  
→ *Global Land Outlook*

60

Find it on [unccd.int](http://unccd.int),  
go to: *Our Work & Impact*  
→ *Country profiles*

- ② **Build networks and interact with policy actors.** Being part of formal or informal networks provides opportunities for learning, resource exchange, and collaboration. It is vital for creating consensus. Working with others with similar goals can improve access to other actors, reduce costs, and build a stronger case for policy change. This requires identifying the right people and collectives to engage with, whether lawmakers, policy or scientific experts, or politicians. It involves work at multiple levels — on the ground, with partner organisations, with decision-makers, and with regional or national governments. Usually, larger organisations and networks engage in this kind of activity as part of a policy advocacy strategy, which is why we recommend being part of a network. Your experience can contribute to building momentum for change.

A good example is *The Open-ended Network of IPBES Stakeholders* set up for Indigenous Peoples. These networks offer access to knowledge and discussions affecting stakeholder groups and entry points to influencing processes (for example, reviewing IPBES assessment drafts).

- ③ **Participate for extended periods.** Developing deep knowledge and building networks takes time. In addition, policy processes can take years. When the goal is to create new policy or policy reform, reaching adoption is not the end as policy implementation will need to be put into operation.
- ④ **Use evidence.** Well-designed policymaking requires sound evidence. Scientific research, both quantitative and qualitative, is critical to understanding problems, informing solutions, and evaluating policy responses. Collecting relevant scientific data in the field can be done directly by researchers or in collaboration with them and can involve the local community, for example when using citizen science, see the highlight below.

In addition to modern science, Indigenous and traditional knowledge is recognised and used to inform policy platforms. For example, IPBES, set up to promote the science-policy interface for biodiversity and ecosystem services, and to protect the sustainable use of biodiversity and safeguard human well-being, systematically relies on Indigenous and traditional knowledge for reviewing and contributing to its reports. One example is the 2023 report on alien invasive species. There are multiple ways in which Indigenous Peoples and local communities can participate.

→ [ipbes.net](https://ipbes.net),  
search for: *Indigenous Local Knowledge, How to Participate*



Citizen science involves any activity that engages the public in scientific research. It has the potential to bring together science, policymakers, and society in an impactful way. Citizen science is a collaborative approach that can help foster environmental awareness, a sense of environmental stewardship, and project ownership. It can produce robust and locally relevant evidence by involving ordinary people in data collection and analysis. This evidence can be instrumental in shaping policies and advocating for policy change. Find more information on: [eu-citizen.science](https://eu-citizen.science)



## LEARN MORE

For specific steps and tips about policy change in organisations and communities:

Young, J., Shaxson, L., Jones, H., Hearn, S., Datta, A. and Cassidy, C., 2014. *Rapid Outcome Mapping Approach: A Guide to Policy Engagement and Influence*. Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London, United Kingdom.

*Partners for Resilience Advocacy Capacity Toolkit*

→ [www.partnersforresilience.nl](http://www.partnersforresilience.nl), go to: Resources → The ACT for Resilience Toolkit

→ [i2s.anu.edu.au](http://i2s.anu.edu.au), search for: *Rapid Outcome Mapping Approach*

Mayne, R., Green, D., Guijt, I. et al., 2018. *Using evidence to influence policy: Oxfam's experience*. Palgrave Commun 4, 122.

→ [nature.com](http://nature.com), search for: *Using Evidence to Influence Policy: Oxfam's Experience*

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## Credibility as a policy actor

To attract policy actors' attention, they must understand who you are and whether you are a reliable voice in your field. You build credibility in multiple ways.

**Understanding.** Presenting a proper policy analysis means identifying how relevant policies impact the landscape. How are you solving local and national policy goals? A lot of this has to do with language and experience in the field. That's why it's a great idea to link what you do to the 4 Returns — it's expressly made for this purpose.<sup>61</sup>

**Legitimacy.** The work that you do needs to be legitimate. What is your experience that lends credibility to your voice? What is your track record? Case studies that rely on sound impact monitoring are a good way to begin to build legitimacy because they formalise your story in a way that can be tailored to policy priorities.

**Vision.** Having clear ideas about your direction of travel is crucial. This will be outlined in your landscape plan and *Theory of Change*. Make policymakers aware of your long-term vision and how it feeds into their priorities.



Learn more about public policy analysis on [wikis.ec.europa.eu](http://wikis.ec.europa.eu), search for: *Public Policy Analysis*



**Visibility.** Working with others, getting in the news, as well as local and national papers, all drive your agenda. Think about where you can tell your story to get other people's attention. Visibility also includes links to local and expert communities, so on-site conferences and events that attract voluntary participation all help you get seen.

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## Influencing holistic landscape restoration policy: local, subnational, national, or global scales

Holistic landscape restoration is shaped by policies from multiple sectors including land use, water, agriculture and fisheries, climate, rural development, spatial planning, social and economic development, trade, energy, and mining that show up across different levels or scales — local, subnational, national, and global.

Influencing **local** or **subnational** policy can be more flexible, adaptable, and responsive to the unique challenges and opportunities of restoration initiatives than influencing national or global scales. Engaging with local communities, governments, and stakeholders can foster a sense of ownership and commitment to restoration efforts. It allows for the integration of traditional knowledge and practices, which are often vital for successful landscape restoration. Additionally, by demonstrating tangible benefits at the local level — such as improved livelihoods, enhanced biodiversity, and increased resilience to climate change — grassroots efforts can serve as powerful models and catalysts for driving broader policy change at regional and national levels. Being able to present empirical evidence will be extremely important.

Policy influence at the subnational and local levels can offer many advantages. Local policies, rooted in the specific history, needs, and realities of a given landscape, can be better understood by local stakeholders. This richer understanding can inform policy-influencing responses more effectively. Policy influence that begins at the local level is also more direct because it can engage policy actors who are closer to the action. Depending on your goals, a strategic blend of local and higher-level policy advocacy is often the most effective approach to advance holistic landscape restoration initiatives.

You can find an example of a powerful local policy initiative in the case study on AIveIAI's manifest initiative below. To learn more about influencing at the local level read the toolkit *Influencing Policy Development*<sup>62</sup> by the University of Kansas.

<sup>62</sup>  
Find the toolkit on [ctb.ku.edu](http://ctb.ku.edu),  
search for: *Influencing Policy  
Development*

At the **national** and **subnational scales**, policy influence needs to be tailored to national ministerial and subnational administrative arrangements. This involves understanding where and how relevant decisions are being made, bearing in mind that working across ministries, agencies, and administrations is most likely necessary.

Although major policies are determined at the national level, they include policy responses to international commitments and treaties. For example, countries committed to implementing the *Drought Resilience, Adaptation and Management Policy Framework* developed by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) need to develop national drought plans aligning with national and subnational policies. Also, countries that ratify the legally binding *Paris Agreement* will need to ensure that any new national legislation is in line with the international agreement.

At the **global scale**, several inter-governmental organisations coordinate and motivate national governments to act in favour of biodiversity, reverse land degradation, and attenuate climate change. Significant breakthroughs include the 2022 *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework* (GBF), adopted at the COP15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity, which is a landmark commitment in this area. Another major development is the UN-led legally binding marine biodiversity agreement, the *High Seas Treaty*, adopted in June 2023. This treaty aims to protect the ocean, promote equity and fairness, tackle environmental degradation, fight climate change, and prevent biodiversity loss in the high seas.

Other major intergovernmental policy mechanisms and instruments that affect holistic landscape restoration include:

63

Read more on [ecologic.eu](https://ecologic.eu), search for: *The Role of Ecosystem Restoration for the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement*

→ The *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC) and particularly the *Paris Climate Agreement*<sup>63</sup>

64

Read more on [unccd.int](https://unccd.int), go to: *Land & Life* → *Land Degradation Neutrality*

→ The UNCCD's land degradation neutrality target<sup>64</sup>

→ The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)<sup>65</sup>

65

Read more on [cbd.int](https://cbd.int)

→ The European Union's Green Deal is a broad policy package that aims to achieve zero emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050 and economic growth that is decoupled from resource use while creating a fairer society. To achieve this, it has developed new legislation (for example, Climate Law) and is developing new legislation in 2024 (for example, Nature Restoration Law), and reforming existing legislation (for example, Common Agricultural Policy Reform).

Regardless of the scale you choose to influence, it will be key to understand the multiple policy sectors that affect holistic landscape restoration in your region and to work towards increasing policy coherence. Not doing so jeopardises the integrity of holistic and systemic approaches, such as the 4 Returns. For example, focusing on promoting regenerative agriculture enabling policies outside the context of nature restoration and conservation may lead to the loss of protected nature which ultimately affects water and pollinators needed for agriculture. Similarly, focusing on nature restoration without reference to regenerative agriculture leads to fewer biodiversity stepping stones outside protected areas. In preparing to bring policy change, contextualising any return in relation to the other returns is vital for supporting 4 Returns landscapes.

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## Barriers to holistic landscape restoration

**65**  
*Protecting and Restoring Forests: A Story of Large Commitments Yet Limited Progress*, NYDF Assessment Partners, 2019.

**67**  
*Taking Stock of National Climate Action for Forests*, NYDF Assessment Partners, 2021.  
Find it on [forestdeclaration.org](https://forestdeclaration.org), go to: Resources → Taking Stock of National Climate Action or Forests: 2021 NYDF Assessment Report

Recent years have seen an increase in both national and international policy attention towards land restoration. However, progress is slow. Only a fifth of land pledged to be restored by 2020 had been brought under restoration by 2019<sup>65</sup> and countries are off track for meeting restoration targets set for 2030.<sup>67</sup> Barriers standing in the way of landscape restoration include those affecting restoration in general. While it may make for gloomy reading, it can sharpen our understanding and responses while we engage in land restoration work.

**Finance.** Finance is a fundamental barrier to meeting global targets. The quantity available, the accessibility, and the models employed are all inadequate. Subsidies are often unsuited to landscape restoration. The private sector is under-involved and lacks perspective on returns available.

**Policy and governance.** Political priority for restoration is low. Policies are often unsuitable for integrated approaches and there is a lack of enabling policy instruments. Existing policies are inadequately implemented, with restoration policies often shared between siloed departments. In addition, landscape restoration requires governance at the landscape scale which remains mostly unsupported.

**Legal and tenure issues.** Challenges include difficulty in obtaining legal rights, lack of integrated land use planning, complexity of the legal framework, and the perceived complexity of implementing restoration.

**Socio-cultural.** The interests of different stakeholders can conflict. A lack of understanding and collaboration across different components of restoration — such as ecology, social sciences, engineering — contributes to a lack of collaboration. Knowledge

is exchanged ineffectively, often because of different languages that exist between disciplines. Societal awareness and engagement are lacking, with less identity and attachment to the landscape.

**Management, planning, and implementation.** Evaluation, monitoring, and documentation are often lacking. Also, when the timing of restoration projects does not correspond to ecological and social timescales it can cause problems. Projects often have unrealistic or unclear project goals; they also have a lack of standards against which progress can be measured.

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## How you can be an advocate for policy

Policy influence is massively boosted by evidence of positive and negative change. These are ways you can help provide it.

**Be proactive in a network in and outside the restoration bubble.** Networks are the ideal funnel for many projects to have their needs represented to policymakers. The network can be a valuable source of advice, funding, and influence. Because policy takes so much work, only larger organisations or groups of projects engage in it. Your network may be able to put a policy advisor at your disposal if policy barriers are an issue. The main benefit, however, is feeding developments in your landscape up to the policy level.



### RECOMMENDED NETWORKS

These networks related to the field of landscape restoration may be of interest:

The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration is building a strong, broad-based global movement to grow political momentum for restoration initiatives on the ground.

→ [decadeonrestoration.org](https://decadeonrestoration.org)

Regen10 is a multi-stakeholder collaborative platform aimed at scaling regenerative food systems globally within a decade.

→ [regen10.org](https://regen10.org)

1000 Landscapes for 1 Billion People is developing the tools, finance, and connections needed to accelerate the work of landscape partnerships. Its online events offer the opportunity to meet with like-minded practitioners.

→ [landscapes.global](https://landscapes.global)

The Global Regeneration Co-lab is an online learning and connection space for regeneration changemakers. There are weekly meetings, special events, and projects you can get involved in.

→ [grc.earth](https://grc.earth)

The Global Landscape Forum is the world's largest knowledge-led platform on sustainable landscapes. On its community platform GLFx you can join a local chapter or Community of Practice. It also organises a yearly conference.

→ [globallandscapesforum.org](http://globallandscapesforum.org)

→ [glfx.globallandscapesforum.org](http://glfx.globallandscapesforum.org)

The 4 Returns community offers many online and offline learning and networking opportunities. A great first step is to publish your landscape story from a 4 Returns perspective with the template provided.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](http://4returns.commonland.com)

→ [4returns.commonland.com](http://4returns.commonland.com),  
go to: *Landscapes*

If a network has yet to develop in your region, you can build one from the ground up. Contact other projects — even at the supra-national level. Where you have shared needs, such as in policy, it may be possible to hire a policy expert to represent you.

**Research financing models.** Find ways to mix subsidies with patient (concessional or non-commercial) capital and develop business models that can invite private capital. See the chapter *Landscape finance* [page 187] to get up to speed on what might be available.

**Link work with local and international commitments.** Get policy-makers behind you by showing how your work relates to international policy commitments; whether it's the UN Sustainable Development Goals, Convention on Biodiversity, or climate agreements, make it clear how your work is helping governments meet their agreements. You can do this light touch through communication on your website, or by meeting your local politicians.

**Use the 4 Returns in your communications.** The more of us moving in the same direction, the more powerful we are. Policy actors often can't see the amount of 4 Returns work occurring because it's not labelled as such. By using its language as well as its methods, you tie in with a global movement recognised at many different levels. That's why it's so important to collaborate and learn from each other and, above all, use the language of the 4 Returns so it becomes an automatic association in policy actors' heads.

**Bring community with you.** Often people lose motivation for change because they don't see ways to do it. As part of a landscape partnership, engaging others in the local community is key to your success. You can provide local people with opportunities to volunteer or hold community evenings, so they have a stake in developments in the landscape. Community energy is a massive enabler for all and, cumulatively, it prepares the ground for policy change.

**Bring local politicians with you.** You can help local politicians be a voice for change by bringing them with you on your journey. You can be a flagship for local social and environmental change — a good news story they want to be seen to get behind. Consider both local and national politicians who may alert you to avenues for subsidy and connect you with local players who can support your change in the landscape.

**Carry out robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning.** MEL (see chapter *Monitoring the 4 Returns* [page 274]) is vital for the success of your project. Adjusting a few of the indicators you measure could mean you make a greater impact on policy. For guidance, consult established projects in your area or internationally through the 4 Returns community.

**Tell your story.** Engaging followers with your story through social media or other platforms is a great way to show that what you're doing has priority in public consciousness. As we say in the storytelling chapter, this means sharing your challenges as well as your successes; describe what has worked and hasn't worked and talk about people as well as issues. Use the 4 Returns in telling your story, see the chapter *Storytelling* [page 284].

**Volunteer for studies.** Landscape restoration is a hot topic. University researchers are often on the lookout for case studies that allow them to study social, environmental, and business change in motion. Being involved in a study can also provide you with insights into your own impact. The researchers may also be able to put you in touch with other similar projects that can support you by sharing their own experiences.

**Reach out to national focal points.** Intergovernmental agreements and platforms assign national focal points that are valuable sources of information. Find out about your country's focal points:

- ➔ UN Convention to Combat Desertification, country profiles [unccd.int/our-work/country-profiles](http://unccd.int/our-work/country-profiles)
- ➔ UNFCCC National Focal Points [unfccc.int](http://unfccc.int), search for: *National Focal Points of Parties to the UNFCCC*
- ➔ CBD National Focal Points [cbd.int/information/nfp.shtml](http://cbd.int/information/nfp.shtml)



## RECOMMENDED NETWORKS

While policy is a broad area, if this is something you are seriously looking at, you can use the following toolkits to shape and sharpen your policy approach.

IPBES supports policy tools to promote the development and use of policy instruments in the field of biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services.

→ [ipbes.net/policy-tools-methodologies](https://ipbes.net/policy-tools-methodologies)

The *Community Organising Toolkit on Ecosystem Restoration* from the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration includes tools, knowledge, and resources to activate communities for restoring ecosystems to productive, healthy spaces. It includes successful examples of community-organised restoration.

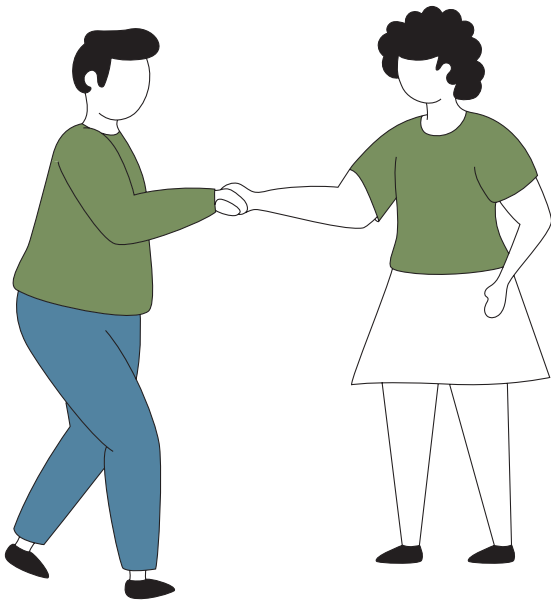
→ [decadeonrestoration.org](https://decadeonrestoration.org),  
search for: *Community Organizing Toolkit on Ecosystem Restoration*

Policies that support forest landscape restoration (FLR) published by IUCN describes a range of FLR-supportive policies, complemented by case studies of countries where they have had a positive impact.

→ [portals.iucn.org/library](https://portals.iucn.org/library),  
search for: *Policies Support Forest Landscape Restoration*

The knowledge hub of the Global Landscapes Forum is a large database of resources on sustainable landscapes. This is a useful place to find the resources and evidence to help make your policy case stronger.

→ [globallandscapesforum.org](https://globallandscapesforum.org),  
go to: *Knowledge*





## LANDSCAPE STORY: A POLICY INFLUENCING JOURNEY

In 2018, AlVelAI hoped to mobilise both Spanish autonomic and central governments with a view to creating a standard certification for regenerative agriculture. The idea was that a national certification would improve the recognition and value of regenerative practices and products. With contacts in the Andalucian government and central government, AlVelAI was able to arrange meetings with technical experts and officials at the Ministry of Agriculture. However, several events halted progress. Shortly after the initial meetings came the Covid pandemic, followed by elections and new government departments with new directors and officials. AlVelAI reconsidered its approach to influencing policy. It concluded that it had been overly ambitious in targeting the central government and that it should retrace its steps to build relationships from the bottom up.

A new plan emerged to write a public declaration, or manifest, that could influence local councils in the landscape. Town and village councils represent people and their interests, so are important players. The new ambition became to approach all landscape town and village councils to ask they become signatories of the manifest. Doing this requires no economic or political commitment. The document was drafted by 60 people at a workshop in 2022. Intentions listed in the manifest are uncontroversial and resonated with councillors and mayors.

Even so, engaging councils is a process that takes time — 89 municipalities are represented by 79 municipal administrations representing about 200,000 people. So far, 12 municipal administrations have been involved and three have become signatories of the manifest. AlVelAI's approach has been to focus on the larger towns first to capture the biggest representation of the population. Although there is plenty of work ahead, there are visible positive outcomes. For example, the council of Benamaurel has created a regenerative agriculture training plan for farmers.

From a political standpoint, having a document signed by representatives of 200,000 people is likely to open doors at regional and national government levels. AlVelAI will be in a stronger political position. The manifest should also add weight to finding additional financial resources for regenerating the landscape. It will serve to mobilise people across the large AlVelAI territory. By creating and supporting several groups of motivated people across the territory in a coordinated way, more regenerative and restorative actions can be implemented, more minds awakened, and hearts inspired.

Additional info on  
[youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), search for:  
*Manifesto for a Regenerative Territory*

The Manifest for a Regenerative Landscape  
[territorioregenerativo.com](https://territorioregenerativo.com)



← Manifesto workshop in Guadix, in 2022. Photography: Antonio Garcia, AlVelAl.

## LANDSCAPE STORY: SAVE THE MED FOUNDATION

Save the Med Foundation<sup>®</sup> is a grassroots organisation, based in Mallorca, Spain, that works to enable the recovery of the rich biodiversity of the Mediterranean Sea. From a traditional marine conservation organisation that focused on marine protection and plastic pollution, it evolved to embrace a wider marine regeneration approach. Their policy-influencing work led to fundamental achievements as the foundation played a key role in designing and implementing new marine protected areas (MPAs) in the Balearic Islands.

⑧ Find more info on [savethemed.org](https://savethemed.org)

Over ten years ago, a highly experienced and professional team of scientists asked to collaborate with the NGO. The group had worked together and had a clear vision for a network of marine protected areas. Some held jobs in the public administration related to marine protected areas. Together they designed the dossier for a marine protection area for Sa Dragonera. The NGO provided an organisational platform from which to advocate, and the already existing local group of scientists provided a clear agenda. Collaboration, trust, and respect were built within the group. They consider this an essential ingredient that brought them to where they are today. Ultimately, policy influence is about personal relationships.

This policy influencing work emerged organically when the group of scientists and the head technician of fisheries (local government) asked to collaborate on the development of a dossier for the local government's marine protection strategy. The dossier addressed the need to integrate external and coastal waters (under central and autonomous government). It was unpaid work that took over two and a half years. With the support of the local government, the dossier was presented to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food.

Historically, marine protection frameworks in Spain have served the interest of the fishery industry rather than the environment. Marine protection areas were designed to promote the recovery of fish stocks and their habitats on which the local economy relies. In Spain, sea waters are governed by the autonomous communities with coastline (decentralised administration) and the Spanish central government. Most areas have both mainland government input and local government influence. For grassroots organisations, it means working with both governments and engaging with mostly the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food, as well as more recently with the Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge.

Having direct access to the local government fast-tracked the process and gave the group direct insight into policy processes. Understanding that the local government had no resources for designing the dossier, the group provided an important service. The local government not only accepted the dossier but encouraged the group to engage with the central government to consider including external waters in the mapping of the MPA. This was achieved. In 2016, internal or local government-managed waters were declared a marine protected area and in 2020, external waters managed by central government were included.

Read more about the organisation at [oceanfamilyfoundation.org](https://oceanfamilyfoundation.org), go to: *What → Save the Med*

A place for notes

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A series of horizontal dotted lines spanning the width of the page, likely intended for handwriting practice or as a template for text entry.

# Carry out monitoring and learning



Evaluate the 4 Returns impact in the landscape, reflect on what you learn, and adjust the landscape plan if necessary.

Impact measurement, collective learning, and adaptive management are especially important in the rapidly evolving contexts in which landscape plans are implemented — ensuring the plan stays aligned to the vision. Adaptive management, or learning by doing, is a systematic process for continually improving practices by learning from the outcomes of previously employed practices. The positive impact created can facilitate the replication and upscaling of impact within the landscape. And it can be a catalyst for other landscapes, supporting the movement and wider system that enables landscape restoration. Building up evidence and sharing learnings, inside and outside of the landscape, are critical for that.

The purpose of this section is to evaluate the impact of 4 Returns interventions in the landscape, reflect on lessons learned, and adjust the landscape plan if necessary. Here, stakeholders assess the outcomes of landscape actions against agreed key performance indicators. The results and lessons can be shared widely to mobilise greater support and participation.

In the chapter *Monitoring the 4 Returns* [page 274], you'll learn about the importance of measuring the impact of your holistic landscape restoration initiative. The chapter guides you through the steps needed to create your own 4 Returns monitoring plan. We introduce the 4 Returns indicator menu which you can use to determine what indicators are relevant and feasible in your context.

The final chapter of this guidebook, *Storytelling* [page 284], highlights the transformative power of stories in the context of holistic landscape restoration. You'll learn how storytelling is a powerful tool in all phases of the 4 Returns process, as well as the power of stories for gaining insight and for communicating your impact.



## RECOMMENDED TOOLS AND METHODS

*A quick-start guide to monitoring, evaluation, and learning for holistic landscape restoration*, developed by Commonland in 2024, introduces you to what impact measurement for landscape restoration projects entails.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *A Quick-Start Guide to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning*

The 4 Returns indicator menu, created by Commonland, the Landscape Finance Lab, and Wetlands International in 2024, provides a comprehensive set of metrics for assessing the social, natural, financial, and inspirational returns of landscape restoration projects.

→ [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *4 Returns Indicator Menu*

Explorer.land enables the exploration of nature-based projects through storytelling and data presented on 3D maps, enhancing engagement and understanding of these initiatives.

→ [home.explorer.land](https://home.explorer.land)

Restor, a platform focused on ecological restoration and conservation, offers tools for project management, data analysis, and community engagement.

→ [restor.eco](https://restor.eco)

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## ENVISAGED OUTCOMES

- Monitoring plan developed for adaptive management and accountability that is based on an evaluation and analysis of indicators for holistic landscape restoration.
- Impact communicated and lessons learned shared to inspire others and mobilise further support. The evidence created demonstrates the value of the 4 Returns restoration to others and may inspire adoption.



# Monitoring the 4 Returns

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- Your 4 Returns monitoring plan, based on a set of indicators tailored to your landscape, allows you to share your results and impact with stakeholders, and to learn about your work and adapt your approach accordingly.
- The 4 Returns indicator menu provides a set of indicators to choose from when building your 4 Returns monitoring plan. It builds on themes of the 4 Returns.
- The indicators you choose depend on your purpose for monitoring, your intended results, and your preferred research methodologies.

When you implement your landscape plan, each time you reflect on your progress and changes in the landscape, you measure impact. Measuring impact helps to:

- Show the impact of restoration actions and, if needed, adapt your approach to improve the impact of projects in the landscape
- Encourage others to replicate successful projects
- Inspire financiers to continue funding or begin to invest where they see progress

You could say that impact measurement is key to the implementation of your landscape plan.

Measuring impact requires three stages — monitoring, evaluating, and learning (MEL). There are many generic resources on how to set up a MEL plan. This chapter explains how to monitor the 4 Returns specifically — addressing the “M” in MEL. We will introduce the 4 Returns indicator menu: a set of indicators that you can use to develop a 4 Returns monitoring plan for your landscape. The 4 Returns indicator menu builds on the themes of the 4 Returns that were introduced in the chapter *Unpacking the 4 Returns* [page 33].

This chapter aims to help you create your own 4 Returns monitoring plan, which you can use to share your results and impact with stakeholders. The plan also allows you to learn about your work and adapt your approach accordingly. You can use the 4 Returns indicator menu as inspiration, with suggestions on what and how to monitor. This chapter could inspire you with ideas about evaluation too.

To learn more about the basic principles of creating a MEL plan, check out the companion guide *A quick-start guide to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning for holistic landscape restoration*.<sup>1</sup> The guide describes steps for developing an impact measurement system, with practical tips along the way.

<sup>1</sup> Find the tool on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Quick-Start Guide to Monitoring Evaluation and Learning*

↓ Worms in healthy soil, Australia.  
Photography: Wide Open Agriculture.



# Building on the themes of the 4 Returns

The 4 Returns indicator menu builds on the themes of each of the 4 Returns as introduced in the chapter *Unpacking the 4 Returns* [page 33]. You can read more about the meaning and rationale of these themes, and how they relate, in that chapter.



↑ Themes and subthemes of the 4 Returns.

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## How to read the 4 Returns indicator menu

For each theme and effect of the 4 Returns (see figure on previous page), we developed indicators in the 4 Returns indicator menu to help you develop your 4 Returns monitoring plan. Wherever possible, indicators and methods were developed from existing and well-used frameworks, such as UNEP Land Use Impact Hub, USAID, WRI, LandScale, and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.

Here are some guidelines for using the 4 Returns indicator menu to create your own 4 Returns monitoring plan.

- ➔ All the indicators measure progress towards the achievement of an expected result. To measure changes, a baseline and one or more follow-up measurements are useful.
- ➔ Selecting indicators from the menu clarifies the performance and evolving context of the strategy and actions for your landscape. The indicators in the menu are suggestions; you can adapt, contextualise, or change the indicators for your monitoring plan to suit your landscape plan.
- ➔ The themes may not cover all elements of your interventions. Other themes and indicators can be added.

We will keep testing and adapting the 4 Returns indicator menu depending on what proves valuable for practitioners. If you have suggestions for other themes or indicators, let us know!

### **Recommended indicators to start monitoring**

From the menu we selected some indicators that we recommend to start with, because the menu can be quite overwhelming. These indicators are recommended because:

- ➔ They provide basic insight into the progress towards creating the 4 Returns, at output, outcome, and impact levels equally.
- ➔ They are universal in the sense that we expect many 4 Returns landscape restoration projects will work on these themes.
- ➔ They are feasible to monitor, even by practitioners who are less experienced in monitoring.

Beside the recommended indicators, which of the other indicators from the menu you choose will depend on whether your landscape plan focuses on these outcomes or not.



### Levels of impact

Some changes in the landscape are expected earlier than others or lead to other expected changes. To distinguish these different levels of change, the indicators in the 4 Returns indicator menu are organised according to the following structure:

- ➔ Output indicators signal a direct result of your work in the landscape.
- ➔ Outcome indicators signal a change in the behaviour of landscape stakeholders, such as farmers, community members, and businesses.
- ➔ Impact indicators signal the effects of both the practitioner's work and landscape stakeholders' work and generally pinpoint the end goal of the landscape plan.

### Monitoring frequency

How often should you monitor the indicators? The recommended frequency depends on when you expect a change in an indicator. It also depends on practical considerations, such as affordability and the time that it takes to measure the indicator. Some indicators, mostly those at output and outcome levels, require annual monitoring. Other indicators either change less quickly or are difficult to monitor annually, for example stakeholder questionnaires. These “complex” indicators could be used in an evaluation or monitored every three to four years. Complex indicators can be difficult to measure unless you have either expertise in social research or an ecological background.

Monitoring new and mature seedlings at the research and development plot in the Baviaanskloof, South Africa. Photography: Reblex photography, Commonland.





### Recommended measurement methods

For each indicator in the 4 Returns indicator menu, we suggest at least one research methodology. Where an indicator has several research methodologies, you can choose the method best suited to your expertise. In the case of indicators where no pre-existing method was available, one was developed based on our experience and expert consultation. Methods include:

- ➔ Registration. Output-related indicators can be registered simply by the landscape restoration practitioner or businesses in the landscape that carry out the actions in the landscape plan.
- ➔ Social research. Most impact indicators under the social and inspirational returns require measurement with stakeholders in the landscape, for example individuals or groups. This could be done by:
  - Questionnaires. They reach the most people. In the indicator menu, for each indicator you can find questions with statements on a four-point scale — totally disagree, disagree, agree, and totally agree.
  - Individual or group interviews. They allow greater depth on the how and why questions, but are more time-consuming, so generally fewer people can respond.
- ➔ Ecological sampling. For many of the natural returns, it is useful to collect samples and analyse them, such as transects, photographs, soil samples, and water samples. This can be time-intensive when sampling is needed in multiple locations.
- ➔ Spatial data. Satellite data to support spatial analysis can be efficient and low-cost with the right expertise but is only useful when there are physical changes in the landscape that can be observed with satellite data.
- ➔ Modelling. This can be useful to estimate an indicator where exact measurements are not feasible, for example in the case of soil carbon measurement or biodiversity measurements.
- ➔ Self-reflection. For all indicators, you can also reflect on the changes based on your own experience and work in the landscape. Be cautious because this is less objective and therefore less reliable for external audiences than primary data collection from stakeholders in the landscape.

Sometimes the 4 Returns indicator menu links to other methodologies, which can help you to select a method.

### Suggested breakdowns

For some output indicators, we recommend splitting up the groups of stakeholders being monitored to create a more detailed picture of who you're reaching. We suggest these categories:

- Gender. Making a distinction between whether you reach men, women, or nonbinary stakeholders uncovers social equity within the community.
- Age. Another measure of social equity is to test your reach to youth. You should define the age of youth to suit the context of the landscape. The official UN definition is below 25, but some Western landscapes define youth as 35, or even 45, when it addresses young entrepreneurs.
- Stakeholder background. This tells you the diversity of people reached. Examples of stakeholder types include large-scale farmers and foresters, smallholder farmers and subsistence farmers (less than two hectares), other businesses, conservation and rewilding practitioners, restoration NGOs, government, and other, such as community members and service providers.
- Marginalised groups. This is mainly relevant in areas where Indigenous Peoples or other communities tend to be marginalised.
- Zone. For some indicators, when this is clearly defined in your landscape, it is relevant to distinguish between the 3 Zones: natural, combined, and economic zone.
- Other. Depending on the indicator, you may want to distinguish on specific things, for example product type or financing source.

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## Using the 4 Returns indicator menu

The 4 Returns indicator menu is vast and would be time-consuming for any practitioner to use in its entirety. So, to develop your own monitoring plan, it's important to select the best indicators to reflect your landscape plan. Here are three things to consider when making your choice.

### Purpose of monitoring

Firstly, how do you plan to use the data? For more on purpose, see *A quick-start guide to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning for holistic landscape restoration*.<sup>2</sup> To decide the purpose of monitoring, it is good to involve your most important stakeholders. Different stakeholders may have a variety of monitoring interests, and taking their needs into account will create support for your

<sup>2</sup> Find the tool on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Quick-Start Guide to Monitoring Evaluation and Learning*

monitoring plan. So, before you start, find out the information needs of your stakeholders, and whether these stakeholders are representative of all voices — human or other — in the landscape.

### Your intended results

Secondly, you should decide what to monitor according to your intended results. You can identify your intended results:

- ➔ If you have a *Theory of Change* or similar, the 4 Returns highlight the changes you want to achieve and how they relate to your actions; these are your intended results. Find out about the *Theory of Change* in the chapter *From vision to action* [page 153].
- ➔ Comparing the intended results in the *Theory of Change* with the themes of the 4 Returns [page 276] will signal which indicators in the menu are relevant.
- ➔ If you don't have a *Theory of Change* or similar, you can use the interaction map of the 4 Returns [page 282]. Pick the beige boxes that match your actions to see what results can be expected in the landscape. Then, look at the menu to see which indicators belong to each of these effects.

When you know the intended results, you can use the 4 Returns indicator menu to select indicators that could be relevant to you. As mentioned above, we recommend first looking at the recommended indicators, and deciding whether they apply to your landscape plan. After that, depending on your purpose for monitoring and interest, you can select other indicators.

Tip: Think critically about whether you really need to monitor a result. Sometimes, the evidence provided in scientific literature is enough, so you can focus on monitoring other results instead. Look at what is being researched by others before deciding what to monitor yourself. There are many scientific literature sources, databases, and credible open-source publications, including the UNCCD Global Database on Sustainable Land Management WOCAT database,<sup>3</sup> the World Database on Protected Areas,<sup>4</sup> and the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.<sup>5</sup> The Consensus app<sup>6</sup> is an AI-based tool to collate the most important conclusions from articles.

<sup>3</sup>  
Find it on [qcat.wocat.net](http://qcat.wocat.net)

<sup>4</sup>  
Find it on [protectedplanet.net](http://protectedplanet.net)

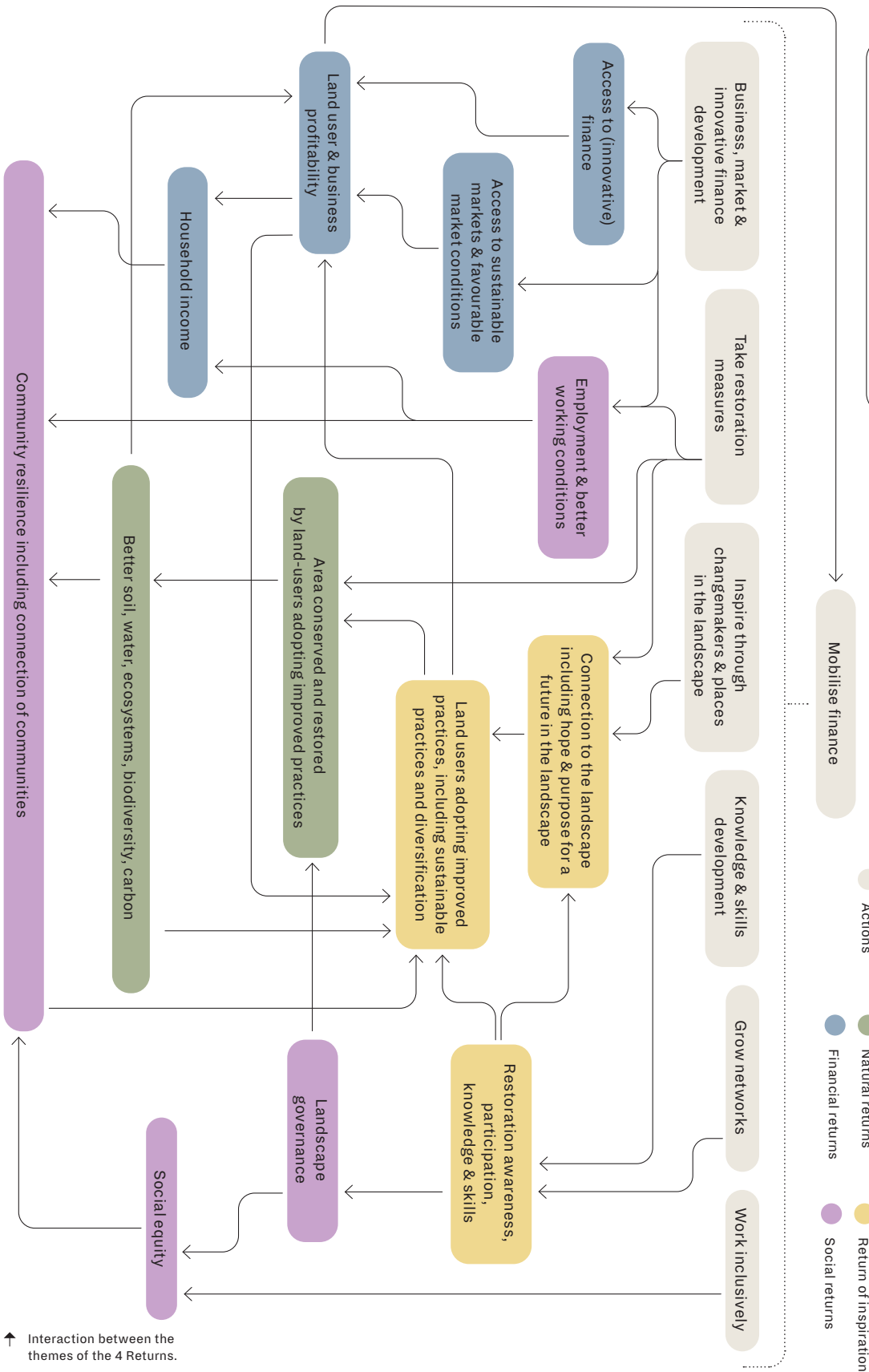
<sup>5</sup>  
Find it on [iucnredlist.org](http://iucnredlist.org)

<sup>6</sup>  
Find it on [consensus.app](http://consensus.app)

### Preferred research methodologies

Thirdly, which indicator you select depends on the methods you choose to use. This can be steered by your preference and need, or by your capacity for monitoring, including your budget, skills, and time. If you have experience with social research, opting for indicators from the themes in the social and inspirational returns is more feasible, for example.

# How the 4 Returns interact



↑ Interaction between the themes of the 4 Returns.



Aromatic oils production in the Baviaanskloof, South Africa, 2022. Photography: Reblex photography, Commonland.

## Start using your 4 Returns monitoring plan

7

Find it on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *A Quick-Start Guide to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning*

8

Find it on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *4 Returns Indicator Menu*

9

Find it on [wetlands.org](https://wetlands.org), search for: *A Landscape Approach for Disaster Risk Reduction in 7 Steps*

After you've designed your 4 Returns monitoring plan, think about some practical steps to implement it. For more about this, read *A quick-start guide to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning for holistic landscape restoration*.<sup>7</sup>

- ➔ For each indicator, you need to design measurement tools. You will compose questions for a questionnaire, for example. Some examples of tools can be found in the indicator menu,<sup>8</sup> such as suitable questions to use in an interview or questionnaire format.
- ➔ Think about doing a baseline of the indicators before the implementation of actions starts. This helps you to set targets and test the indicators on feasibility and relevance.
- ➔ In addition to measuring change, you might also like to measure the contribution of your actions to this change. In that case, you need to integrate a contribution analysis in the monitoring, which should be designed upfront.
- ➔ For some indicators, there is a difference in how you measure accumulated data and separated data. When measuring the area under restoration, for example, you can measure the total area reached, or focus on specific restoration measures in which only part of the total area is reached. This potentially differs per measure. So, decide upfront whether to measure accumulated, separated, or both.
- ➔ Progress and effects of interventions need to be monitored and evaluated to adapt landscape management and to improve planning and strategies as the process develops. More guidance on monitoring and adaptive management can be found in *A Landscape Approach for Disaster Risk Reduction in 7 Steps*<sup>9</sup> in the section *Promote adaptive management*.

# Storytelling

## IN THIS CHAPTER:

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- ➔ Why storytelling is essential in holistic landscape restoration
- ➔ Storytelling reveals the emotions and experiences in your project to leave a lasting impression
- ➔ Stories can provide insight into landscape stakeholders and partners
- ➔ Four essential elements of stories
- ➔ Storytelling for insight
- ➔ Using stories to communicate

“Change happens only when you replace one story with another”

GEORGE MONBIOT, Environmental campaigner,  
Journalist, Writer, and Film maker

Throughout human history, storytelling has been an integral part of our existence, serving as a means of communication, education, entertainment, and cultural preservation. Stories have shaped history and the world as we know it. As George Monbiot explains in his article *How do we get out of this mess?*<sup>10</sup> in *The Guardian*, stories are how we navigate the world. Dominant narratives have shaped the degradation that we see today, but new stories have the power to ignite the change we need for regenerating our planet.

<sup>10</sup>

Find it on [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com),  
search for: *George Monbiot: How  
Do We Get Out of This Mess?*

This is why storytelling is a powerful tool in holistic landscape restoration. It is through stories that we foster understanding, forge connection, bridge the gap between inspiration and action, and learn to amplify our impact. Storytelling is an asset in each of the 5 Elements. We placed it at the end of this guidebook, to emphasise its role in learning and amplifying the impact you're making in your landscape initiative.

In one sense, storytelling can be anything you communicate. But good storytelling also allows you to change a narrative by choosing to emphasise one thing over another. It focuses not just on information but emotions and experiences. Personal stories can play a massive role in bringing alive the reality of people in a landscape to audiences near and far. As an example, think of a family living in your landscape and how their personal story — their relationship to the landscape — is more powerful than your average PowerPoint presentation. We tell stories because they provide the emotional context to understand the reality that numbers can't communicate. They embed the message you want to tell in the minds you need to persuade. And storytelling is much easier than you think — you are probably already doing it.

Bhagwati Sayyam, a part of Adivasi Mahila women's self-help group, giving an interview. Photography: Tesu Media Lab.





We listen to some stories to learn from the diverse perspectives present in the landscape. These are shared in story circles or interviews. We'll call them stories for insight. Then there are the stories we tell when we make videos, write articles, post on social media, give presentations, and have informal conversations. We'll call these stories for communication. This chapter deals with both kinds of stories. But first, we'll look at the common elements that tie them together.

Gazing at the shape of a hill,  
The grey horizon,  
A woman reading a book,  
A landscape shaped by history.  
All we do is story.

BEN OKRI, *The Mystery Feast*

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#### FOUR STORY ELEMENTS



Read more on [storyyourself.com](https://storyyourself.com)

What distinguishes a story from anything else that's spoken or written? These four elements — supplied by Storyyourself<sup>®</sup> — make the distinction clearer. Rather than definitions, however, you can see them as recommendations for what makes a good story.

Experiences take the audience with you into the landscape. In their imaginations, get them to feel their hands in the soil, smell the compost, and taste its produce. Help them get to know the hills, valleys, rivers, and scrub around you. The sensory experiences contained in your landscape help implant your actions in the audience's mind.

As an exercise, make a chart of the different sensory experiences in your landscape; what can be seen, heard, smelled, touched, and tasted? Add these experiences to your stories. For example, when rosemary is harvested, relay how it smells to your audience with a quick social post. You can record a dawn chorus of bird-song or share a view of the sunset. These impressions line your communication, so people have contextual experiences to absorb any data or news you share.





↑ Field visit of 14 landscape partners to a regenerative initiative during the Bioregional Weaving Labs Summit in 2023 in Germany. Photography: Nadine de Vogel, Commonland.

Emotions. How you and those around you are feeling is also part of the story. Excitement, enthusiasm, disappointment, and sadness are all natural ways of experiencing your project. Bringing feelings into your communications makes what you're doing feel more real to your audience. Emotions often unlock a lot in a story and are usually the key to opening creative blocks.

Tests and trials. Hercules, Odysseus, and the gold-medal sprinters didn't just win but overcame. It might feel uncomfortable to talk about what's not going well, but it adds to your credibility and ability to draw people in. Turn the challenges you experience into gripping narratives by sharing what you're disappointed or exasperated about — then the steps you're going to take to get out of the hole. Grounded's account of its challenges in its first years<sup>12</sup> of setting up a regenerative agriculture business helps build a picture of the organisation's integrity and dedication to keep going despite setbacks, for example. Sharing challenges changes your narrative from one of successes and failures to one of resilience — the way you change and evolve just as your landscape does.

<sup>12</sup> Find out more on [grounded.co.za](https://grounded.co.za), go to: *Blog* → *Stories from the Landscapes* → *The Baviaanskloof Part I: A Community Embarks Upon Soil Restoration*

Perspectives. When reporting on a big event, you can include multiple viewpoints in your story. While publicising a launch, for example, show what multiple people — team members and stakeholders — think about what's happening. Another approach is to use first-person testimonies to illuminate the struggles and hopes of communities in your landscape.

Make sure you don't discount your own perspective either. Often stories are dry because the teller tries to tell a general tale rather than getting intimate with their own view of events. When clearly stated, your own view on what is happening brings people closer to the action. Statements like "I feel...", "to me, this seems...", are excellent ways to declare your own view on what's happening. It might feel like drawing too much attention to yourself, but it also helps make your experiences and dilemmas real to an audience — and that means your work lasts in their memory. This aspect, as we will see, is particularly important for *Theory U*.

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## Storytelling for insight

Stories are such a rich conveyor of information. They are prominent tools for sensemaking and monitoring, evaluation, and learning. This kind of storytelling — better-named storylistening — increases awareness by evoking different perspectives and helping discover social and cultural forces at play in your landscape.

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### STORYTELLING AND THEORY U



Presencing Institute, 2023.  
Find out more on  
[presencinginstitute.org](https://presencinginstitute.org)

*Theory U* is a framework developed by Otto Scharmer, co-founder of the Presencing Institute,<sup>®</sup> for leading profound change in organisations and society. *Theory U* is a key element of the *4 Returns Framework* because it emphasises a shift in the way we think and act, moving from old patterns of behaviour to new possibilities. Storytelling plays a crucial role in *Theory U* because it helps to facilitate this transformative process and explore the experiences of a diversity of stakeholders. Here are a few important concepts used in *Theory U* that are enriched by storytelling.

**Presencing.** One of the core concepts in *Theory U*, "presencing", is a combination of presence and sensing. Storytelling helps individuals access a deeper level of presence and sensing by connecting with their personal and collective stories. This heightened awareness enables us to tap into our intuition, explore emerging future possibilities, and make decisions that align with our highest future potential.

**Generative dialogue.** Storytelling is also a powerful tool for fostering generative dialogue — a type of conversation that goes beyond debate or discussion and generates new insights and possibilities. By sharing stories, individuals engage in a dialogue that encourages collective sensemaking, creativity, and the co-creation of new ideas.

Amplifying systemic change. Through storytelling, individuals can articulate their aspirations, visions, and the transformation they want to see in their organisations, their landscapes, or communities. These stories serve as a catalyst for systemic change by inspiring others, building momentum, and creating a shared narrative that guides collective action.



← Live scribing during the 2020 Danjoo Koorlini Social Impact Festival in South West Australia. Photography: Danjoo Koorlini.

## REFLECTION PRACTICE

14 Find the guided journaling exercise on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *Guided Journaling*

A reflection practice is invaluable for your own and your project's learning and growth. Making space for reflection on a regular basis can be done through personal journaling (try the Presencing Institute's guided journaling exercise<sup>14</sup>) or in a group session. Reflecting can also serve as inspiration for capturing your project's story, and sharing this will allow others to learn from your journey. The following tips can help you structure your reflection practice, as well as document any insights for sharing.

- ➔ Outline the landscape story. Provide an overview of the landscape and its current state. Describe the challenges, opportunities, or conflicts that exist within the landscape context.
- ➔ Reflective narration. Infuse your storytelling with reflective narration. Share your own reflections on the landscape journey, the insights gained, and the personal transformation experienced through the process. Discuss the challenges, breakthroughs, and lessons learned.
- ➔ Personal stories. Include personal stories from individuals who were involved in the landscape change process.

- ① Emphasise sensing. Describe the methods used to observe, listen, and gain a holistic understanding of the landscape's dynamics, needs, and potential.
- ① Showcase collaboration efforts. Highlight the collaboration efforts and co-creation that occurred during a process of change. Describe how diverse stakeholders came together, shared their perspectives, and worked collectively to design and implement innovative solutions.
- ① Reflect on emerging insights. Share insights that surfaced in the project. Discuss the paradigm shifts, breakthroughs, or transformative ideas that emerged.
- ① Address resistance and challenges. Acknowledge the resistance, barriers, or challenges faced in the project.
- ① Impact and ripple effects. Reflect on the impact and ripple effects of the project. Discuss the positive changes witnessed within the landscape, the communities, and the individuals involved. Share stories of how these changes have influenced and inspired others.
- ① Encourage audience reflection. Ask the audience to reflect on their own roles in landscape restoration and how the landscape story relates to their own lives, communities, or spheres of influence.
- ① Conclude with lessons learned. Summarise the key lessons learned from the project and discuss the ongoing potential for further development and improvement.

A participant harvesting insights at the Bioregional Weaving Labs summit in Germany in 2023, which was attended by participants from 14 landscape partners of Ashoka and Commonland. Photography: Nadine de Vogel, Commonland.



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## Stories for communication

This section is about sharing stories with stakeholders for funding, raising awareness, and community building.



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### THE 4 RETURNS IN STORIES

The 4 Returns supplies an ideal framework for telling great stories. Each of the returns is a theme along which to organise the stories you tell. You will likely compile these stories for monitoring, evaluation, and learning, so make sure you use them in your wider communications as well. Go through each return and make a point of telling a story about each one, perhaps on a monthly or quarterly basis.

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### 4 RETURNS NARRATIVE

The 4 Returns also imply a wider narrative that you can adopt — a global landscape restoration movement linked by a practical, holistic approach and language that everyone understands. It delivers returns to all landscape stakeholders — people, nature, communities, and businesses. By working with the return of inspiration and the social, natural, and financial returns, we combine our efforts to heal our relationship with the land and provide a long-lasting legacy for future generations.

Refer back to the mindsets in the chapter *How to get started* [page 55]; these perspectives can help you communicate about your landscape.

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## THE POWER OF HOPE

The project you are working on is a story of hope. Centuries of degradation is being reversed through your work. In an era of multiple, inter-related crises, your project is evidence of hope. By telling stories of your project and of the 4 Returns, you give people more reasons to believe that change is possible. You need to remain clear-eyed about the realities on the ground but keep sharing your vision of hope for the landscape. In doing so, you will motivate action elsewhere. *The Book of Hope* by Jane Goodall is a great resource to better understand the power of hope in restoring nature.

**15**  
Find out more on [explorer.land/x/projects](https://explorer.land/x/projects)

**16**  
Find out more on [restor.eco](https://restor.eco)

**17**  
Find the example on [crowtherlab.com/flagship-cases](https://crowtherlab.com/flagship-cases),  
search for: *Spanish Altiplano*

Platforms such as Explorer.land<sup>15</sup> and Restor<sup>16</sup> have libraries of inspirational stories that show the global land restoration movement in action. One example<sup>17</sup> is a story on how regenerative agriculture is used to restore the Spanish Altiplano landscape.



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## HOW TO USE DIFFERENT MEDIA

Now let's get practical. Your understanding of different media shapes the kinds of stories you tell. Here are some techniques to consider when sharing a landscape story.

### Interviewing

Telling a landscape story through interviews can provide valuable insights and personal perspectives. On the 4 Returns platform you can find an example.<sup>18</sup> Here are some techniques to consider when using interviews to narrate a landscape story.

**18**  
Find examples and techniques on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com),  
search for: *Q&A with Wilder Land Co-Founder, Daan van Diepen*

- ➔ Find diverse voices. Seek out a variety of interviewees with different roles, expertise, and connections to the landscape. This can include landscape developers, environmentalists, local community members, scientists, and policymakers. Ensure that their perspectives contribute to a comprehensive and well-rounded narrative.
- ➔ Prepare thoughtful questions. Develop a set of thought-provoking questions tailored to each interviewee's expertise and experience. These questions should elicit detailed responses that provide unique insights into the landscape, its history, significance, challenges, and restoration efforts.



- ➔ Active listening. Allow the interviewees to express themselves fully and provide space for them to share personal stories, anecdotes, and emotions related to the landscape. Actively engage with their responses to build a deeper understanding of the subject matter.
- ➔ Follow-up questions. Ask follow-up questions to delve deeper into specific aspects of the interviewees' responses. This can help clarify information, uncover additional details, and explore different angles of the landscape story. Be flexible and adaptable during the interview process.
- ➔ Authenticity and empathy. Foster a comfortable and supportive environment for the interviewees to share their stories authentically.
- ➔ Structuring the narrative. Organise the interview content into a coherent and engaging narrative structure. Identify common themes, connections, and contrasting viewpoints that emerge from the interviews.
- ➔ Use quotes. Incorporate direct quotes from the interviewees throughout the narrative. These quotes should be impactful, descriptive, and highlight the interviewees' unique perspectives. They add authenticity and bring the story to life.
- ➔ Emotional connection. Emphasise the emotional connections that interviewees have with the landscape. Allow them to share their personal experiences, memories, and feelings associated with the landscape. This can help create an emotional connection between the audience and the story.
- ➔ Supporting narration. Complement the interview segments with your own narration or commentary. This can provide additional context, and background information, or bridge the gaps between different interviewees' perspectives. Maintain a balance between the interviewees' voices and your own narration.
- ➔ Sound design. If you are using audio, pay attention to the audio quality of the interviews, ensuring clear and audible recordings. Consider adding subtle background sound effects related to the landscape, such as birds chirping or wind rustling, to enhance the listening experience and create an immersive atmosphere. Read more about recording soundscapes.<sup>19</sup>
- ➔ Editing and structure. Carefully edit the interview content to remove any redundancies, pauses, or irrelevant segments while maintaining the authenticity and integrity of the interviewees' voices. Structure the interviews in a way that creates a cohesive and engaging narrative flow.

<sup>19</sup>

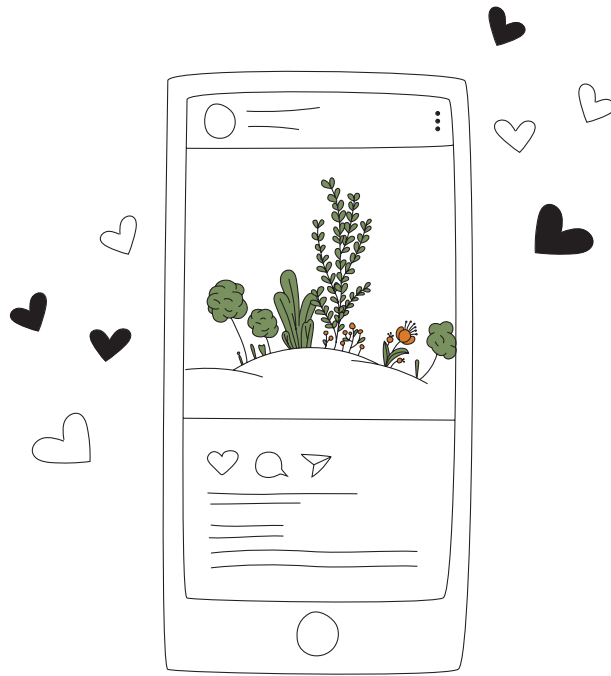
Read more about *The Soundscapes of Resilience* on [4returns.commonland.com](https://4returns.commonland.com), search for: *The Soundscapes of Resilience*

## Social media

Social media is the easiest way to start sharing stories from your landscape to a global audience. Social media platforms are convenient and accessible, with billions of active users worldwide and great tools to support you in your storytelling. The various social media platforms tend to overlap, but each is more suited to a particular audience and content.

- ➔ Instagram. Ready to share visual storytelling? Then Instagram is the platform for you. Instagram is a visually-focused platform primarily targeting millennials and Gen Z (people born between 1981–2012). Instagram emphasises photo and video sharing and is a platform where aesthetics and visual appeal are key. Instagram is made for mobile phones, so any videos you want to upload should be portrait style (vertical).
- ➔ LinkedIn. This professional networking platform is used primarily for business and career-related purposes. It focuses on connecting professionals, sharing industry news, and industry-specific discussions. Only about 1% of LinkedIn’s 260 million monthly users share posts — so it is a great platform to stick out from the crowd.
- ➔ Facebook. If you want to focus on a general-purpose social media platform with a broad audience, then Facebook is for you. As Facebook and Instagram both come from Meta, you can post simultaneously across platforms.
- ➔ X (formerly Twitter). X focuses on short text updates. It is mostly used to share news and opinions, engage in public conversation, and follow trending topics. It can be an excellent place to get noticed by journalists, who often use the platform to find stories.
- ➔ TikTok. A popular platform among younger audiences, TikTok is a video-sharing app that allows users to create and share short-form videos on any topic. It’s mainly mobile-based and uses powerful algorithms to target users with content. For this reason, TikTok is the best social media platform for reaching huge, new, young audiences or going viral.
- ➔ YouTube. Alongside Facebook, YouTube is one of the largest social media platforms out there, with an audience of more than two billion people. It’s a great place to share longer-form video content — try to make sure your videos are filmed in landscape, and you create a “thumbnail” when uploading.





Here are some more general tips to help you share your story on social media.

- ➔ Visual storytelling. Use captivating and high-quality visuals, such as photos, videos, and infographics to convey the beauty, significance, and challenges of the landscape. Visuals are key to grabbing attention and eliciting an emotional response from the audience.
- ➔ Short and engaging captions. Craft concise and compelling captions to accompany your visuals.
- ➔ Hashtags and keywords. Use relevant hashtags and keywords in your posts to increase discoverability. Research popular hashtags related to landscape restoration to reach a wider audience and engage with audiences interested in these topics.
- ➔ Personal narratives. Share personal stories or testimonials related to the landscape. Highlight how the landscape has impacted individuals, communities, and organisations. Personal narratives create an emotional connection and make the story relatable.
- ➔ Infuse education and awareness. Use social media as a platform to educate and raise awareness about the landscape's importance, conservation efforts, and restoration initiatives. Share interesting facts, historical context, and cultural or scientific insights to enrich the audience's understanding.

- Behind-the-scenes content. Offer a glimpse behind the scenes of a landscape restoration project. Share updates, progress, challenges, and success stories to keep the audience engaged and connected to the ongoing work.
- Interactive stories. Create interactive content, such as polls, puzzles, quizzes, and challenges to engage the audience. This encourages participation and enhances the overall experience of the story.
- Collaborate with influencers or experts in the field. Partner with influencers or experts in the field of landscape restoration or environmental advocacy. Collaborative posts, interviews, and takeovers can help amplify the story, reach, and credibility.
- Calls to action. Inspire the audience to get involved by encouraging them to take a specific step.
- Engage with the community. Respond to comments, questions, and messages from your audience. Building a genuine connection with your audience fosters loyalty and enhances the impact of your story.
- Monitor and optimise. Assess how your content is performing on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis through data analytics within your social media accounts. Checking how many people see your posts (metrics: impressions, reach) and how engaged your audience is (metrics: reactions, engagement rate) can help you to optimise your content to better suit your audience.



### Filming a story

Video is a great way to engage people in the stories from your landscape. And it's easier to do than you might think. Most of us already carry a video camera with us every day — our smartphones! Modern smartphones record high-quality video and free editing tools make it easy to create great videos to share your stories.

- Clear concept. Before you start filming, write your video script, with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Think about the transitions between shots. Having a clear plan of what you want to capture before you hit record makes the finished product more professional.

20

Wikipedia, *Rule of Thirds*, February 2024. Find out more on [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule\\_of\\_thirds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule_of_thirds)

- Frame your shots. Position your subjects using the rule of thirds.<sup>20</sup> Turn on the grid or guidelines on your phone camera to align main subjects and points of interest along gridlines or at intersections. This creates visually pleasing compositions.
- Beginning and closing shots. Make sure you have a beginning and an ending shot that indicates where the story is taking place — that sets the scene. If you don't have footage that can indicate where the story is taking place, you can add titles to make it clearer for viewers.
- Think about the sound. Clear audio enhances the quality of your video. Try to minimise background noise by filming in a quiet environment or by using an external microphone.
- Same scene, multiple perspectives. When you film a scene, do it from multiple perspectives.
- Never zoom. If you want to zoom into a situation, don't click zoom, but instead walk slowly towards the subject. It will feel more natural.
- Narration. If you are creating a documentary video, you can use interviews and voice overs to provide insights, thoughts, or commentary.
- Edit. After you've collected all your video footage, use a video editing tool to trim footage, add effects, incorporate music, add narration, and enhance your video.

Participant filming with a smartphone at the Bioregional Weaving Labs summit in Germany in 2023. Photography: Nadine de Vogel, Commonland.



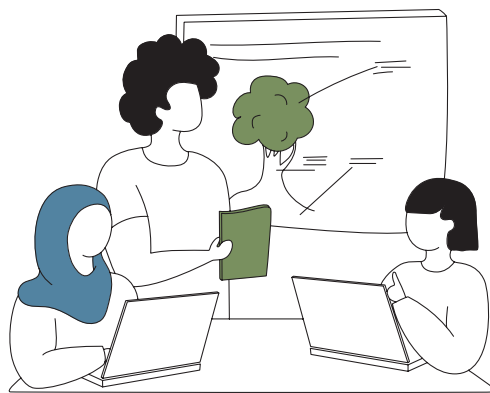
## WRITING ARTICLES

<sup>21</sup> Find the example on [weforum.org](http://weforum.org), search for: *We Must Tackle Global Risks in an Integrated Way – Here's How*

Do you have a blog or website? Written articles are a great way of sharing stories about your landscape (see an example from the World Economic Forum).<sup>21</sup> Follow these tips to start writing up the stories of your landscape and engage a wide audience.

- ➔ Strong headlines. Craft a concise and attention-grabbing headline that summarises the essence of the article and captures the readers' interest. Use keywords related to landscape restoration to ensure relevance and searchability.
- ➔ Inverted pyramid structure. Follow the inverted pyramid structure, placing the most important information at the beginning of the article. Start with the key details, such as the location, scale, and significance of the restoration project.
- ➔ Lead with impact. In the opening paragraph, present a compelling statement or statistic that highlights the importance of landscape restoration. Engage the reader immediately by conveying the broader implications and benefits of the restoration efforts.
- ➔ Clear and concise writing. Use simple language to ensure that your article is accessible to a wide audience. Avoid jargon or niche technical terms unless necessary and explain the specialised vocabulary that you do use.
- ➔ Provide context. Briefly introduce the broader context of landscape restoration. Provide background information about the area, its ecological and cultural importance, and the impact of its degradation.
- ➔ Key stakeholders. Identify the key stakeholders involved in the restoration project, such as government agencies, environmental organisations, research institutions, local communities, and private investors. Discuss their roles, motivations, and collaborative efforts to highlight the project's collaborative nature.
- ➔ Project details. Provide specific details about the restoration project, including its objectives, methods, and timeline. Highlight innovative or unique approaches being employed, such as the reintroduction of native species, erosion control measures, or sustainable land management practices.
- ➔ Human interest stories. Incorporate human interest stories or quotes from individuals involved in the restoration project. This can include project leaders, scientists, local community members, and business owners. Personal stories add an emotional connection to the article.

- Supportive evidence. Use facts, data, and research to back up your statements and emphasise the credibility of the article. Include statistics and personal accounts of local communities that illustrate the positive impact of landscape restoration on inspired action, social cohesion, biodiversity, ecosystem services, and financial opportunity.
- Relevant images. Include high-quality photographs or visuals that showcase the restored landscapes, depict the restoration process, or feature key individuals involved. Images can significantly enhance the readers' understanding and engagement.



**+ GET INSPIRED!**

This chapter shares a myriad of ways to start your storytelling. The best first step is to be inspired by the stories you hear around you. Who is telling the best stories either within or outside your area? Follow them on social media and watch their videos: what aspects of their storytelling could you adopt?

Here are a few favourites we recommend:

Mossy Earth

→ [mossy.earth](https://mossy.earth)

Terraso

→ [terraso.org](https://terraso.org)

Explorer.land

→ [home.explorer.land](https://home.explorer.land)

A Regenerar

→ [instagram.com/a\\_regenerar](https://instagram.com/a_regenerar)

Restor

→ [restor.eco](https://restor.eco)

Grounded

→ [instagram.com/grounded](https://instagram.com/grounded)

A place for notes

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing notes.

A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.



A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.

# Glossary

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## The 4 Returns Framework

**The 4 Returns Framework.** A holistic approach and practical tool for landscape restoration, based on many years of experience working in the field, using a language all stakeholders understand and that inspires action. It delivers returns to people, nature, communities, and businesses, and is based on the ecosystem approach that was endorsed by COP5 of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in 2000. The *4 Returns Framework* uses 4 Returns of impact in three landscape zones, during a period of more than 20 years, and consists of five process elements to make it happen with stakeholders. It was published by the IUCN Commission on Ecosystem Management in 2012 and updated to the final publication in 2015.

**Natural returns.** The increase of the health (including its ecological functionality and resilience) of the ecosystem in the landscape

**Financial returns.** The long-term economic resilience and prosperity of communities and businesses

**Social returns.** Strengthening communities in landscapes by increasing livelihood opportunities (for example, jobs), community engagement, and social resilience

**Return of inspiration.** An increased connection to the landscape, motivating stewardship

**Natural zone.** A spacious and healthy natural zone provides resilience against climate change, disease, and other threats. The aim is to regenerate a landscape's ecological foundation by restoring native vegetation, natural wildlife habitats, and water availability. This helps to boost and protect biodiversity over time. It is one of the 3 Zones used in the *4 Returns Framework* to help all stakeholders understand the complexity of a landscape. Over time, every landscape should strive to achieve a fair balance between the 3 Zones.

**Combined zone.** The combined zone combines sustainable production and the regeneration of biodiversity and ecological functioning. The goal in this zone is to shift to sustainable production systems, such as regenerative agriculture, agroforestry, rotational grazing, polyculture plantations, paludiculture (wet agriculture), silvo-fisheries, and sustainable aquaculture-mangrove systems. It is one of the 3 Zones used in the *4 Returns Framework* to help all stakeholders understand the complexity of a landscape. Over time, every landscape should strive to achieve a fair balance between the 3 Zones.

**Economic zone.** The economic zone delivers sustainable economic production with dedicated areas for value-adding activities, such as processing. Also in the economic zone, nature can be integrated, for example, through green-grey infrastructure or green cities. Examples of economic zones are hard infrastructure, such as urban areas and industrial complexes, as well as monocultural agriculture and tree plantations. It is one of the 3 Zones used in the *4 Returns Framework* to help all stakeholders understand the complexity of a landscape. Over time, every landscape should strive to achieve a fair balance between the 3 Zones.

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## Other terms

**Agroecology.** A holistic approach that simultaneously applies ecological and social concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agriculture and food systems. It seeks to optimise the interactions between plants, animals, humans, and the environment while also addressing the need for socially equitable food systems within which people can exercise choice over what they eat, and how and where it is produced. Agroecology is concurrently a science, a set of practices, and a social movement. It has evolved as a concept over recent decades to expand in scope from a focus on fields and farms to encompass the ecological, socio-cultural, technological, economic, and political dimensions of food systems, from production to consumption.<sup>1</sup>

**Carbon credits.** Carbon credits represent units of measurement that quantify the reduction or removal of atmospheric carbon dioxide, achieved through a range of methods including biological processes (e.g., photosynthesis in plants and trees) and innovative technologies (e.g., improved cookstoves, carbon capture and storage). Additionally, geological processes such as carbon dioxide storage in underground reservoirs contribute to generating carbon credits. These credits are generated and cer-

<sup>1</sup>

Adapted from FAO, find it on [fao.org/agroecology/overview/](http://fao.org/agroecology/overview/)

tified based on demonstrated reductions in carbon emissions or successful carbon sequestration, adhering to recognised carbon standards.

**Carbon project developer.** A person or organisation responsible for identifying, designing, and implementing projects that help reduce greenhouse gas emissions. They might work independently or with investors, project partners, and technical experts to bring projects to fruition.

**Carbon sequestration.** The removal of atmospheric carbon dioxide, either through biological processes (for example, photosynthesis in plants and trees) or geological processes (for example, storage of carbon dioxide in underground reservoirs)

**CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalents.** CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents, often abbreviated as CO<sub>2</sub>e, refer to a standardized unit of measurement used to express the global warming potential of various greenhouse gases in terms of their impact on climate change, relative to carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>). It allows for the comparison of different greenhouse gases based on their ability to trap heat in the atmosphere over a specific period, typically 100 years. For instance, methane (CH<sub>4</sub>) has a higher global warming potential than CO<sub>2</sub> over the short term, so its emissions are often expressed in CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents to provide a clearer picture of its overall climate impact.

**Emission reduction and avoidance.** This refers to the total amount of CO<sub>2</sub>-equivalents that could be reduced through a change of practice in various sectors. Emissions arising from an altered practice are compared with emissions from a business-as-usual scenario (baseline), to result in the total amount of reduced emissions. Emission reductions differ from emission avoidance in that, for the latter, the business-as-usual scenario is not yet implemented. So, the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> avoidance is based on hypothetical baseline assumptions.

**The Ecosystem Approach.** A strategy for the integrated management of land, water, and living resources that equitably promotes conservation and sustainable use<sup>2</sup>

**Holistic landscape restoration.** This involves restoring degraded landscapes by addressing their social, ecological, and economic functions, ensuring their sustainability and resilience for the future. It recognises the interconnectedness of physical, chemical, biological, ecological, economic, socio-cultural, spiritual, and inspirational processes within landscapes, emphasising the need for integrated, large-scale, and long-term approaches. By taking a holistic approach, problems can be addressed comprehensively, leading to lasting positive change that benefits both nature and communities.

**Impact measurement and impact management.** Impact measurement is the process of quantitatively and qualitatively evaluating the impacts of an organisation or project. Impact measurement is one step in impact management.

<sup>2</sup>

Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2004. *The Ecosystem Approach, (CBD Guidelines) Montreal: Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity* 50 p.

Impact management is adapting your strategy and actions based on lessons gained by impact measurement, with the final aim of creating as much positive impact as possible and avoiding negative impact. Measuring impact helps a project and its stakeholders understand and learn from the progress of their efforts and their impact. This can help to:

- ➔ Show the impact of restoration actions and — if needed — adapt your approach to improve the impact of projects in the landscape
- ➔ Encourage others to replicate successful projects
- ➔ Inspire financiers to continue funding or begin to invest where they see progress

**Knowledge broker.** Brings knowledge to stakeholders in formats that meet their needs. Has good technical knowledge and the ability to translate and communicate that knowledge

**Lab.** An approach to multi-stakeholder learning journeys, also called systemic or social (innovation) labs

**Landscape.** A socio-ecological system that consists of interconnected natural and/or human-modified land and water ecosystems. It is influenced by geology, climate, flora, fauna, and micro-organisms, as well as historical, economic, socio-cultural, and political processes. Where water is the dominant feature, this can also be referred to as a wetland landscape; where oceans are predominant, this can be referred to as a seascape.<sup>③</sup>

**Landscape approach.** A conceptual framework whereby stakeholders in a landscape aim to reconcile competing social, economic, and environmental objectives. A landscape approach aims to ensure a full range of local-level needs are met, while also considering the goals of stakeholders, such as national governments or the international community. A minimum of 100,000 hectares is generally needed to implement a landscape approach, although there are exceptions (for example, offshore islands, or other natural landscape areas, such as a watershed or high plain).

**Landscape and stakeholder analysis.** This provides a context of what is happening and has previously happened in the landscape in terms of ecology, geology, climate, culture, economics, policy, social networks, and more. It investigates past and present initiatives to identify what could be developed further and draws lessons from past failures.

**Land degradation.** The result of human-induced actions that exploit land causing its utility, biodiversity, soil fertility, and overall health to decline<sup>④</sup>

<sup>③</sup> Modified from *The Little Sustainable Landscapes Book*. Find it on [globalcanopy.org](http://globalcanopy.org), search for: *Little Sustainable Landscapes Book*

<sup>④</sup> From [unccd.int](http://unccd.int), go to: *Land and Life → Degradation Neutrality → Overview*

**Landscape finance.** This is the provision and management of all financial resources necessary to support the actions and processes required to realise long-term holistic landscape restoration. It includes flexible long-term funding to support processes related to the development, operation, and management of a landscape partnership. It also captures financial streams tailored to support nature restoration, sustainable land use, and the development of a commercially viable, scalable, and investable portfolio of businesses that drives holistic restoration of the landscape.

**Landscape lab.** A transformation process for a landscape, that supports local stakeholders and changemakers to engage and mobilise towards a thriving ecosystem and community. In the labs, changemakers identify critical leverage points (also called acupuncture points) in their landscape and co-create strategies and solutions. A landscape partnership is responsible for maintaining this process during the 20+ Years of implementation.

**Landscape partnership.** Also commonly known as multi-stakeholder partnerships, refers to a strong, trusted, and long-lasting coalition of organisations in the landscape from across sectors and communities working towards a resilient landscape regeneration with a shared landscape vision

**Landscape plan.** A document including a clear and concise outline of the characteristics of landscapes in which you work, the 4 Losses of the landscape and potential 4 Returns, what has been achieved, challenges and lessons learnt, the 20+ Year vision, opportunities in the 3 Zones, and funding needs for the future. Landscape plans are compiled from the perspective of the entire landscape and will evolve as a living, breathing resource for landscape teams and other stakeholders to work with. Lastly, visioning and planning are part of any landscape restoration programme. The process of creating a landscape plan can assist in this visioning process for an entire landscape to help develop or sharpen strategy, identify opportunities, gaps, and challenges, and create alignment and understanding between partners in a landscape. It can also serve as a basis for direct fundraising by partners themselves.

**Landscape restoration practitioners.** Any individual or organisation that works on (holistic) landscape restoration and is based physically in the landscape

**Landscape restoration.** According to experts:

- ① Turning degraded areas of land into healthy, fertile, working landscapes where local communities, ecosystems, and other stakeholders can sustainably cohabit<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>  
From [iucn.org](http://iucn.org)

- ② The ecological process that aims to restore a natural and safe landscape for humans, wildlife, and plant communities. This process paves the way to protect our ecosystems, create economic development, help prevent natural disasters such as floods, and increase soil productivity and food supplies.<sup>⑥</sup>

⑥ From [unccd.int](https://unccd.int), go to: *Land and Life* → *Degradation Neutrality* → *Overview*

⑦ Find more on [fao.org](https://fao.org)

⑧ Find more on [ser.org](https://ser.org)

For further information, we'd also like to refer to the Food and Agriculture Organization<sup>⑦</sup> and the Society for Ecological Restoration.<sup>⑧</sup>

**Landscape stakeholders.** This includes all people, flora and fauna, organisations, and businesses that have an interest in a landscape, either because they live there, or because their livelihood depends on the landscape. This encompasses communities, farmers, businesses, NGOs, local governments, investors, and all non-human species that have no voice and often are represented by experts, community leaders, and conservationists.

**Payments for environmental services (PES).** A system where individuals or communities receive incentives, such as money or other rewards, for taking actions that protect or enhance the environment. It encourages sustainable practices and conservation by providing financial benefits for maintaining ecosystem services like clean water, carbon sequestration, or habitat preservation. PES programmes create economic incentives to promote environmental stewardship and strike a balance between conservation and sustainable development.

**Policy influence.** A deliberate effort to bring change to public policy decisions and processes based on a particular agenda.

**Prototyping.** This is the translation of an idea or innovation into something concrete: an experimental action. A prototype is an early draft of a final project or initiative, and usually goes through several iterations, based on feedback from diverse stakeholders. The objective of prototyping is to test what later could become a pilot project that can be shared and scaled up.

**Regenerative / 4 Returns business.** A regenerative business is a business that restores the ecosystem rather than degrading it. A successful regenerative business can contribute to all the 4 Returns — inspiration, social, natural, and financial. Regenerative businesses can be found in a variety of sectors, including regenerative agriculture, agroforestry, real estate, tourism, carbon, and water services, to name a few.<sup>⑨</sup>

**Regenerative organic agriculture.** Regenerative organic agriculture improves the resources it uses rather than destroying or depleting them. It is a holistic systems approach to agriculture that encourages continual on-farm innovation for environmental, social, economic, and spiritual well-being.<sup>⑩</sup>

⑨ Learn more on [coursera.org](https://coursera.org), search for: *BMI Sustainable Landscape Restoration*

⑩ Rodale Institute. For a more in-depth understanding of the various definitions of regenerative agriculture, see [frontiersin.org](https://frontiersin.org), search for: *Regenerative Agriculture— Agroecology Without Politics?*

**Regenerative economy.** Rather than extracting from the land and each other, this approach emphasises producing, consuming, and redistributing resources in harmony with the planet. A regenerative economy requires a strategy to build a society based on the local production of food, energy, and goods, and democratisation of how they are consumed, ensuring everyone has full access to healthy food, renewable energy, clean air and water, good jobs, and healthy living environments while supporting collective and participatory governance. Fundamentally, it’s “the application of nature’s laws and patterns of systemic health, self-organisation, self-renewal, and regenerative vitality to socioeconomic systems”.<sup>11</sup>

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Find more on [circle-economy.com](http://circle-economy.com), go to: *Resources* → *Resources & Publications* → *Transforming our Systems With a Regenerative Economy*

**Regional learning lab.** This is also a lab, but now instead of serving one landscape or bioregion, it is a place where the various partners involved in labs from various landscapes within one region (for example, the EU, Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America) come together to exchange knowledge and experiences and find support from like-minded people and organisations. It is a support structure for several labs that share characteristics, for example because they all focus on a particular theme or are near each other.

**Theory of Change.** A visual representation illustrating how you envision your actions could lead to change and impact, often depicted in impact pathways.

**Theory U.** A stakeholder mobilisation approach, instrumental for implementing the 5 Elements of the *4 Returns Framework*, that opens the minds, hearts, and efforts of all stakeholders, fostering one shared vision, bottom-up change, and leadership.

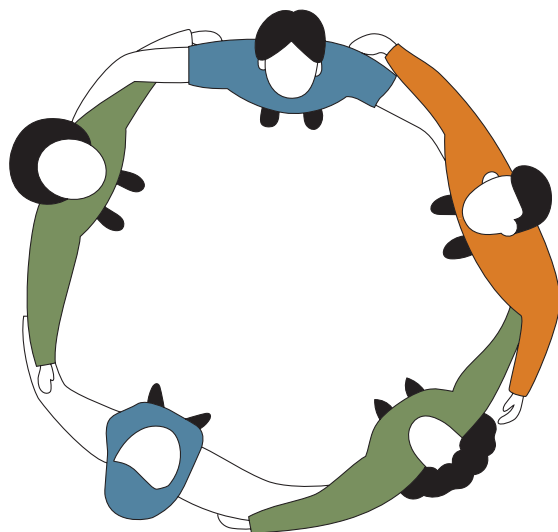
**Wetlands.** Areas of marsh, fen, peatland, or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish, or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six metres.<sup>12</sup>

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Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, Article 1.1.



# Acknowledgements



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*The 4 Returns Framework in practice: a guidebook for holistic landscape restoration* is an inspiring yet practical book, resulting from more than a decade of experience restoring landscapes around the world. It guides the reader in an understandable and compelling way through the complexity of long-term, large-scale holistic landscape restoration, providing clear insights into the "why, what, and how," and delivering inspirational, social, natural, and financial returns. Compiled by experts and practitioners from a diverse array of local landscape partnerships and international organisations, it can be used as a resource for investing in degraded landscapes and seascapes worldwide.

