
4 Returns Labs

Creating spaces of
belonging for large scale
landscape restoration

This white paper is written by Maaike Boumans, Dieter van den Broeck and Pieter Ploeg from Commonland with the intention of further developing the body of work of supporting multi-stakeholder processes aimed at generating large scale landscape restoration. It builds on the foundational work of the Presencing Institute, which informs the Return on Inspiration that is a core element of the 4 Returns Framework for landscape restoration. This paper is an expression of the partnership between Commonland and the Presencing Institute that aims to develop a model of change and build strong regional and landscape partnerships with other organisations to achieve impact at scale. It is a first start to create a dialogue with the wider community. The paper is a living document that will be updated along with insights gained from future dialogues.

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Summary

Welcome.

In front of you lies a living document about 4 Returns Labs as an approach to holistic landscape restoration and restoration, written for people working in the field of supporting collaboration and system change for landscape restoration. You will read about how holistic landscape restoration is a powerful way to respond to multiple crises of our time, how it is already happening in many places around the world, and how the 4 Returns Framework can support a shift away from the maximization of profit per hectare towards a return of inspiration,

social returns, natural returns, and financial returns. We explore the need for system wide collaboration between landowners, farmers, interest groups, citizens, financial institutions and governments. We expand on the need to understand the complex nature of ecological, social, economic and political landscapes in an integrated way and highlight how different forms of complexity are at play at landscape restoration. If we have more than enough innovation, and what we need now is an integration of current initiatives to scale up our collective impact, then how can we create an enabling environment for this type

of systemic collaboration across landscapes? We want to introduce you to what we call ‘Spaces of Belonging’: vessels for large-scale collaboration that invite stakeholders within and outside a landscape to shift to operating from a more inclusive mindset, allowing them to heal the ecological, social and spiritual divide both within themselves and across the community or network, and create resilient business opportunities within those landscapes. And we propose 4 Returns Labs, an approach to multi-stakeholder learning journeys, as a way to create these Spaces of Belonging. We believe Labs create an enabling environment that supports groups of stakeholders across a bioregion to collaborate on landscape restoration at a systemic level. We also believe we need to step up our game. And that a new iteration of this work might be an ‘Ecosystem of Labs’: multiple Labs - multi-stakeholder learning journeys - focusing on different parts of the system within the same bioregion, that are happening simultaneously and are supporting and reinforcing each other.

We hope reading this document will support you and inspire you. Adapt it to your context. Use what is relevant, leave that which is not. Add what is missing. Together we are working across varied landscapes: some of us in the reality of the biodiversity crisis and climate disaster, others in institutional settings places, some in conflict ridden places, some with local or indigenous communities and some in places where that knowledge is to be restored. We hope these words may keep kindling the fire inside you to do just what is needed - knowing it is land, fire, water and air (pneuma) that connects us all.

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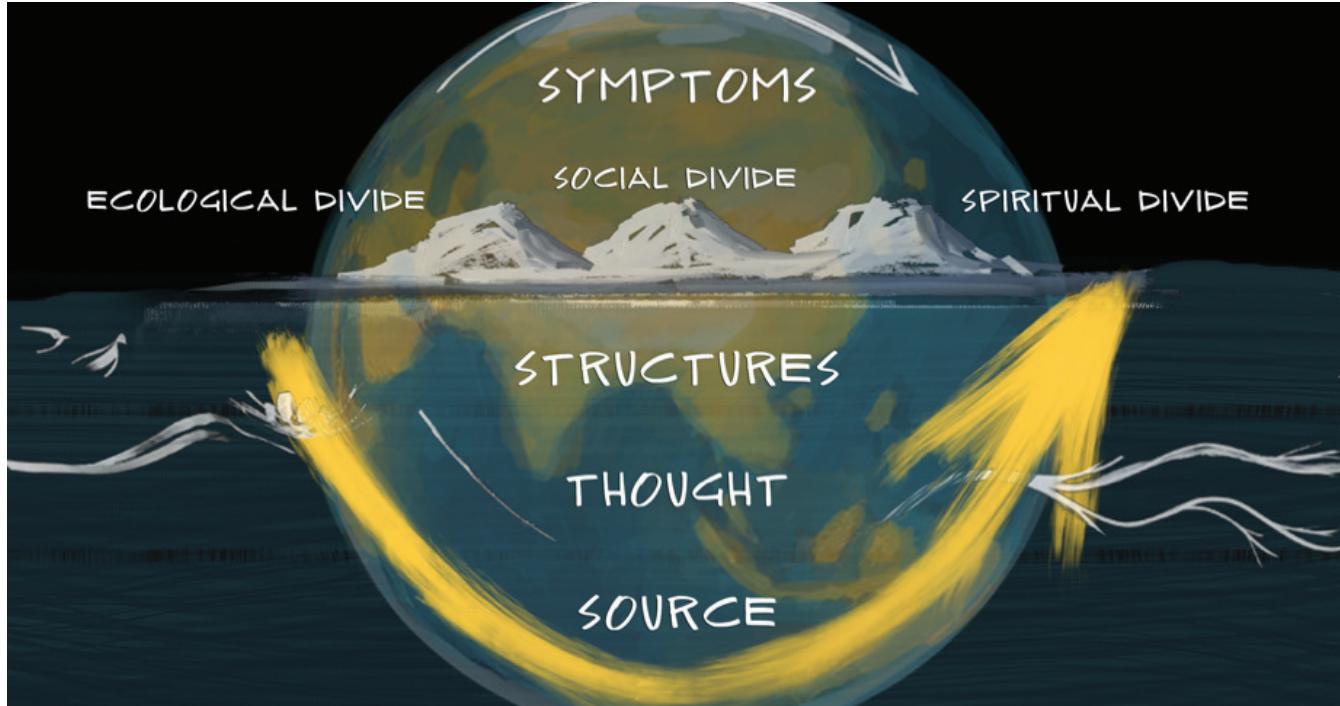
Global Context

When we started writing this document in March 2021, the world was still very much caught up in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of finishing the first version of this document, the latest IPCC report just came out, warning that without immediate, rapid and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, it will be impossible to limit global warming close to 1.5°C or even 2°C. Meanwhile, in February 2022 a war started in Europe with global consequences on social security, food, energy, and mutual trust building. In addition to these current crises, we are facing profound crises on ecology and climate, and unprecedented biodiversity loss, an economic crisis, polarisation, (institutional) racism and worldwide inequality. And perhaps, at the root of it all, lies a crisis in how to live in co-existence on this Earth, how to live in community with each other and within the larger ecological system that we are a part of.

Many of the crises we find ourselves in, are in one way or another connected to the way we treat natural systems like landscapes and seascapes. Man's unsustainable production and consumption practices, combined with an increasing and more demanding population are leading to more and more degraded ecosystems. Today, 60 percent of the functions provided by ecosystems, and which are serving goods and services, are threatened^{1,2}. Land degradation does not only mean a loss of biodiversity, soil, and clean water, and increasing the impact of climate change. It also leads to a loss of social capital (e.g. social inclusion, equity, jobs), a loss in economic activities (increasing financial risk), and a loss of meaning, purpose, and hope for the communities affected worldwide (influencing e.g. mental health).

These are visible, direct and indirect consequences of our unsustainable land management, spurred on by an economy that is based on the idea of ever-increasing growth. When we look underneath the surface, at what drives this collective behavior, we can recognise a paradigm of separation. The idea that human beings exist as separate individuals, and as separate from nature. According to scholar Otto Scharmer, we can distinguish three divides: an ecological divide, a social divide and a spiritual divide³.

We'd like to highlight a few examples of these divides in our global land use system which includes agriculture, aquaculture, grazing, forestry, mining, and infrastructure. The ecological divide addresses a disconnect between self and nature. Our current global land use system thrives on increasing production while simultaneously degrading the ecosystems that form the very basis of



Source: Presencing Institute

this wealth creation. One illustration of the social divide is a disconnection between consumers (citizens) and farmers in the food system, as a consequence of an industrial approach to development. There is an increasing polarisation between farmers and government, indicated by farmers' protests from the Netherlands⁴ to India⁵. The spiritual divide reflects a disconnect between one's

self and Self - the capital Self reflecting a persons' highest potential, what they are here for on Earth. A sign of the spiritual divide is expressed in increasing numbers of burnout, depression and suicide. Although exact numbers are hard to determine as suicides by farmers are under-reported, studies⁶ show suicide rates in some countries are higher in rural areas than urban areas.

Our **current systems** are thus not only destructive to our ecosystems, they wreak havoc in human beings too.

Holistic landscape restoration

It is clear we need to restore our landscapes - on a large scale, urgently. Not only to restore biodiversity, soil, and water quality; and to sequester carbon, but because through landscape restoration we can also bring back jobs, business activity, education and security; realise long-term sustainable profit; and give people hope and a sense of purpose. It offers an opportunity to address multiple of the crises mentioned above which are crucial for our survival.

To do systemic work of restoring large scale landscapes, there needs to be a commitment from stakeholders (both inside and outside the landscape) involved to a long term process, as experience⁷ shows it takes a minimum of 20 years to restore a landscape. However, the reality is that some communities and regions may need to mitigate more urgently as climate disasters intensify. The work that is needed to integrate holistic landscape restoration might include

working on social and historical trauma, deeply rooted conflicts, displacement and histories of poverty, colonisation and class systems, to restore and 'restory' the narrative of identity and relationship to the land.

It is already happening

There are many initiatives worldwide working on holistic landscape restoration and restoration, showing what is possible when we bring our intention, knowledge, expertise, commitment, and resources together. However, these initiatives often face systemic barriers such as siloed interests, land tenure, financial infrastructure, political borders and/or policies that prevent them from scaling up. Yet, there is increasing governmental support and a shared sense of

urgency to restore landscapes globally, as formulated in high-level international policies such as the BONN Challenge, the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration and the three UN Rio conventions on desertification (UNCCD), biodiversity (CBD) and climate (UNFCCC). There is enough potential funding⁸ in the global economic systems, as businesses are realising that “you can’t succeed in a failing world,” according to Ann Cairns, Executive Vice Chair of Mastercard, in a session at the

latest World Economic Forum in 2021. We know we have the knowledge and data we need to implement large scale landscape restoration.

Restoration of the Loess Plateau
(before in 1995, and after 2009)
in Shaanxi province, Northwest China.

Photo credits: Kosima Liu



“As we see fault lines emerging that endanger our peace, our health, our prosperity and ultimately human civilization, it is important to learn from efforts that have been grappling with these questions for years and decades.”

John D. Liu
Ecosystem Ambassador Commonland Foundation

Process

5 Elements

Our landscape restoration process consists of 5 elements.

- Establishing a landscape partnership

- Reach a shared understanding

- Building a landscape plan

- Ensure effective implementation

- Develop monitoring and learning

Impact

4 Returns

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



Return of Inspiration

Opening people's eyes to the possibility of a better future



Social Returns

Creating jobs, businesses, networks, and social prosperity



Natural Returns

Restoring the health, resilience and prosperity of landscapes



Financial Returns

Realising long-term, sustainable, and local income

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 and protection of biodiversity within natural ecosystems such as wetlands, grasslands and forests

Combined Zone

Combining food, fibre and biodiversity productivity through regenerative agriculture, agroforestry and soil restoration.

Economic Zone

Delivering sustainable economic productivity with dedicated areas for activities that create value, typically concentrated in urban areas, infrastructure and 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 holistic understanding

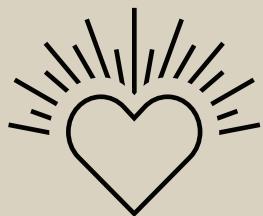
the 4 Returns framework

We need to have a holistic understanding of the system to be able to address underlying causes of landscape degradation. One of such underlying causes is the fact that our current landuse system, including agriculture, is based on the mindset of maximization of financial return of investment per hectare, in line with policies and regulations that continue to promote ecologically degrading economic models. We believe it is crucial to shift from the mindset of 'maximization of \$ profit/hectare' to a mindset of what we call "4 Returns".

The 4 Returns Framework⁹, developed by Commonland, is a systemic, science-based framework that offers a simple formula to create a common understanding of what a healthy landscape means. Developed in close collaboration with scientific institutes, business schools, farmers, and experts, it supports people from across the spectrum – government, business, and communities – to co-create and act on a common vision for a resilient landscape. It supports stakeholders to transform degraded ecosystems through achieving 4 returns by following

five processes (the 5 elements) within a multifunctional landscape (the 3 zones) over the course of minimum of 20 years. The 4 returns are inspiration, social returns, natural returns, and financial returns. Our practice and research have found each of these are vital in restoring landscapes.

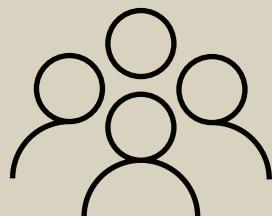
4 Returns



Inspiration

Giving people hope and a sense of purpose

We believe that by making people aware and engaging them, a sense of hope and purpose will return. We pursue this by deeply understanding local and indigenous ownership and wisdom, grasping the meaning of long-term commitment for governments, companies and investors, and taking time for inner reflection.



Social Returns

Bringing back jobs, business activity, education and security

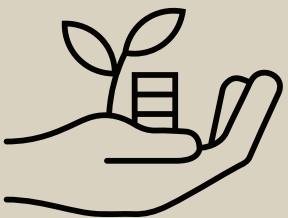
Landscape restoration provides a solution by attracting investment in the land. This brings along renewed economic activity and opportunities for social development. In fact, various countries have already implemented landscape restoration as a means to create jobs.



Natural Returns

Restoring biodiversity, soil, water quality and capturing carbon

Fortunately, the restoration of large-scale ecosystems can be done. This will return essential ecosystem services on which we are heavily depending, including fertile soils, water, biodiversity, biomass and carbon storage.



Financial Returns

Realising long-term sustainable profit

We develop business cases from landscape restoration which are viable and sustainable in the long term. These business activities produce financial benefits to all stakeholders, such as sustainable agriculture and forestry, real estate investment, tourism and sustainable industrial development.

When we approach landscape restoration from the mindset of 4 Returns, we change the way we manage our land, produce our food, finance businesses in the area, and might even change the way we look at the relationship between ourselves and the ecosystems we are a part of. In her famous article Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System¹⁰, Donella Meadows identifies

'changing the mindset or paradigm out of which the system arises' as the second biggest leverage point for system change. Changing the underlying mindset or paradigm is also known as 'deep scaling'¹¹: impacting the cultural roots of a system, by changing relationships, cultural values and beliefs. We believe this mindset shift is crucial.

3 zones

To put the 4 returns into practice, it is especially helpful to divide a landscape into 3 zones, (natural, combined, and economic zones) as a way to support stakeholders to understand the different needs and values in any one area and to ensure equal space for nature and people. Understanding a landscape from the perspective of the three zones helps stakeholders to ground and adjust their impact based on a sense of space. Natural zones contain natural habitats and ecosystems, the aim here is to restore natural habitats and increase connectivity, thereby also increasing benefits for humans from ecosystem functions. Combined zones are places where sustainable production and

regeneration of biodiversity are combined and where the need and potential for rebuilding functional ecosystems, including healthy soils, is often the greatest. The aim here is to diversify in products and move to polyculture, reduce inputs and restore hydrology. Economic zones include urban areas, industrial complexes, and some intensive monoculture plantations. It is usually neither practical nor necessary to restore these, but management choices can help to maintain for example ecological corridors, reduce off-site impacts such as pollution and soil erosion and reduce stress in other parts of the landscape through improvements in e.g. energy efficiency and circular economy.

5 elements

Next to the 4 returns and 3 zones, we have found the 5 elements described below to be essential elements for a diverse group of stakeholders to reconcile competing interests and create synergies that connect people, businesses and organisations towards the joint vision of a healthy landscape for the long-term. These elements often take place simultaneously or overlap and they vary greatly depending on context. They were first described in The Little Sustainable Landscapes Book (2015)¹².

→ **1. Landscape partnership**

Interested rightsholders and stakeholders come together for dialogue and action in a common platform for action.

→ **2. Shared understanding:**

Partners exchange information and discuss perspectives to achieve a shared understanding of landscape conditions, challenges and opportunities, and each other.

→ **3. Landscape vision and collaborative planning:**

The exchange of information and reaching shared understanding leads to a landscape vision and the collaborative development of an agreed action plan.

→ **4. Taking action:**

Stakeholders implement the plan with attention to maintaining collaborative commitments and transparency and to the finance that can make it happen.

→ **5. Monitoring and learning:**

Stakeholders undertake monitoring for adaptive management and accountability.

If you are curious to learn more about the 3 zones or the 5 elements and its applications, see The 4 Returns Framework for landscape restoration. United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021 – 2030 (2021)¹³ for more information and case studies.

To create a system-wide mindset shift from maximization of \$ profit/hectare to 4 returns, using the 5 elements in 3 zones, requires system-wide collaboration: we simply cannot make these kinds of systemic changes on our own.

System-wide collaboration

Multi stakeholder collaboration on a systemic issue requires a shift from a traditional mechanistic problem-solving approach to an integrated, collaborative, systemic (and transformative) way of working. All parts of the system need to be involved: private and public landowners, conservationists, farmers, governments (local, national and international level), business, the financial industry, interest groups, citizens. These stakeholders, inside and outside the landscape, need to be willing to engage in deep listening, dialogue, and collective learning. Often, each of the players is trying to solve the piece of the puzzle they consider ‘their own’, from their individual perspective and position in the system, without understanding the ecology of the area, and the wider system they are a part of and without seeking collaboration. But several

examples¹⁴ show that when collaboration and collective leadership are present we are able to restore the ecological functionality and inspire the cultural diversity of large areas of land. When stakeholders are willing to shift their perspective from ego (short term personal gain) to eco (long term well-being of the whole), awareness based systemic change can happen.

It takes time and skills to build trust, transparency, and a willingness in the system to collaborate across borders and face the barriers on ‘unknown territory’. People may have a shared intention, but the shape of the actual work they’ll be doing - that which is needed - becomes clear only during the process itself. It requires a learning mindset, a willingness to be confronted with one’s

own limitations. To be part of the solution, we must first recognise how we are part of the problem. These deep learning capacities need to be cultivated across all levels: at the level of individuals (holding the space for self-awareness), groups (deep listening and dialogue), organizations (from centralized to networks), and the evolution of larger systems (coordinating through seeing the whole)¹⁵. Finding the right leverage points in the system will likely be a story of trial and error.

We see great potential for these new kinds of social alliances, multi-stakeholder partnerships coupled with a sense of belonging to a territory, that can inspire partners to act more cohesively, better manage conflict and respond more adaptively to an uncertain future¹⁶.

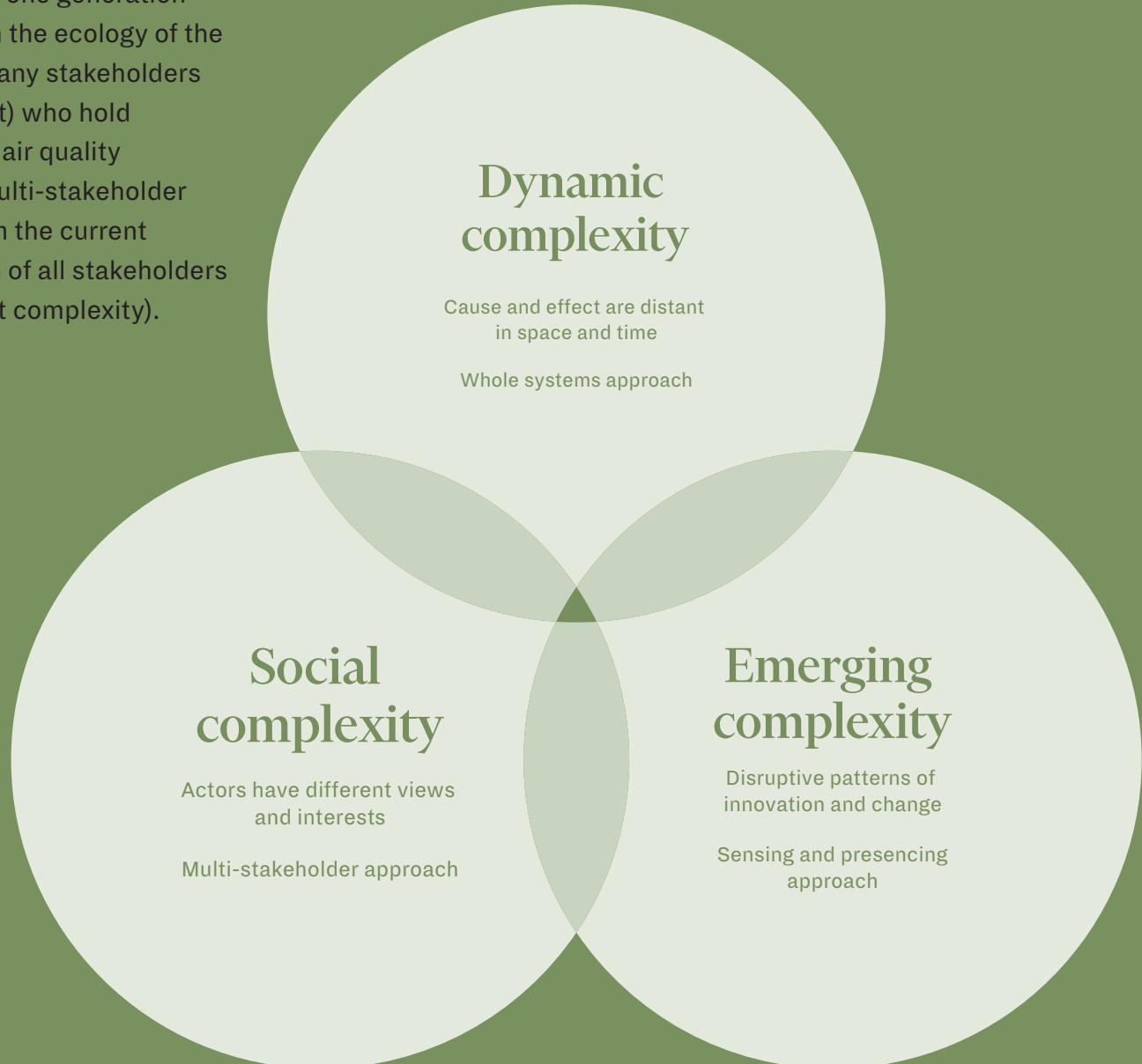
Working in complexity

System-wide collaboration is not the only piece of the puzzle. We are operating in complexity and need to take this into account when setting out to restore landscapes. Large scale Holistic landscape restoration and restoration doesn't have a simple straightforward approach. Even with all the expertise in the world, there are no 'copy-paste', step-by-step solutions. Landscape degradation, as a 'wicked problem', has multiple causes, many interdependencies, and different stakeholders who each hold a different understanding of what the problem is (and

who is responsible or should 'fix' it). To achieve large-scale restoration goals, efforts must tackle the complex nature of ecological, social, economic and political landscapes in an integrated manner¹⁷.

In describing the basic pattern of the U methodology of transformation, Otto Scharmer from the Presencing Institute describes three forms of complexity: dynamic complexity, social complexity, and emergent complexity.

All three dynamics are at play within a landscape: the impact of poor and not well integrated land management becomes apparent only after longer time periods and restoration of landscapes takes at least one generation (high dynamic complexity), but often more, depending on the ecology of the area. As we have seen, landscape restoration involves many stakeholders (farmers, industry, financial system, citizens, government) who hold multiple interests around e.g., revenue, land use, tenure, air quality (high social complexity). The complexity of working on multi-stakeholder endeavours for landscape restoration requires going from the current ‘individual problem solving’ approach to collective action of all stakeholders involved to achieve landscape restoration (high emergent complexity).



Why we need diversity

Scientists have proven that biodiverse soils and landscapes are more resilient in the long run than mono cropping systems with substantial chemical input. Simply said: an increase of biodiversity within an area, will bring down risks for people, investors and business, when e.g., heavy weather events due to climate change take place. Following this line, we see that cultural, ethnical, and gender diversity will also contribute to resilience and in bringing down risks. In order to see the whole system as fully as we can and work with these different types of complexity, we need a diversity of voices and

perspectives in the room that reflects the system. It is important to ensure a diversity of voices in terms of e.g., socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, and ability. Diversity in perspectives allows us to spot blind spots in our thinking and increases the chances of developing prototypes that address root causes. Experiencing the richness of working with and learning from a diverse group, also helps us to understand the value of biodiversity as embodied in nature more deeply, reinforcing a connection to nature.

Embodying this diversity in the conveying team as much as possible is a helpful starting point. Bringing real diversity in terms of power, class, gender, age and ethnicity in the room is not easy. It takes time to build relationships of trust that will allow the conveying team to bring the right people in. In collaboration it is often helpful to “slow down to speed up”. A Lab process, which will be described below, supports a group to lean into this slowing down. Hence, for both forms of diversity, the timeline is important as resilience is not built overnight.

Creating Spaces of Belonging



There are ample examples in human history (such as the development of the Montreal protocol¹⁸ and the women's suffrage movement¹⁹) where people have worked across sectors and solved big problems successfully. We believe that in the context of landscape restoration, "Spaces of Belonging" can be of value for this: vessels for large-scale collaboration, that invite people to shift to operating from an eco-

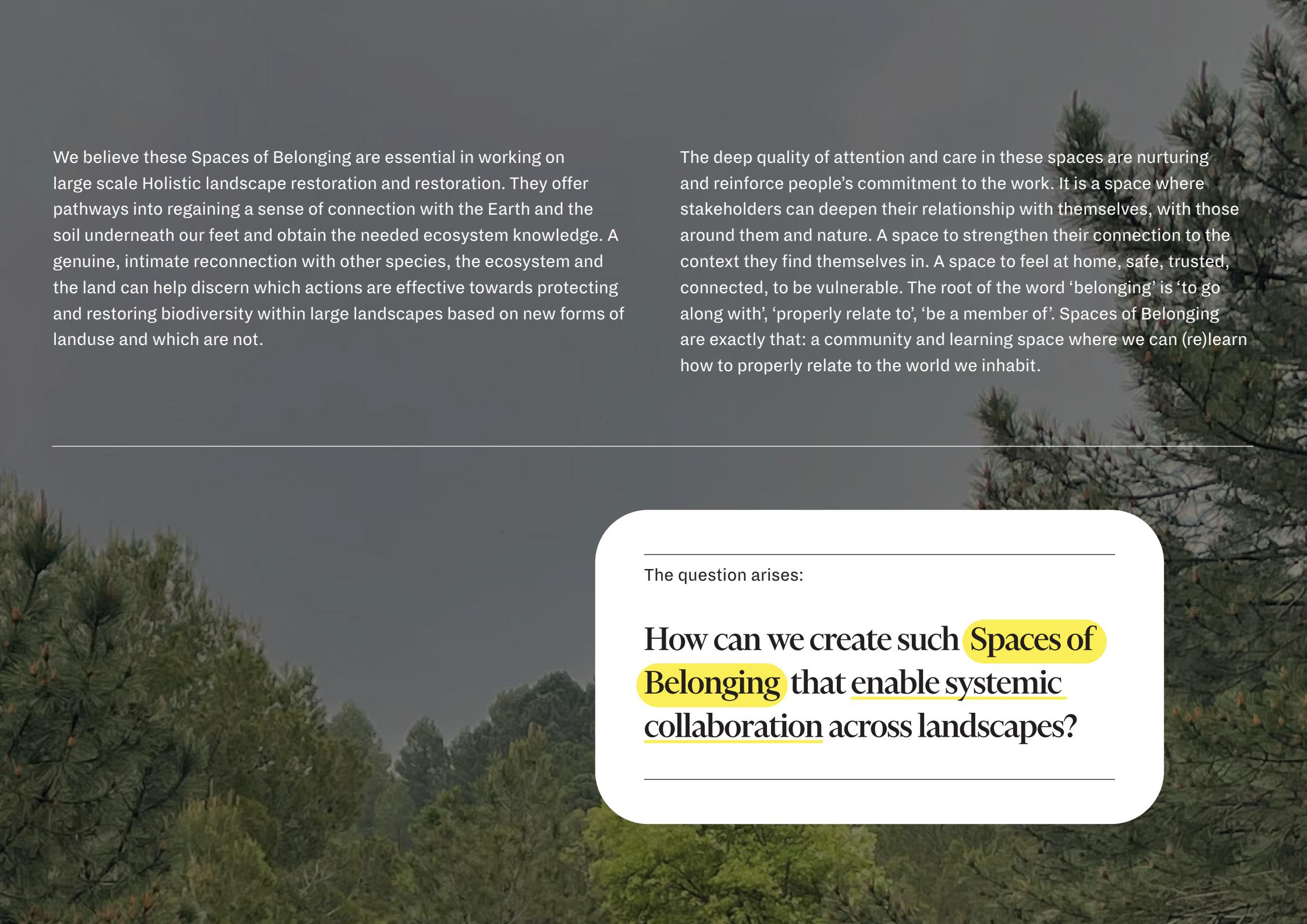
mindset. Spaces of Belonging allow us to heal the ecological, social and spiritual divide, within each participant and across the community or network. This also allows people to build new generative business models, develop new financial models and new ways of working together for creating impact.



“Perhaps what is needed so deeply in this world adrift, in these times of uncertainty and unprecedented urgency, are places we can come home to. Places we can rest. Gather strength. Gain clarity. Grow our capacity. Where we can be in learning with fellow human beings and be held by the larger web of life. Spaces of belonging.”

Maaike Boumans

Facilitator, Spoken Word Poet and co-author thought-paper



We believe these Spaces of Belonging are essential in working on large scale Holistic landscape restoration and restoration. They offer pathways into regaining a sense of connection with the Earth and the soil underneath our feet and obtain the needed ecosystem knowledge. A genuine, intimate reconnection with other species, the ecosystem and the land can help discern which actions are effective towards protecting and restoring biodiversity within large landscapes based on new forms of landuse and which are not.

The deep quality of attention and care in these spaces are nurturing and reinforce people's commitment to the work. It is a space where stakeholders can deepen their relationship with themselves, with those around them and nature. A space to strengthen their connection to the context they find themselves in. A space to feel at home, safe, trusted, connected, to be vulnerable. The root of the word 'belonging' is 'to go along with', 'properly relate to', 'be a member of'. Spaces of Belonging are exactly that: a community and learning space where we can (re)learn how to properly relate to the world we inhabit.

The question arises:

How can we create such Spaces of Belonging that enable systemic collaboration across landscapes?



Labs as an approach

We propose Labs are a powerful embodiment of these Spaces of Belonging. One way of describing Labs is as multi-stakeholder learning journeys. They are increasingly being applied to address complex societal challenges and form social alliances. There is a wide range of types of labs: Social Innovation Labs, Living Labs, Urban Living Labs, Urban Transition Labs and Public Sector Innovation Labs, based on systems and design theory and/or complexity science²⁰. Labs take a systemic approach: they focus on disrupting the underlying

patterns that contribute to the socio-ecological problems²¹. A diverse group of stakeholders commits itself to a long-term journey they do not know the outcome of but hold a shared intention for. By creating a space for authentic communication, mutual learning and inviting a systemic perspective, relationships between the various stakeholders are transformed. They learn to see different possibilities for the system they create together and are able to form innovative ideas to move in that direction. Transformative spaces like these are by

their nature challenging at times. Conflicts will come up. With tools and structures for creating safe(r) and braver spaces, a Lab can offer a constructive space to address and work with conflicts in support of the benefit of the whole. People may step in and out of a Lab process. An open infrastructure, a ‘container’, that supports the continuity of a Lab is therefore important.

Labs offer an approach for working with the three types of complexity in the context of landscape restoration. Following the

Dr Noel Nannup, a respected Aboriginal Elder, story-teller and cultural guide and co-founder of Danjoo Koorliny.
Photo credits: Danjoo Koorliny Walking Together

architecture of a U-process it brings together relevant stakeholders and takes them on a journey of sensing and understanding the socio-, ecological, economic and political landscape they are a part of more deeply. Stakeholders forge new relationships and are collectively discovering the biggest leverage points in their system. From this understanding, they develop system-interventions at strategic leverage points.

Along the way, stakeholders grow their systemic/holistic leadership capacity to take collective action and form a pro-active transition network that is able to support and scale up emergent and evolving transition initiatives. This approach shifts away from the idea of finding easy solutions (there are no “silver bullets”) as the complexity of the system asks rather for a platform of ongoing collaboration to support a systemic change in the socio, political, economic, and ecological system of a landscape, supported by large-scale investable landscape visions.

As a space ‘in-between’, Labs can also offer a ‘loom’ for “weaving” together the bottom-up initiatives with high level visions and policies, financial investments and knowledge brokering. This “weaving” allows the - usually smaller scale - bottom-up initiatives to scale up and thereby help the system shift. As such, they are essential in strengthening the ties in a network that can then work together on an endeavour that is larger than any one of them. These spaces are both a way to support systems change and embody the change in itself: a fundamentally different way of being and acting in the world.

3D System Sculpting involves creating a three-dimensional model that ‘maps out’ a current situation using small items. When the model is completed, the group moves around the table to view the model from different perspectives (2021).
Photo credits: Commonland



4 Returns Labs

'4 Returns Labs' focus specifically on holistic landscape restoration, combining Theory U methodology and the 4 Returns framework. It is a series of workshops for all relevant stakeholders within the landscape to learn how to address the underlying causes of landscape degradation and develop actions for landscape restoration together. Participants commit to a long-term process to collectively find ways to contribute to landscape restoration, be it through direct intervention in a landscape, by focusing on policy and funding mechanisms, or by zooming in on the chain of a specific product. We introduce the notion of three zones (natural, combined and economic zones) as a helpful way for stakeholders to ground their

activities in different parts of the landscape, adjusting to the needs and values of that specific area. This will create an integrated and holistic plan for the landscape. As we're working with landscape restoration, it is vital that we find ways to include the 'voice' of the land. To create moments and rituals to (re)connect with life on the land and in the soil, to come back into relationship and heal the divide that we have created over the past generations. This is not always easy and might be met with resistance, but it is an essential part of the work of landscape restoration.

See next pages for an example of 4 Returns Labs in The Netherlands.

'4 Returns Labs' focus specifically on holistic and landscape restoration, combining Theory U methodology and the 4 Returns framework. It is a series of workshops for all relevant stakeholders within the landscape to learn how to address the underlying causes of landscape degradation and develop actions for landscape restoration together.



Voor de Oogst van Morgen,

THE NETHERLANDS

In 2018, the first large-scale multi-stakeholder Systemic Innovation Lab on land restoration called “For Tomorrow’s Harvest” took place in the Netherlands. This Lab was facilitated by Commonland and the Netherlands Physical Environment Consultative Council (under the Dutch government) to tackle the degradation of agricultural landscapes, associated biodiversity loss, land and water pollution. The Lab took place between November 2018 and December 2020 and brought together

80 stakeholders from over 25 organisations (policymakers, NGOs, banks, farmers, researchers and consultants), forming an inclusive transdisciplinary network. The aim was to develop the collective leadership of stakeholders towards transformation of the agricultural system in the Netherlands. Participants joined 10 interactive one to three-day offline and online workshops following the process framework of Theory-U²².

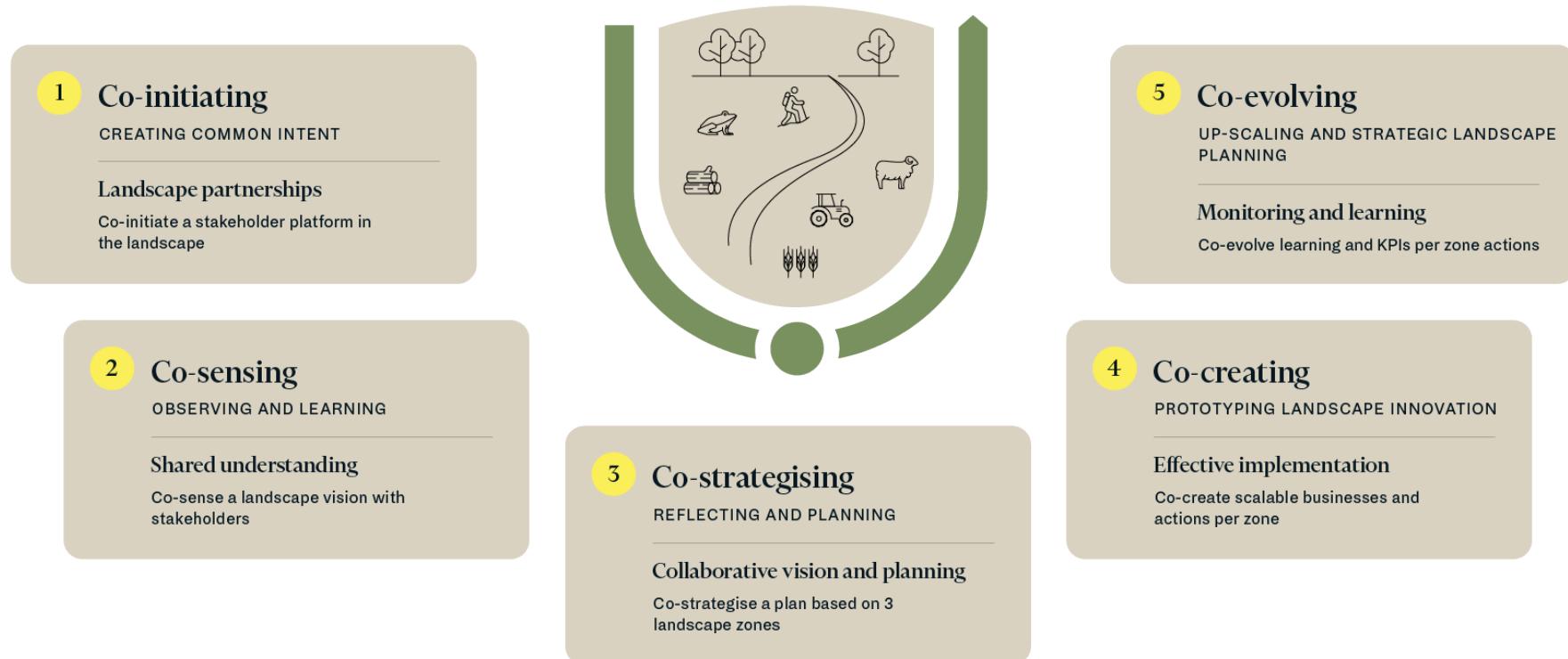
4 Returns Lab Process Design

A 4R Lab is based on the integration of Commonlands' & Presencing Institutes experience with applying Theory U as a framework for guiding awareness-based system change within landscape restoration. It supports people to learn from the future as it emerges, in contrast to our common way of learning from experiences of the past. It helps participants to open beyond their assumptions and judgements and usual ways of making sense ('downloading') so that they can consciously participate in a larger field for change. As Scharmer says: "Leadership in this century means shifting the structure of collective attention - our listening - at all levels²³." He proposes that what is needed for systems transformation, is to move from ego (industrial, profit driven, short term) to eco (holistic, long-term, multiple returns).

By taking people on a carefully crafted journey, a 4 Returns Lab helps participants become aware of their blind spots and helps to support a shift in their normal course of action. They are encouraged to leave familiar patterns behind to take a fresh look at what wants to arise. Growing one's awareness of the place from which we operate is important, as Bill O'Brien (former CEO Hanover Insurance) captured when he said: "The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor."

A 4 Returns Lab is based on the methodology of Theory U and consists of the five underlying phases with various workshops, learning journeys, and dialogue interviews. The exact design of a 4 Returns Lab is adapted depending on context.

By taking people on a carefully crafted journey, a 4 Returns Lab helps participants become aware of their blind spots and helps to support a shift in their normal course of action.



1. Co-initiating

In the first phase we focus on nurturing deep and trustful relationships among the stakeholders, increasing awareness of each other's purpose, values and work. They are introduced to deep listening and systems thinking, among other practices. Together with the group, we co-create an inspiring

shared intention for the bioregion based on the 4 Returns Framework. From here we start to notice which solutions have high potential, and which barriers need prioritised addressing. The desired outcome is that the stakeholders feel committed to and have gained a sense of trust in the

Lab process, share the same language (4 Returns framework), understand the importance of system thinking and have started to uncover some of their individual and collective blind spots.

2. Co-sensing

The partnership will collectively ‘sense’ the bioregional system-dynamics from within, connecting to the highest potential and opportunities for change and the biggest barriers for scaling. Through learning journeys, dialogue interviews and shadowing they will deepen their understanding of the underlying structures and mindsets that need to be addressed for system change and continue to develop their own capacity for systems leadership. The primary focus here is to learn from what is already working, and what could be possible if we would really all work together.

4. Co-creating

In the co-creating phase, stakeholders start to prototype the integrated solutions based on the local context in small teams. They step over the threshold into thoughtful and heartfelt action, and start co-creating a portfolio of locally adapted solutions with system change scaling potential. This includes creating an impact strategy, first scaling, replication strategies and regenerative business development. Our focus in this phase is on prototyping; doing small scale actions on the ground, reflecting on those actions and adapting in order to learn quickly and integrate strategically. These actions are based on insights from thorough landscape analysis and informed by the concept of the 3 zones.

3. Presencing

Integrating and reflecting on the learning from the co-sensing phase, the stakeholders “uncover their deeper knowing about what is going on the system, their role within it, and what they, individually and collectively, are being called upon to do²⁴”. They will move from learning to action by connecting to inspiration and a common will. In order to transform the deeper structures and mindset, stakeholders need to also connect with their own role in bringing about the necessary system change and mindset shift.

5. Co-evolving

The last step in the process is our chance to fund, scale, replicate and integrate the prototypes and innovations into the existing bioregional system. 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 the scaling, adapting and replication of these solutions.

It is important to acknowledge that the entire process is **not** a linear, strictly step-by-step process. Stakeholders return to the intention they've set at the co-initiation phase at later stages, continue to sense and observe throughout and one-on-one collaborations could already emerge from the beginning of the process.

Building blocks

In addition to 4 Returns and Theory U, there are various other theories and models we work with in designing and facilitating a 4 Returns Lab. We'll briefly introduce a few of them.

To map the systems change we are cultivating, the "X-Curve"²⁵, developed by Derk Loorbach from DRIFT and the Two Loops

Model²⁶ developed by Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze from the Berkana Institute, are helpful tools for stakeholders to understand the larger transition they are a part of and what their role in the transition is. Participatory learning processes from the Art of Hosting Conversations that Matter²⁷ support stakeholders in learning how to harness the power of meaningful

conversation in creating system change. The Art of Hosting is an approach to leadership that scales up from the personal to the systemic using personal practice, dialogue, facilitation and the co-creation of innovation to address complex challenges, and is used in many different sectors across the world.

With these multiple 4 Returns Labs happening in one bioregion simultaneously, we need something that supports these 4 Returns Labs to link, integrate and implement the prototypes they develop. In this way, experiments can grow from niche alternatives to new patterns, structures, and ultimately a new system. We call this an Ecosystem of Labs.

From Spaces of Belonging to an Ecosystem of Labs

We have described 4 Returns Labs - multi-stakeholder learning processes as a leverage for system change towards holistic landscape restoration - as an approach to create belonging and support a community to collaborate towards large scale land restoration. This type of large scale land restoration happens within one bioregion, an area defined by a comparable climate, ecosystem, and socio-economic system. But working with these large scale areas at a minimum of 100.000 hectare, one single 4 Returns Lab wouldn't be able to bring together all the needed stakeholders, dive into the multitude of intertwined issues and aspects and create transition prototypes on all of these. We need multiple 4 Returns Labs

in a region at the same time, for example Landscape Labs involving stakeholders directly connected to the land (such as farmers, citizens, local entrepreneurs); Policy Labs on national and regional levels focused on government policy; Value Chain Labs focused on specific products or produce; Regional Labs focused on current or new regional developments; a Finance Lab working with alternative/new means of finance; and a Soil Lab working specifically with the soil in particular areas.

With these multiple 4 Returns Labs happening in one bioregion simultaneously, we need something that supports these 4 Returns Labs to link, integrate and

implement the prototypes they develop. In this way, experiments can grow from niche alternatives to new patterns, structures, and ultimately a new system. We call this an Ecosystem of Labs. Just like a 4 Returns Lab requires a 'backbone organisation', an entity capable of facilitating the learning journey and a different kind of collaboration, documenting the learnings, and supporting the further development of prototypes, an Ecosystem of Labs requires a supporting infrastructure. We believe this could be the next iteration of hosting multi-stakeholder processes for large scale landscape restoration and are currently developing such a prototype together with partners in Europe: the Bioregional Weaving Lab.

Conclusion

Holistic landscape restoration is a powerful way to respond to the interconnected crises of our time. By offering a shared language and approach, the 4 Returns Framework can support stakeholders to shift from the mindset of maximization of profit per hectare towards social returns, natural returns, financial returns and a return of inspiration. System wide collaboration between all stakeholders in a bioregion is needed for systemic change and can be achieved through 4 Returns Labs, supporting stakeholders to scale up current initiatives and collaborate more effectively. 4 Returns Labs builds trust-based relationships between stakeholders, helping them understand the system they

are part of, creating a shared intention and distributing knowledge and funding. All of this contributes to collaborative vision and planning to mobilise collective action on the ground for large scale holistic landscape restoration. We propose 4 Returns Labs have the potential to create Spaces of Belonging that invite stakeholders to develop this mindset and the needed capacities. And we believe an Ecosystem of Labs – multiple 4 Returns Labs happening simultaneously in one bioregion, focusing on different parts of the system, that are supporting and reinforcing each other – are a new iteration of this work. We would love to explore it together with you.

Message from the authors

This is our latest thinking and inspiration. We're not saying it is easy work. We do know it is beautiful work. If this paper spoke to you and you are wondering what you could do, in your own context, in the area you live in, we suggest you could start by going on a dialogue walk²⁸ with somebody you don't know who lives or works close to you. Who might you reach out to that could offer new insights about the land you are living on? Who might have a different perspective due to their occupation or background? Bring your curiosity, practice deep listening²⁹ and see what unfolds from that conversation. We would love to hear about your experience! If you are interested to learn more about this work, please contact Dieter van den Broeck (dieter.vandenbroeck@commonland.com) or Pieter Ploeg (pieter.ploeg@commonland.com).

Glossary

4 Returns Framework: the 4 Returns Framework from Healthy Landscapes is a structured practical set of tools to achieve integrated landscape management through transforming degraded landscapes by focusing on 4 returns of impact over the course of minimum 20 years with a zoning approach: inspiration, social, natural, and financial returns

Biodiversity: derived from biological diversity. it means the variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems (source: UN Convention on Biological Diversity, <https://www.cbd.int/>)

Bioregion: a specific geographic area that is distinct from others by the characteristics of

its natural environment. A bioregion is larger than an ecosystem and is in fact usually host to several. A bioregion is large enough to encompass all the biological activity and ecological processes necessary for life to sustain itself, and for local habitats and ecosystems to preserve their biological integrity. They are certainly influenced by administrative and political boundaries but are neither defined nor constrained by them³⁰

Bioregional Lab: a Lab in a region with a comparable climate, ecosystem, and socio-economic system. Defined by national borders, (e.g., Spain), or across borders (e.g., The Alps). Within a Bioregion, several different landscapes can be identified

Dynamic complexity: when cause and effect are distant in space and time, requiring a whole system approach

Ecosystem: an ecosystem is a community

of living organisms (plants, animals and microbes) in conjunction with the non-living components of their environment (things like air, water and mineral soil), interacting as a system. These biotic and abiotic components are regarded as linked together through nutrient cycles and energy flows. As ecosystems are defined by the network of interactions among organisms and between organisms and their environment they can be of any size but usually encompass specific limited spaces

Ecosystem of Labs: multiple Labs (multi-stakeholder learning journeys) focusing on different parts of the system within the same bioregion, that are happening simultaneously and are supporting and reinforcing each other. This Ecosystem of Labs is held by a network of partners that coordinate the various Labs

Emergent complexity: when there are

disruptive patterns of innovation and change, calling for sensing and presencing approach

Financial returns: realising long-term sustainable profit

Integrated Landscape Management: an overarching inclusive approach of technical, institutional, market and policy solutions that enable stakeholders to better align and integrate efforts to sustain and restore healthy ecosystems, improve livelihoods and strengthen local economies at a landscape scale (source: 1000 Landscapes for 1 Billion People, <https://landscapes.global/resources/>)

Inspiration: giving people hope and a sense of purpose

Lab: an approach to multi-stakeholder learning journeys, also called Systemic/Social (Innovation) Labs

Landuse: is the term used to describe the human use of land. It represents the economic and cultural activities (e.g. agricultural, residential, industrial, mining and recreational uses) that are practiced at a given place.

Public and private lands frequently represent very different uses. For example, urban development seldom occurs on publicly

owned lands (e.g., parks, wilderness areas), while privately owned lands are infrequently protected for wilderness uses. Land use differs from land cover in that some uses are not always physically obvious (e.g. land used for producing timber but not harvested for many years and forested land designated as wilderness will both appear as forest-covered, but they have different uses).

Landscape: the visible features of an area of land, its landforms, and how they integrate with natural or man-made features. When we use landscape in this context, we mean landscapes and seascapes, that is a number of ecosystems that together form the landscape.

Landscape restoration: the process of restoring the ecological functions of a landscape and revitalizing the social and economic functions

Natural returns: essential ecosystem services on which (non)human life depends, including fertile soils, water, biodiversity, biomass and carbon storage

Social returns: bringing back jobs, business activity, education and security

Social complexity: when actors have different views and interests, requiring a multi-stakeholder approach

Spaces of Belonging: vessels for large-scale collaboration, that invite people to shift to operating from an eco-mindset, allowing them to heal the ecological, social and spiritual divide both within themselves and across the community or network

Three divides: coined by Otto Scharmer (Theory U) as the ecological divide, social divide and spiritual divide currently underlying much of society challenges worldwide

Theory U: change framework and set of methodologies developed by Otto Scharmer, senior lecturer at MIT, that has been used by thousands of organizations and communities worldwide to address our most pressing global challenges

Weaving: is the practice of interconnecting people, projects and places to each other and to a shared purpose; fostering collaborations for systemic impact; facilitating collective learning; and embodying the change we wish to see³¹

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Endnotes

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