From existing landscape partnerships to Regional Land Use Partnerships: sharing lessons learnt

Researchers Antonia Eastwood and Alice Hague from the James Hutton Institute outline eight lessons learnt from their research on urban and rural land partnerships.

In 2021, the Scottish Government published its third Land Use Strategy. This strategy seeks more inclusive conversations around how land should be used in Scotland and aims to broaden the range of interests engaged in land use decision-making. The strategy also aims to move away from a sector-by-sector approach towards an overarching holistic picture of what sustainable land use could look like. The strategy proposes to pilot a set of five platforms for change initiatives, called Regional Land Use Partnerships (RLUPs) which will use a landscape and ecosystems approach. These pilots will be used to trial different governance options and partnership working on a regional scale, to understand how best to work collaboratively, and signpost funding opportunities.

Working collaboratively across a landscape to manage land in an inclusive way, and to deliver multiple benefits, requires co-operation and collaboration between different actors and stakeholders. These actors and stakeholders may have very different and sometimes conflicting values, perspectives, and land management priorities. To work together to achieve more sustainable (and equitable) landscape outcomes, diverse actors and stakeholders will need to learn and adapt together, resolve issues and conflicts, develop innovative solutions, and reach compromises that are acceptable by those involved. The process of ongoing learning and adapting decision-making as learning occurs, while also widening participation, is called adaptive co-management. The adaptive co-management of land is complex. However, by building on the lessons learnt from our research, the RLUPs can continue the learning process and support more inclusive sustainable land use that benefits nature and communities alike.

Our research

To better understand the factors that enable learning and adaptation in different partnerships and collaborations, we conducted 24 in-depth interviews and social mapping exercises with land managers, landscape co-ordinators and land management advisors in the Cairngorms National Park (15 interviews) and in central Scotland (9 interviews). Further details of our research methodology can be found in further reading below.
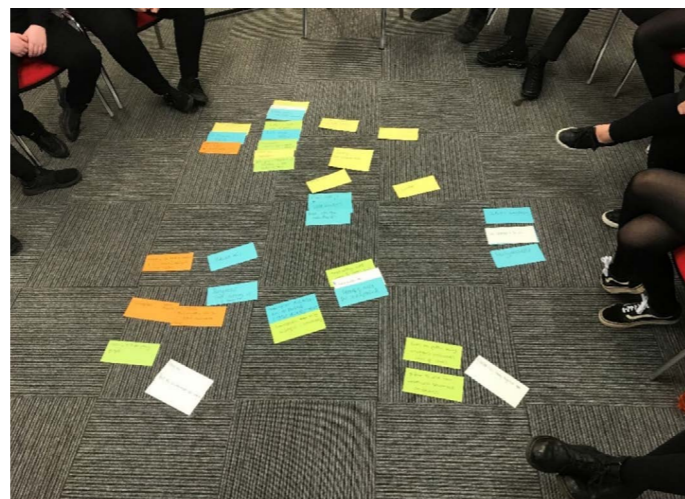
Engaging neglected voices (e.g. young people) in landscape partnerships is essential for social and environmental justice, as well as transformative change.
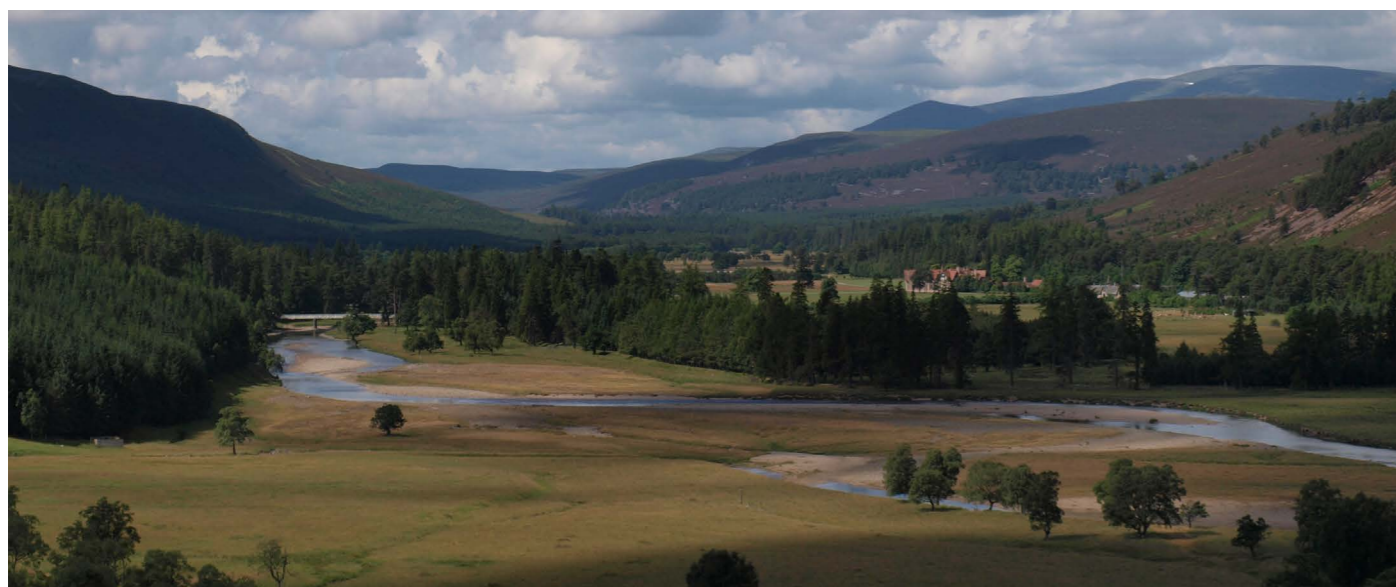
Lessons learnt

1. Managing landscapes requires incorporation of **different types of knowledge** at different scales e.g. local, experiential, scientific, professional (such as health, green network, planning or housing professionals), subjective, objective knowledge etc. The most successful land managers and partnerships are those that seek new knowledge and understanding of complex issues, learn from that knowledge, and adapt their management accordingly.

2. Successful partnerships are based on **social relationships and networks** which need building and nurturing over time. This is particularly true for mandated or imposed (top-down) partnerships where there may be differences in values and perspectives, or even existing conflicts. Cultivating positive and meaningful social relationships can help build trust between people. Different strategies can be used to develop relationships and include organising learning-focused field trips, holding informal social events, using the creative arts, and employing staff to bridge social networks. Enabling people to interact and engage with others outside their usual social circles and settings allows them to make new connections with people they might not normally meet.

3. The **lack of trust is a key barrier** to meaningful engagement in partnerships and subsequently, opportunities for knowledge sharing and learning are reduced. Systems-based trust (trust in procedures and governance, rather than trust in individuals and organisations) can be increased by paying explicit attention to decision-making processes to ensure they are fair and accessible, and are designed to reduce power imbalances between people.

4. **Understanding the reasons behind the lack of engagement** is essential for inclusivity in land management and sustainability. For some communities, engaging with land use issues is not a priority as other issues take precedence. Reducing poverty and inequality, and empowering and building the capacity of communities is essential to achieve greater inclusivity and environmental justice in landscape partnerships. The use of creative participatory approaches such as participatory video and nature well-being programmes, can help disenfranchised groups engage with local issues, whilst simultaneously building agency.

5. Powerful actors and their social networks can greatly influence and shape the context in which decisions about land use are made. **Levelling out power dynamics** in landscape partnerships by using more democratic, deliberative decision-making processes, and diversifying land and business ownership (e.g. through worker-owned co-operatives or community-owned businesses) would support more inclusive ways of managing land.

Cultivating relationships and building trust is essential to successful partnerships.

6. Building trust, nurturing partnerships, and developing meaningful engagement programmes with communities needs substantial **financial and staff resources.** Cuts to public and local authority funding limits community engagement activities and maintenance of greenspace quality. The lack of funding and resource must be addressed, especially in socially deprived areas to ensure partnerships are inclusive, equitable and deliver multiple benefits to all.

7. **Targeted funding** can provide opportunities for new and existing relationships to develop and can catalyse new collaborations and partnerships. Funding criteria often influence the ultimate scope and focus of projects on the ground.

8. Land use partnerships should seek to reflect on, and **capture learning outcomes,** and share their findings. Opportunities for organisational learning should be integrated within monitoring and evaluation of landscape-scale projects.

Further reading

Connecting young people with greenspaces: The case for participatory video

A cup of tea? – The role of social relationships, networks and learning in land managers' adaptations to policy change

Enabling adaptive co-management of urban land: lessons from central Scotland

Adaptive co-management of the Scottish uplands – the role of social networks

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