

PRACTICE INSIGHTS

UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration

Building bridges for inspired action: On landscape restoration and social alliances

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Abstract

1. Participatory approaches are linked to landscape restoration (LR) success, but not all participatory approaches are created equal. Engagement approaches that invest in transformative stakeholder and governance processes can create the right conditions for long-term LR commitment.
2. A large-scale LR initiative in Spain, namely AIVelAl, illustrates how collective action can be activated through inspiration, trust and hope, which, in turn, can be cultivated through the application of social schemes designed to support inclusive stakeholder engagement processes and programmes.
3. Collective agency and inspiration matter for activating and sustaining LR actions and outcomes. Multi-stakeholder partnerships that speak to human agency, inclusivity and trust between actors can help create a deeper shared meaning, a place-based sense of belonging that encourages cohesive landscape stewardship.

KEYWORDS

landscape restoration, multi-stakeholders, participatory engagement, partnerships, place-based attachment, social alliances, transformative change

1 | INTRODUCTION

In response to global ecosystem degradation, biodiversity loss and climate change, landscape restoration (LR) appears high on the international agenda (UNEP and FAO, 2020). Along with other major initiatives, the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021–2030 seeks to accelerate restoration action around the globe (UNEP, 2021). Because the challenges we face are interconnected, it is essential that these problems are tackled together, and that restoration efforts address the complexity of ecological, social, economic and political landscapes in an integrated manner (Carmenta et al., 2020). It is widely recognized that socio-ecological systems and locally led action are crucial for achieving multiple restoration

benefits (César et al., 2021; Fischer et al., 2021). Yet, despite numerous guidelines and tools to encourage participatory approaches, the implementation of multi-stakeholder-driven restoration is not commonplace (Höhl et al., 2020; Jellinek et al., 2019). Restoration initiatives that insufficiently consider Indigenous communities or local stakeholders' perspectives, knowledge and needs may generate unforeseen or unwanted effects (Robinson et al., 2021; Scheidel & Gingrich, 2020).

Landscapes are shaped by stakeholders with different world-views, resources and agendas, leading to trade-offs and potential conflict (Mugo et al., 2020; Sayer et al., 2013). Placing stakeholders at the centre of LR action and decision-making is critical for achieving anticipated outcomes (Gornish et al., 2021; Höhl et al., 2020).

Dietmar Roth passed away on July 2, 2021 before the resubmission of the paper.

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Multi-stakeholder engagement can help identify and reveal trade-offs, power structures and imbalances, positive feedback loops and synergies that can lead to positive restoration outcomes and transformative change¹ (Garcia et al., 2020; Höhl et al., 2020). Moreover, it can identify challenges linked to stakeholder agency and governance arrangements that impact LR actions and outcomes (Visseren-Hamakers, 2018; Wilson & Cagalan, 2016).

Not all stakeholder engagement approaches are equal (Sayer et al., 2013). Marginal or short-term engagement of landscape stakeholders has been linked to poor restoration outcomes (Scheidt & Work, 2018; Sungusia & Lund, 2016). For example, Höhl et al. (2020) found that globally, the lack of stakeholder involvement was associated with project failure. Alternatively, holistic people-centred practices can engage people's motivations, build trust and collaboration which promotes project success (Sayer et al., 2013; Wilson & Cagalan, 2016). For example, Mazón et al. (2021) found that higher stakeholder engagement and satisfaction raised participants' longer-term commitment to restoration action regardless of financial inducements.

History and place influence human relational processes and place attachment in landscapes (Cockburn et al., 2019; Fornara et al., 2020). Just as displacement from ancestral lands disconnects people's sense of belonging, so too, the degradation or disruption of ecosystems disconnects people from their land and heritage as they know it, leading to grief, hopelessness, a reduced sense of belonging and esteem (Fried, 2000; Masterson et al., 2019). Restoring or fostering people's connection to land, purpose and pride can trigger a collective sense of responsibility and action (Ruggeri, 2020; Williams et al., 2020).

Conceiving stakeholders' collective inspiration as an outcome in LR frameworks is uncommon. Ferwerda (2015) places the *return of Inspiration*, an empowering place-based cultural and ecological connection that can activate and maintain collective action, on par with natural, financial and social returns (impacts), thus configuring the 4 Returns Framework.² *Inspiration*, the collective creative force connected to the land, shared identity or history, emerges from and contributes to sustained strong local stakeholder engagement and landscape partnerships (Dudley et al., 2021). Inspiration can be a source for activating social networks, enhance information flows and collaboration, and by increasing social cohesion, contribute to adaptive responses in the face of change, uncertainty or loss (Fornara et al., 2020). Inspiration has been operationalized according to local preferences with broad indicator domains reflecting diverse conceptualizations and metrics (see Table 1).

Purposeful social relationships built on a common ground that offset contrasting interests, expectations and world views are

central to achieving collaborative stewardship and long-term aspirations (Cockburn et al., 2019). To build such multi-stakeholder engagement in LR initiatives, inclusive governance needs to be operationalized at the landscape level with a view to emancipate those actors whose interests have not been addressed, and whose values contribute to restoration actions (Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021).

This paper contributes to the stakeholder engagement debate by considering how multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSP; Brouwer et al., 2019), in particular *social alliances* (SA), can be operationalized and activated to support LR initiatives. We define SAs as voluntary long-term partnerships that are inclusive and heterogeneous in nature, sharing goals, resources and motivation for driving restoration actions.³ We present a Spanish LR case study based on the 4 Returns model, *Altiplano de Granada, Los Vélez and Alto Almanzora* (AlVelAl) to illustrate how participatory multi-stakeholder processes striving for *inspiration* can build lasting SAs that sustain restoration action. The author group includes practitioners and scholars with no direct role in AlVelAl except for D. Roth, who was an active member of the association. Our aim is to stimulate further debate on the role of MSPs, and the processes that sustain these, in LR planning and implementation, which has implications for practitioners, government agencies, NGOs and funding agencies seeking long-term results.

2 | FOSTERING SOCIAL ALLIANCES

The quality, depth and duration of stakeholder involvement can be placed along a continuum of stakeholder engagement (see Figure 1). On one side of the continuum, restoration initiatives may consult stakeholders (e.g. surveys). This type of exchange is brief, top-down driven and may not recur in the future. *Partnerships* take stakeholder engagement further as they add dialogue and collaboration for achieving objectives (Van Huijstee et al., 2007; Visseren-Hamakers, 2013). These are based on recurring interactions and will require some level of trust and rules of engagement (Sayer et al., 2013). For example, partnerships can be established between forest landowners to manage fire risk jointly. *MSPs* are operationally similar but involve diverse stakeholder groups that add complexity. They may comprise cross-sectoral, minority and disadvantaged groups, and need dialogue, some level of trust and time to address disparities and potential conflict (Brouwer et al., 2019; Sayer et al., 2013). Finally, we suggest that SAs build on the complexity of MSPs in that these recognize the role of human agency in creating deeper connections such as attachment to a territory or something bigger (Conrad, 2017), which can *inspire* partners to act more cohesively, better manage conflict and respond more adaptively to an uncertain future (Murphy et al., 2019), foster

¹Transformative change is defined as 'fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values' (Díaz, S., Settele, J., Brondizio, E.S., Ngo, H.T., Agard, J., et al., (2019). Pervasive human-driven decline of life on Earth points to the need for transformative change. *Science* 366, eaax3100, p 7.

²A holistic landscape restoration framework that renders multiple systemic returns on investment: return of inspiration, and returns of social, natural and financial capital (Dudley et al., 2021).

³We consider stakeholders are people rather than institutions or organizations, and therefore, build on the literature of social & behavioural ecology rather than organizational psychology (e.g. Bissonnette et al., 2015; Dunbar, 1989; Gavrillets et al., 2008).

TABLE 1 Domain categories used to monitor the return of inspiration and associated metrics. Operationally, *inspiration* has been defined according to local preferences. Broad indicator domains (i.e. awareness and meaningfulness; engagement and commitment, and innovation and creativity) reflect a diverse use of the concept and include quantitative and qualitative metrics

Domain and description (source: Adapted from Ferwerda, 2015)		Metrics examples (source: Ferwerda, 2015)	AlVelAl landscape restoration initiative locally adapted metrics
Awareness and meaningfulness	<p>Experiential elements that relate to meaningfulness, spiritual or holistic awareness, happiness, nature re-sacralization, local traditional, cultural wisdom, indigenous values</p> <p>Time for inner reflection, worship, knowledge transfer & outreach, cultural events, touristic rural walking routes and recognition</p>	<p>Number of local spiritual, religious events linked to landscape</p> <p>Quality of 'defining moments' for people involved in initiative</p> <p>Percent free time to rest and think</p> <p>Percent of stakeholder group/yr/ha reporting meaningful connection to landscape/to landscape animals</p> <p>Number of outreach activities/participants engaged in outreach events to raise awareness</p>	<p>Number of workshops, webinars courses, participants attending and publications</p> <p>Number of knowledge transfer events (e.g. workshops, colloquia, webinars, rural)/number of participants</p> <p>Number local cultural events linked to landscape (festivals, rural pride day, rural walking routes)/ participation</p> <p>Number of awards, recognition, mention in media, social network and visits/yr</p> <p>Percent stakeholder group/yr/ha reporting meaningful connection to landscape</p>
Engagement and commitment	<p>Stakeholder engagement and commitment, landscape leadership, commitment to project ownership, network complexity, less corruption; understanding meaning of long-term commitment for companies, investors</p>	<p>Number cultural events linked to landscape (festivals, broader community engagement events)</p> <p>Percent of stakeholder group/yr/ha actively engaged/committed</p> <p>Percent of new members/yr joining partnership</p> <p>Percent change relative to corruption benchmark</p> <p>Funding organizations responding to long-term commitment</p>	<p>Assistance provided and attendance</p> <p>Frequency of lending farm for events</p> <p>Percent of stakeholder group/yr/ha actively engaged/committed</p> <p>Number of new members/yr joining AlVelAl</p> <p>Infrastructure maintenance and promotion of agricultural heritage</p> <p>In farm experimentation of solutions</p> <p>Number of new farmers joining practicing regenerative agriculture techniques ha/year</p> <p>Number hectares restored in natural zones</p>
Innovation and creativity	<p>Collaborative problem solving, business innovation, nature & art</p>	<p>Number of creative projects</p> <p>Number of people engaged in creative projects</p> <p>Number of innovative business enterprises</p>	<p>Number of new landscape products</p> <p>Number of innovative business enterprises</p> <p>Number projects presented to AlVelAl</p> <p>Number creative landscape art projects</p> <p>Number people engaged in creative projects</p>

environmental stewardship (Masterson et al., 2019) and transformative changes in landscapes (Ruggeri, 2020).

Building and sustaining voluntary alliances rests on establishing trust between members, effectively addressing challenges along the way, and creating value over time (Sayer et al., 2013). Social interventions and alliances able to exploit common ground are more likely to be politically and practically viable (Van Zwanenberg et al., 2018). Poor methods of participation can result in low levels of trust and little learning (Sungusia & Lund, 2016); conversely, high participation, dialogue, discourse exposing context, power dynamics and underlying values can build trust and generate social learning (Robinson et al., 2021). And while it may

not necessarily lead to consensus, it can help move the stakeholders towards greater problem resolution.

3 | THE ALVELAL EXPERIENCE IN SPAIN

The association AlVelAl was established in 2015 in southeastern Spain (see Figure 2) in response to severe land degradation and lack of livelihood opportunities (<https://www.alvelal.net/>). It steers a 1-million-hectare holistic LR project based on the 4 Returns framework (Dudley et al., 2021) with a strong focus on regenerative agriculture and businesses, restoring natural biodiversity corridors, and

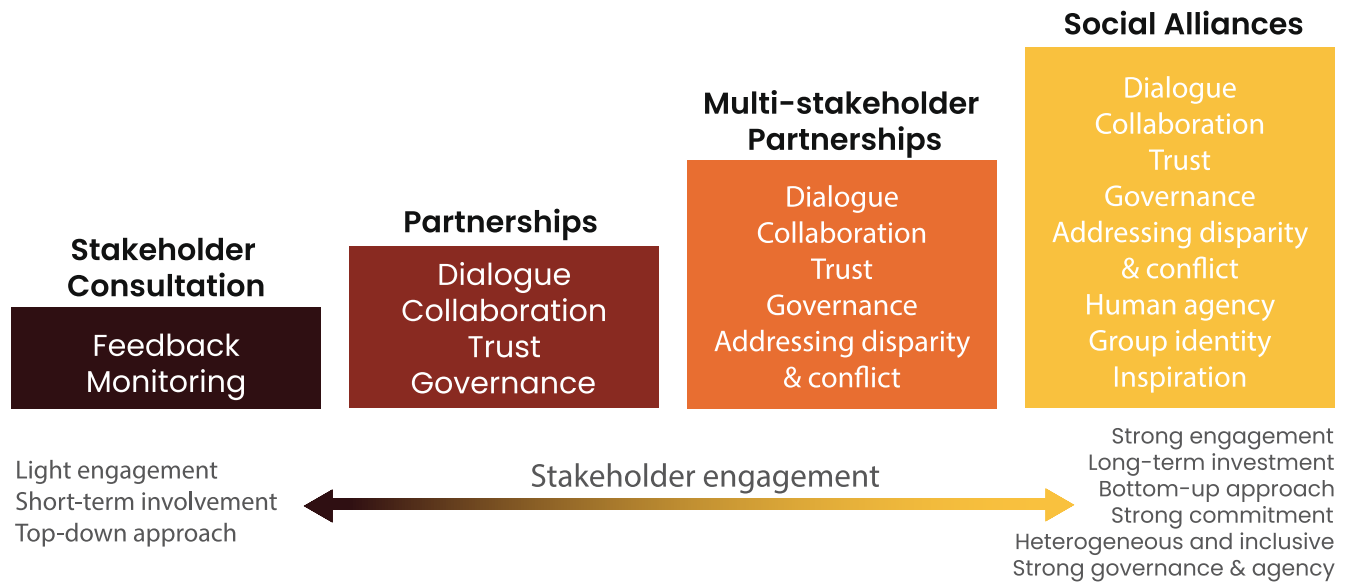


FIGURE 1 Continuum of stakeholder engagement.

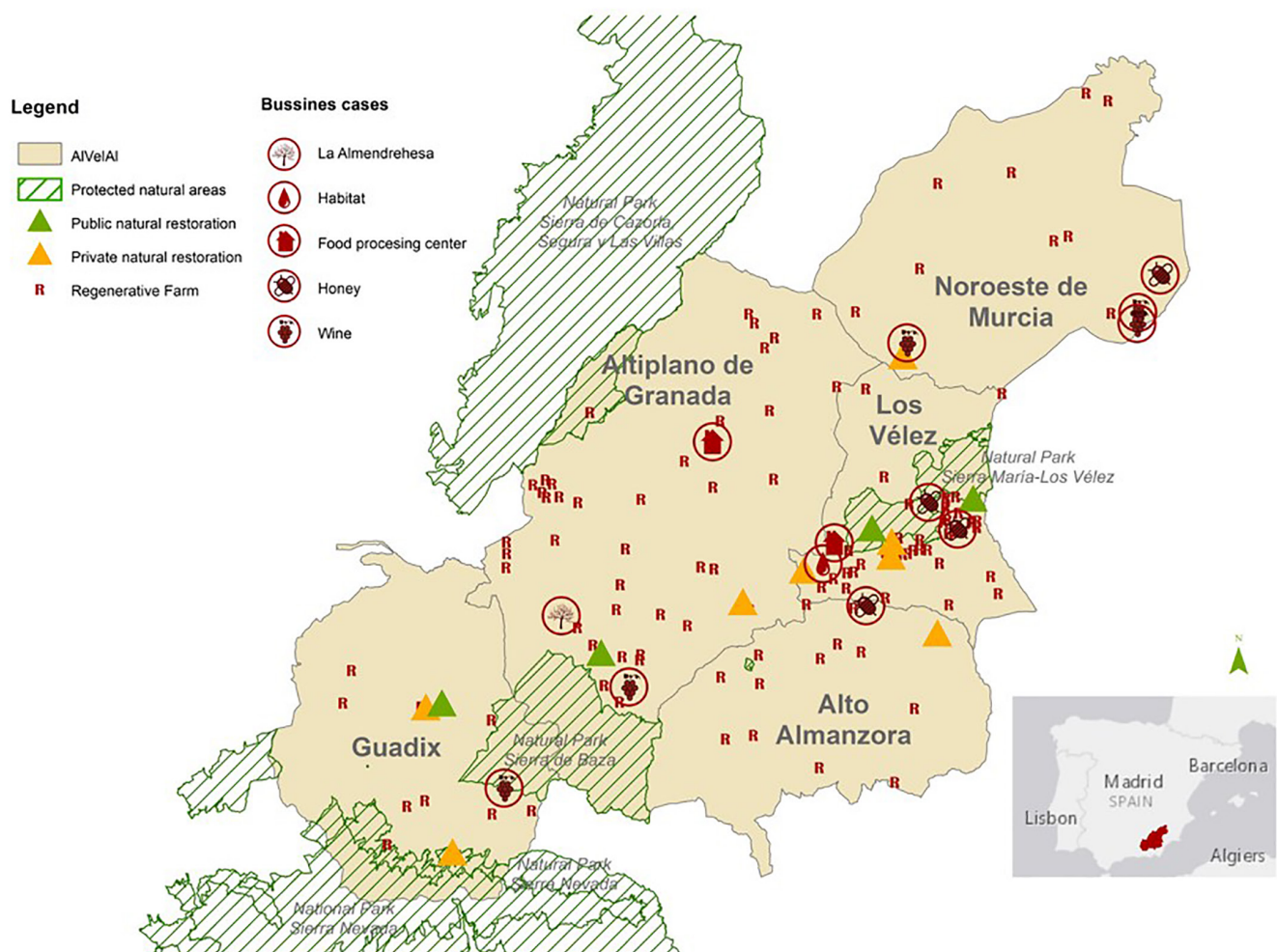


FIGURE 2 Map of AlVelAl's landscape

cultivating inspiration and hope. AlVelAI is a member organization with about 350 members, the majority farmers but also agri-food businesses, local action groups, municipalities, landowners and entrepreneurs.

About 30 stakeholders met at a workshop in 2014 to co-initiate a LR vision through to 2034 (Ferwerda & Gutierrez, 2021; Hilmarssdóttir et al., 2019). The workshop was guided by Theory-U (Scharmer, 2009) as a methodological approach for exploring, guiding and managing group processes systematically. A 20-year landscape vision was created by stakeholders in 2014 and again in 2021 for adaptive management and to extend the vision to 2050.

AlVelAI applies a dynamic governance (sociocracy) model based on consent and egalitarian values where information flow is bidirectional. For example, members of the board join team meetings and team members join board meetings. This allows integrating multiple perspectives more effectively, preventing potential conflict or solving conflict through questioning and dialogue prior to decision-making and implementation. In addition, the organization's structure is based on levels of competence where consensus over roles and functions is established early. Decisions are reached by consent within functional areas but where issues cut across areas, pertinent decisions are referred to the 'higher council'. Here, information from field processes reaches the technical teams and the board of directors and vice versa. However, managing the rapid growth of a diverse membership with contrasting expectations and priorities remains a significant challenge.

Promoting *inspiration* is integral to all activities, which encourage a sense of belonging and inclusive decision-making. Inspiration also drives this social alliance, characterized as a continuously expanding deep MSP process. To nurture trust, AlVelAI organizes various training (e.g. facilitation, collective leadership) and multiple events to create opportunities for shared experience, connection and celebration. The inclusion of children and youth in the organization of events (e.g. regeneration festival) builds bridges across intergenerational approaches to LR (see 6 min video on the AlVelAI community in [Supporting Materials](#)). Organized cultural walking routes reconnect isolated villages in the landscape, rescuing shared history and traditions while serving as tourist attraction. And a 'circle of wise people' offers a space to resolve conflicts previously identified by members (e.g. conflicts related to personal ambitions or power). Professional facilitators are brought in to help manage processes when necessary.

Members of the association attribute multiple dimensions to 'inspiration': territorial belonging, the meaning of the territory that binds them, who they are in the place, the local cultural traditions, and the intergenerational dialogue (Roth, 2021). Inspiration is 'measured' by multiple metrics and their use has been adapted over time (see [Table 1](#)). People describe that inspiration is about connecting head, soul and hands, which has much to do with creativity.

The role of art and culture is all-pervasive in this LR project. Collaborative creations function as a 'glue' for social cohesion, create a collective memory and promote natural capital. For example, the 'living sculpture AlVelAI-8000' project ([Figure 3](#)) mobilized members and community, including a special needs group and pupils from an



FIGURE 3 Aerial view of the AlVelAI-8000 living sculpture.

agricultural education centre. Together, they restored 21 hectares of public land with aromatic herbs in the shape of an 8000-year-old cave painting from nearby mountains. The project exceeds the technical and practical work required for creating an aromatic oil business. Rather, it speaks of the importance of pride, beauty, inclusivity and inspiration.

Inspiration and creativity have also been applied to generating financial capital. Collective entrepreneurial efforts led to the locally owned limited company La Almendrehesa, a successful attempt to reimagine, re-shape, cultivate and enrich the existing environment with a holistic business model. Almendrehesa now exports almonds and sells other products grown in regenerative farms.

4 | CONCLUSIONS

Our experience suggests that engagement approaches that invest in thoughtful stakeholder and governance processes can effectively create strong commitment of actors, supported by an expectation of appreciable results in the long term. Furthermore, approaches that speak to human agency, such as SAs, can strengthen the relationship between people and place by fostering inspiration amongst stakeholders, who despite potentially divergent values and needs, are united through a collective passion for the landscape they are attached to. There may be multiple entry points for developing and strengthening collective agency and thus inspiration, according to various initial landscape conditions.

Inspiration as an outcome to be attained poses multiple challenges and questions. For example, how do we measure creative projects that emerge out of passion and pride? What are the different pathways for unlocking inspiration? For AlVelAI, inspiration evolved organically, yet SAs may also succeed using a more structured approach. Further research is needed to assess the intersection of

MSP, governance processes and collective inspiration in driving restoration success.

In line with the human landscape literature (Hunziker et al., 2007), our case study observes that people share a place-based or collective identity that promotes inclusivity and collective agency. Furthermore, that inspiration is recognized as crucial in building bridges for engagement and action in LR projects.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Victoria Gutierrez, Pieter Ploeg, Florentina Bajraktari, Giles Thomson, Ingrid Visseren-Hamakers and Dietmar Roth conceived the ideas and draft of the manuscript; DR contributed the case study. Victoria Gutierrez led the writing and revision of the manuscript. All authors contributed critically to the drafts and, with the exception of DR, all gave final approval for publication.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

PEER REVIEW

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This manuscript does not contain data.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

Video S1. AIVelAI on revitalising the community (6 min video).

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