

Core Criteria for Mature Landscape Initiatives

A collective position paper
Version 1 - October 2024

©Hendrik Cornelissen/Unsplash



Context

Landscape initiatives bring multiple stakeholders together in a defined geographic area to address prioritised sustainability challenges, such as deforestation, biodiversity loss, and livelihoods, through a collaborative approach.

The power of landscape initiatives lies in aligning interests and priorities of key stakeholders, including local communities, practitioners, market actors, and local governments around collective goals, actions, and investment so that they are better able to finance and address the system conditions needed to achieve long-term sustainability impacts at a landscape scale.

With increasing interest and engagement in landscape initiatives¹, it is critical that all stakeholders have a simple and consistent understanding of the core elements of a mature landscape initiative. Many of the leading landscape practitioner organisations² have come together to agree

on those core criteria and accompanying sub-criteria, which are presented here.

The criteria present both a roadmap for new and existing landscape initiatives to improve their effectiveness and a means by which to assess the maturity of these initiatives for different purposes or use cases, which are also described below. While landscape initiatives will take different pathways to build out these criteria and sub-criteria over time, mature initiatives that have these criteria in place are likely to be more resilient, more attractive to investors, and better placed to deliver more durable sustainability impacts in the landscape.

Definitions



Landscape

Socio-ecological system, defined by a geographic area with common and interacting ecological and socioeconomic characteristics. A landscape may be delineated based on river basins, seascapes, ecosystems, jurisdictions, productive boundaries, or in other ways.

Landscape Approach

A management approach focused on multi-stakeholder collaboration to advance shared sustainability goals and build resilience at landscape scale.

Landscape Initiative

The multi-stakeholder initiative that operationalizes a landscape approach in a particular landscape, by setting common goals, taking collective action while reconciling different interests, and monitoring progress towards shared sustainability goals and outcomes at a landscape scale.³

1. See CDP [analysis of increase of company disclosure](#) for landscape engagement.
2. The organisations supporting this position are listed on the front page.
3. See also Accountability Framework initiative [definition of landscape initiative](#).

Core Criteria

Mature landscape initiatives are characterized by four core criteria that are integral to their effectiveness. These core criteria and accompanying sub-criteria can act as a roadmap for developing landscape initiatives to align with over time. The implementation of the four core criteria can also act as safeguards, minimising various risks associated with decision-making processes and actions in the landscape, while enhancing positive social and environmental outcomes⁴.



1. Scale:

The landscape initiative operates at the scale of a defined ecological, socioeconomic, or administrative area, e.g. a watershed or jurisdictional boundary.



2. Multi-stakeholder governance process or platform⁵:

The landscape initiative is governed by a multi-stakeholder process or platform that has decision-making responsibility for the design, implementation, and monitoring of the initiative⁶.



3. Collective goals and actions⁷:

Stakeholders in the landscape initiative have agreed on a set of long-term landscape-scale sustainability impact goals and a collective action plan for achieving those goals⁸.



4. Collective monitoring⁹:

The landscape initiative manages a collective monitoring and reporting framework that enables assessment and communication of progress towards the initiative's collective sustainability impact goals.

4. See the sub-criteria for more detailed examples of safeguarding roles.

5. For a comprehensive map of multi-stakeholder governance processes and platforms, see the [CDP/TFA map of landscape initiatives](#).

6. Where various agencies or stakeholders are responsible for different actions within a landscape, there may be several processes or platforms that support implementation but these should all be aligned under a common framework.

7. See also the Landscapes Practitioner working group [joint position paper 1 on 'what constitutes a credible action/investment'](#).

8. Meaningful impact at a landscape scale results from the coordinated efforts of key stakeholders over the long-term, requiring a commitment of at least 5 to 10 years.

9. See also the Landscapes Practitioner working group [joint position paper 4 on collective monitoring](#).

Sub-criteria

Sub-criteria provide further definition to the core criteria and are indicative of mature, high-quality landscape initiatives. The sub-criteria describe conditions that are needed to fully realise the effectiveness of these initiatives. Landscape initiatives will progress to maturity along different pathways and these sub-criteria are guideposts for stakeholders to support that journey.



1. Scale:

The landscape initiative operates at the scale of a defined ecological, socioeconomic, or administrative area, e.g. a watershed or jurisdictional boundary.

Landscape initiatives typically operate at a scale of hundreds of thousands of hectares but can often be larger or occasionally smaller, depending on the landscape context.

The landscape initiative is of a scale that:

- it can influence systemic conditions underlying its sustainability goals, such as through land use planning or policy reform¹⁰; and
- enables coherent area-level management by the multi-stakeholder governance process.



2. Multi-stakeholder governance process or platform:

The landscape initiative is governed by a multi-stakeholder process or platform that has decision-making responsibility for the design, implementation, and monitoring of the initiative.

The multi-stakeholder process or platform:

- includes active participation from key stakeholders¹¹ in the landscape, including local community representatives in particular;
- sets or facilitates definition of the collective goals and actions of the initiative¹²;
- engages with local government directly and seeks to align with progressive local, sub-national, or national government priorities and policies;
- has clear and transparent operating procedures and decision-making that support effective stakeholder participation;
- plays a coordinating role for actions and monitoring in the landscape; and
- implements safeguards, including grievance mechanisms, that minimise the risks of negative human rights or environmental impacts, while enhancing positive results for people and nature within the landscape¹³.

10. Landscapes of sufficient scale also help to safeguard against leakage or bad practices shifting to less visible supply chains.

11. Key stakeholder groups can include local and regional governments, NGOs and/or civil society, local communities, indigenous peoples, producers, other market actors, and financial institutions.

12. See [3. Collective goals and actions](#).

13. The participatory nature of the multi-stakeholder process itself serves as a core social safeguard that supports overall mitigation and reduction of risks.



3. Collective goals and actions:

Stakeholders in the landscape initiative have agreed on a set of long-term landscape-scale sustainability impact goals and a collective action plan for achieving those goals.

The sustainability goals:

- are informed by a context analysis or similar effort to understand current landscape conditions and stakeholder priorities for action;
- encompass social, environmental, and economic priorities¹⁴;
- are each accompanied by measurable metrics, baseline data, and short and medium-term milestones; and
- are reviewed regularly and revised as necessary to reflect the changing landscape context.

The collective action plan:

- addresses systemic issues by focusing on long-term solutions that can be embedded in local governance;
- considers the diversity of land-use types and commodities that are present in the landscape;
- lays out strategies and actions to achieve defined milestones and make progress towards the sustainability goals;
- is made publicly available and is agreed upon by participating stakeholders¹⁵;
- is updated regularly to reflect progress and funding; and
- is accompanied by a finance or funding strategy¹⁶.



4. Collective monitoring:

The landscape initiative manages a collective monitoring and reporting framework that enables assessment and communication of progress towards the initiative's collective sustainability impact goals.

The collective monitoring framework includes:

- a locally validated baseline performance assessment¹⁷ of the ecological and socio-economic conditions of the landscape;
- activity monitoring that assesses progress in implementing activities included in the action plan;
- performance monitoring at a landscape scale against defined performance metrics and milestones for the collective sustainability goals; and
- robust and transparent reporting of activity and performance data.

14. The balance between these three pillars will depend on the results of the context analysis and priorities of the participating stakeholders.

15. Transparency of the goals and action plan support awareness and buy-in to the landscape initiative, also serving as a safeguard against unintended consequences.

16. A finance strategy strengthens the case to companies and investors about the potential impact and long-term durability of their investments. The action plan can also be accompanied by other implementation documents such as a business plan, marketing strategy, communications plan, etc.

17. Active involvement of local stakeholders in the assessment process will help to ensure that relevant perspectives and data inform definition of collective goals and actions as well as further monitoring. Third-party validation of the baseline helps to ensure accuracy and reliability.

Use Cases

The core criteria and sub-criteria are equally applicable across a wide variety of use cases:



A. Improvement:

As high-level guidance to landscape initiatives on the building blocks that will improve their quality, resilience, durability, and impact, as well as a gap assessment for organisations funding or supporting these initiatives.



D. Investment:

As a means of signalling opportunities for different types of investment and mitigating risk of those investments based on maturity and/or resilience of the landscape, and building confidence in landscape initiatives as a coherent investment theme.



B. Assessment:

For reporting and disclosure frameworks to assess the quality and maturity of initiatives that companies or governments are reporting on¹⁸, or to validate the maturity of an initiative to be able to showcase to potential donors or investors¹⁹.



E. Engagement:

For supply chain companies, investors, and governments to have confidence collaborating with landscape initiatives, and to strengthen the position of local governments in leveraging private sector funding to achieve collective objectives²¹.



C. Claims:

As prerequisites that support robust claims about the initiative, such as for credible disclosure of corporate engagement in landscape initiatives or when a landscape investment qualifies as contributing towards a company target²⁰.



F. Learning:

Providing an overall design framework that establishes a common language to talk about landscape initiatives and facilitate knowledge exchange between conceptual models, public policies, and practical implementation of landscape initiatives.

18. For example, the [CDP disclosure framework](#) uses these criteria to assess the quality and credibility of disclosed landscapes and jurisdictional initiatives.

19. For example, [LandScale](#) and [SourceUp](#) have online platforms that enable landscape initiatives to showcase their progress aligned with these criteria and, in the case of LandScale, to validate their data.

20. For example, SBTN uses these criteria to guide companies on their target setting for landscape engagements. [Science Based Targets Network \(2024\). Step 3: Measure, Set, & Disclose: Land \(v1.0\)](#).

21. For example, the Forest Positive Coalition Landscapes Working Group has developed a blueprint using the core criteria that aims to strengthen alignment with their [Principles for Collective Action \(slide 22\)](#) in the initiatives supported by Coalition members.