

Building Sustainable Futures:

Lessons in Participatory Governance from the Latin American Model Forest Network (LAMFN)

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Research Approach

Model Forests provide a platform for diverse stakeholders within a landscape to participate in local governance and decision-making. This research examines the factors that have enabled many of these platforms to remain active for more than 20 years. Figure 1 illustrates this conceptual foundation: Partnership, the starting point for organizations seeking to influence their territories through an Integrated Landscape Management (ILM) approach. However, this remains an area where additional evidence is needed to better understand how human organizations function. Figure 1 therefore connects the concept of Landscape Partnerships, which lies at the center of the five steps of ILM, with the first principle of the International Model Forest Network (IMFN): *"Each Model Forest is a neutral forum that welcomes the voluntary participation of stakeholders..."*

Research Questions

What factors are critical to sustaining Landscape Partnerships over time?

What role do leadership and identity play in this process?

What types of resources are needed to build strong foundations that support the long-term continuity of these processes?

This research was conducted under a critical constructivist paradigm, emphasizing strong interaction with the study population. Therefore, the methodological approach was Participatory Community-Based. This approach seeks to empower the communities involved so that they move from being "subjects of study" to collaborators in the research, an approach that is deeply rooted in Latin America through its strong tradition of Participatory Action Research.

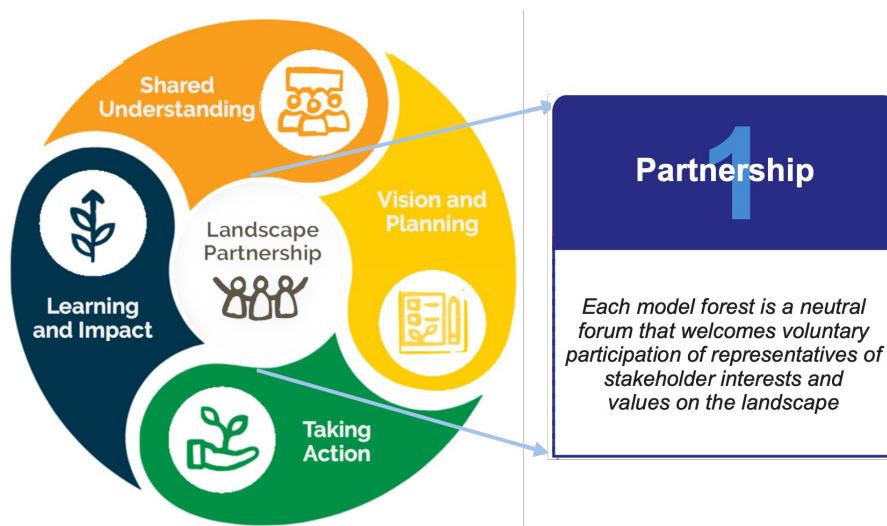


Figure 1: Partnership, a shared conceptual basis between the Integrated Landscape Management movement and the principles of the International Model Forest Network.

Source: 1000 Landscapes for 1 Billion People, 2022, and IMFN, 2019

Key Findings and Implications

Assertive communication and a clear proposal for inclusion are essential for bringing together stakeholders in a landscape. Trust, dialogue, and legitimacy then guide negotiations among stakeholders with diverse, and often conflicting, interests. Neutral facilitation is fundamental for creating safe spaces where common interests, which may not be evident at first, can emerge.

Leadership represents a driving force that maximizes results with limited resources, but there is no single formula for ensuring its continuity, as it grows and matures according to local identity. The experiences of constant adaptation across Latin American landscapes provide evidence that human capital is the foundation of resilience.



Defining Research Priorities at the Pantanal Forest Leaders Workshop, Brazil, 2024

Conclusion

The RLABM brings together territories in Latin America and the Caribbean that have been colonized over the last century under an agro-industrial and mining-oriented logic. Beginning to describe the territory using terms that highlight its social and natural wealth is crucial for shifting mindsets and forging viable paths toward sustainability. Developing a shared, local, and accessible language lays a solid foundation for the initial engagement among stakeholders committed to establishing a roadmap for sustainability.

Recommendations

1. **Prioritize consistent, rather than massive, investment** in participatory governance platforms that adopt a landscape approach.
2. **Avoid placing the entire burden of facilitation** on public officials; instead, view this as an opportunity to support them.
3. Identify the **human element** with a strong sense of **collective purpose** in landscapes with high conservation value, as this is the key to sustained **dynamism**.
4. Take advantage of existing **dialogue mechanisms** within each country's legal framework to strengthen **spaces for collaboration**.
5. “**Redundant representation**” is an element that strengthens these types of platforms.
6. **Leadership is legitimate** today if it champions **inclusion and equity**.
7. **Local identity** is the only means of **fostering ownership of and defining the landscape**.

Download the full research paper [here](#).

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