

SHIFTING FROM INDIVIDUAL TO COLLECTIVE ACTION: LIVING LAND'S EXPERIENCE IN THE BAVIAANSKLOOF, SOUTH AFRICA

8.3

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8.3.1 LAND DEGRADATION AND THREE DISCONNECTS

This section explores the way in which land degradation in the landscapes that Living Lands¹ is working on in South Africa is a symptom of what [Scharmer and Kaufer \(2013\)](#) have termed “the three disconnects.” This phrase refers to the way in which people are disconnected from themselves, from each other, and from the natural environment. [Scharmer and Kaufer \(2013\)](#) refer to these as the spiritual/cultural divide, the social divide, and the ecological divide. After outlining how these operate on the landscapes where Living Lands and Commonland are working, we describe the ways in which we are attempting to reconnect people with themselves, with each other, and with the natural environment, as well as our achievements and discoveries.

8.3.2 ECOLOGICAL DIVIDE

The research undertaken in the Baviaanskloof indicates that much of the environmental degradation that has occurred there occurred as a result of human activities and interventions in the landscape over the past 200 years or so ([Jansen, 2008](#); [Bobbins, 2011](#); [Rebelo, 2012](#); [Stokhof de Jong, 2012](#)). Some of these were intentional interventions for economic and other strategic social gains like the alteration of the river and alluvial fans during the 1980s after a major flood.

Other livelihood activities had unintended degradation outcomes as well. One of these was the degradation of the hill slopes as a result of overgrazing by goats ([Mills et al., 2005](#); [Mills and Cowling, 2006](#); [Powell, 2009](#); [Stokhof de Jong, 2012](#)). Another has been the introduction and spread of invasive

¹Living Lands is a South African izaNGO working to facilitate collaboration on living landscapes through design and facilitation of social learning processes and building leadership capacity. For more information, see www.livinglands.co.za.

alien plants (MacDonald et al., 1986; Van Wilgen et al., 2012). This degradation has reduced rainwater penetration into the soil and the replenishment of groundwater resources and exacerbated the intensity of flooding events (Van Luik et al., 2013). This has reduced the capacity to store and use water downstream and increased damages from floods (Van Luik et al., 2013; Jansen, 2008).

Due to the complex nature of ecological systems, the people's livelihood activities and the changes these make in the land interact with other elements of the ecological system and often change the system in unexpected ways, producing many unintended consequences (Cilliers, 2000). So these effects arise out of a spatial, temporal, physical, and intellectual disconnection between people and their environment. Finding solutions to these problems requires a reconnection with the socioecological system that helps us to understand each of its components and, more important, the relationships and dynamic interactions between them.

8.3.3 SOCIAL DIVIDE

The second generally recognized disconnect is the one between people. While our society is a globally interdependent ecosystem, our individualistic and self-centered way of behaving is essentially a war of the parts against each other and the whole (system) (Scharmer and Kaufer, 2013). Although many of us are aware that our individual activities are having unintended negative effects on others in society, we all seem to be trapped in inherited ways of thinking, behaving, and relating to one another that keep us locked into our habitual behaviors (Ariely, 2010; Kahneman, 2011). Living Lands has found this general situation is well reflected in the attitudes and behavior of the farmers in the Baviaanskloof area, the South African government's Working for Water Programme, the conservation and park authorities, and the competing water users in the Kouga catchment.

This social divide stems from people's usual myopic focus of attention on their own lives or responsibilities and their immediate and short-term needs and wants (Kahneman, 2011). This limited perspective results in their not taking into consideration the temporal and spatial impacts of their activities on other people. This perspective is created through our socialization process and maintained by the social institutions² within which we live and work and interact with others. One of the key institutional characteristics of our society that keeps us stuck on this destructive path is its individualistic orientation and compartmentalization of activities into many separate and different organizations focusing on specific activities or issues (Scharmer and Kaufer, 2013). Therefore, everyone is separated from one another and focused on only a small part of the whole system. So long as we continue to see and act in this competitive, compartmentalized way, we cannot comprehend and deal with the challenges that the whole system is facing. There is an urgent need to critically evaluate the system; coordinate, align, and integrate activities; and find strategic interventions that could put us on a more sustainable path.

Most attempts to deal with land degradation processes focus on these two divides, the ecological and the social, and attempt to restore natural and social capital. Living Lands, however, has found that dealing with the third divide—the disconnect with the self and the lack of inspiration, hope, and

²The term *institutions* here refers to all the rules, norms, and habits of thinking and behaving and relating to one another that are formalized in some way in society. It cannot, therefore, be equated with organizations that only form a small part of what is understood as social institutions.

complacency and the disempowerment that is associated with it—is the key to successfully dealing with the other two divides—the social and ecological.

8.3.4 THE DISCONNECT FROM SELF

Scharmer and Kaufer (2013) refer to this spiritual-cultural divide as “a disconnect between the self and Self—that is, between one’s current ‘self’ and the emerging future ‘Self’ that represents one’s greatest potential” (Scharmer and Kaufer, 2013, pp. 4–5). Deep down, our highest Self wants to be heard, understood, and appreciated and to love and care for others. Despite this, most people feel unloved or not respected, understood, or appreciated most of the time and are very sparing with their love for others. Most people also spend most of their time doing things they do not really want to do but that they feel obligated or forced to do. They also tend to be very judgmental, cynical, and negative about the potential to change things. It is not surprising, therefore, that there are such high rates of suicide, depression, and illness in our society (Krug et al., 2002).

On the landscapes that Living Lands is working on, we see this disconnection from the Self among all the stakeholders. The farmers in the Baviaanskloof and Kouga know that their farming activities are degrading the environment and that their relationships with their workers do not make their staff feel happy, inspired, motivated, or productive, but they feel unable to behave otherwise. They are concerned about their children’s future and want to secure their land and lifestyle, but they find themselves unable to do so. The South African government officials in the departments responsible for water, the environment, and agriculture want to have collaborative relationships with the land and water users, but the way they are doing things does not create opportunities for collaboration and often tends to antagonize those they want to work with and makes it more difficult for the government to achieve its goals. The government officials often see these problems with the way government does things, but they feel powerless to do anything about it. At the same time, everyone is blaming everyone else for the problems and seeing each other as the enemy.

8.3.5 THE LIVING LANDS EXPERIENCE AND APPROACH

Living Lands has found that using the U Theory collective social learning approach (see [figure 8.3.1](#)), developed by the Presencing Institute at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), directly addresses these divides from the self and one another and empowers and inspires the participants to change the way they see and do things and collaborate with others toward achieving their goals and deepest desires. Social learning is increasingly recognized as a crucial component of participatory processes aimed at nurturing collective action around common environmental concerns like land degradation (Cundill and Rodela, 2012). Social learning has been found to improve decision making by increasing awareness of the social system and the relationships and interactions among the various stakeholders, and through the collective learning process building relationships and the problem-solving capacity of stakeholders (Schusler et al., 2003; Brown et al., 2008). Social learning has also been found to support the development of systems thinking among the stakeholders (Nerbonne and Lentz, 2003), and in so doing enhancing the ability of socioecological systems (i.e., society) to respond to change (Pahl-Wostl and Hare, 2004; Pahl-Wostl et al., 2007). Social learning has also been shown to



FIGURE 8.3.1

The U as one process with five movements (Scharmer, 2009).

promote collective action within social networks (Maurel et al., 2007; Lebel et al., 2010). Collins et al. (2007, p. 565) have argued that social learning promotes concerted action, which “involves multiple stakeholders working together in a purposeful way to achieve some common end that emerges during the process.”

Living Lands adopted this approach after initially trying to impose its own restoration agenda on the stakeholders in the Baviaanskloof 6 years earlier. Living Lands was already involved with and inspired by the subtropical thicket restoration project,³ as well as the potential to expand this over the 1.4 million ha of degraded spekboom veld in the Western and Eastern Cape Provinces of South Africa (Mills et al., 2010). When we began undertaking research and engaging with the farmers in this region, we thought that all we needed to do was educate the farmers and get them to revegetate their land with spekboom. We were surprised, however, to find that the farmers were not interested in our solution and wanted to have nothing to do with us. This forced us to reconsider our approach and begin using the key principals of the Theory U collective social learning approach (Scharmer, 2009). This approach (illustrated in Figure 8.3.1) required us to engage in deep listening and perceiving the system with an open mind and to look to the local stakeholders about their concerns and insights for direction on the challenges and potential innovations. This approach created the conditions through which the solutions could emerge from the engagement process. In the process of using this approach, Living Lands workers had to learn how to listen and empathize with the stakeholders, which made a huge difference to the willingness of the stakeholders to participate and consider alternative ways of doing things. Listening helped both Living Lands and the stakeholders understand and appreciate each other’s

³The Subtropical Thicket Restoration Programme was initiated and managed by the Natural Resource Management Unit of the Department of Environmental Affairs and the Working for Water Programme. This project undertook considerable research to assess the potential to restore degraded spekboom veld through revegetation efforts and to sequester carbon and earn carbon credits on the global carbon markets.

perspectives and in the process broaden their understanding of the nature and dynamics of the system. To achieve this, Living Lands had to create a safe space in which all the different stakeholders could express their views, be heard, and interact. This built a great amount of trust.

Getting stakeholders to participate and to broaden their perspectives and become willing to change their behavior, is only possible if engagement and listening are done without the voices of judgment, cynicism, or fear toward one another. One needs to start from where the stakeholders are and to avoid generating fear and resistance. To achieve this, it is necessary to begin with a bilateral stakeholder engagement process between the landscape mobilizers (Living Lands) and each stakeholder group individually, before moving to a multilateral engagement processes. The initial bilateral engagement needs to build sufficient trust and (self) empathy for the stakeholders to become confident and willing enough to engage with other different or potentially competing or threatening groups. Living Lands experienced how powerful this process was in overcoming the tendency to act individualistically among the landowners in the Baviaanskloof and how it opened up the possibility of collaboration among all the landowners and among the landowners and other groups such as conservation authorities.

Once all the stakeholder groups feel that they have been heard and valued and are committed to participate, the next step is to scale up to multilateral stakeholder engagements. The interaction of all the stakeholder groups creates the opportunity to challenge existing narrow perspectives and broaden these to a more holistic and integrated perspective. These multilateral engagements are particularly important in situations where stakeholders are feeling insecure and threatened by one another's behavior. Such insecurity is likely to be prevalent in any situation where there are significant policy changes being proposed and implemented, as is the case in South Africa.

The Living Lands process with stakeholders was valuable in showing how most of the problems around land and water use are a direct consequence of the attitudes, thinking, and behavior of the stakeholders toward themselves, each other, and the environment. All of these groups, including the external stakeholders, were found to be acting separately and individualistically to protect and maintain their own interests and meet their needs and responsibilities. This effectively amounted to the "institutionalised irresponsibility" that [Scharmer and Kaufer \(2013\)](#) draws attention to in his recent book on the U theory processes and approach. Overcoming this problem depends on breaking down the social barriers among people, groups, and institutions, generating mutual understanding and respect, and building a more holistic awareness of the system and the interrelationships with all its elements among the participants. Once this has been achieved, it will then start becoming possible for people to collaborate, experiment, and create new types of relationships and partnerships that are considerate of the needs of all the elements of the system (social and environmental).

Living Lands has intentionally focused its efforts on facilitating the development of large collaborative efforts to deal with the complex social and ecological crises on the landscapes, rather than directly making practical interventions on the landscape. Living Lands found that it was easier for such collaborations to be created by concerned, external, and independent landscape mobilizers like its own organization, which was more willing and able to listen to and hear the voices and concerns of all the stakeholders without judgment, and in doing so, gain the trust and willingness of the stakeholders to participate (See [figure 8.3.2](#) Living Lands listening to the stakeholders). External agencies that have vested interests in the landscape, such as government organizations, are more likely to be viewed with suspicion and as a threat by local stakeholders. Collective social learning processes also require skilled landscape mobilizers who can remain independent and mediate conflicts and tensions among the stakeholders. The networks of experts and other organizations that Living Lands has brought in to support the social change process on the landscape have also proved to be critical to the success of social learning processes.



FIGURE 8.3.2

Living Lands facilitating collective social learning in the Baviaanskloof.

The first phases of the U process are essentially research processes that Living Lands has undertaken using an action-oriented, transdisciplinary, and systems-thinking approach. This socioecological systems perspective is a holistic and proactive strategy for the integrated management of land, water, and living resources, which promotes equitable conservation and sustainable use as part of living landscapes. This approach is focused on the balancing of the on- and off-site services that an intact ecosystem can deliver to both upstream and downstream users, and therefore goes a step further than traditional restoration projects by balancing the effects at different landscape and land use scales.

This integrated approach helped us to understand the system from different perspectives, dimensions, and levels. It gave us important insights into people's future perspectives and interests, priorities, needs, expectations, and challenges. This was important because the priorities of external researchers and implementers like ourselves usually did not match those of local stakeholders. Expect to find considerable differences among stakeholders regarding their perspectives on history, conflicts and resolutions, organizational networks, stakeholder relationships, institutional priorities, and what has (and has not) worked in the past. This is valuable tacit knowledge about the elements of the socioecological system and the relationships among these elements that is embedded in the stakeholders and usually not consciously recognized as knowledge and not readily available from other sources (Craps, 2003; Pahl-Wostl et al., 2007). Accessing this knowledge is critical to gaining an understanding of the problematic relationships in the system that need to change in order to address the key challenges facing the people and their landscape. They can also provide insights into potential innovations, which are essentially new types of relationships that could be considered and piloted. Living Lands looks for solutions that support sustainable livelihoods and seek to be obtainable, location-specific approaches that are suited to the historic, cultural, and political context of the landscape.

As a result of applying this approach in the Baviaanskloof catchment, Living Lands has managed to secure an agreement with all the farmers in the area to collaborate and set up a conservancy, looking at sustainable collective land management, and enter into a stewardship agreement with the neighboring

park authorities that includes setting aside a large portion of degraded spekboom veld for revegetation and alternative, more sustainable land uses being investigated and piloted. Figure 8.3.3 provides a map indicating the areas that the landowners are willing to make available for restoration. This marks a significant change from the situation 6 years ago, when the farmers were not working together and were not willing to consider restoration innovations or enter into any agreements with their surrounding park authorities.



FIGURE 8.3.3

Signed map of Baviaanskloof land uses indicating areas that landowners are willing to set aside for spekboom rehabilitation.

(Source: Stokhof de Jong (2012))

Bottom-up approach with top-down support and guidance, and creating landscape business opportunities

Living Lands began this work very much as a bottom-up approach, recognizing the need for innovations that emerge from the local context and are aligned very directly with the local needs, opportunities, and constraints (illustrated in top half of figure 8.3.4). This stands in opposition to conventional, top-down approaches that identify the solutions as coming from the outside and maintain relationships of dependence and disempowerment. Living Lands recognizes that while such top-down approaches can sometimes affect change, they often have many negative and unintended outcomes that arise out of the complex dynamics and responses of all the different elements and agents within the socioecological system. To minimize these negative and unintended consequences and to build

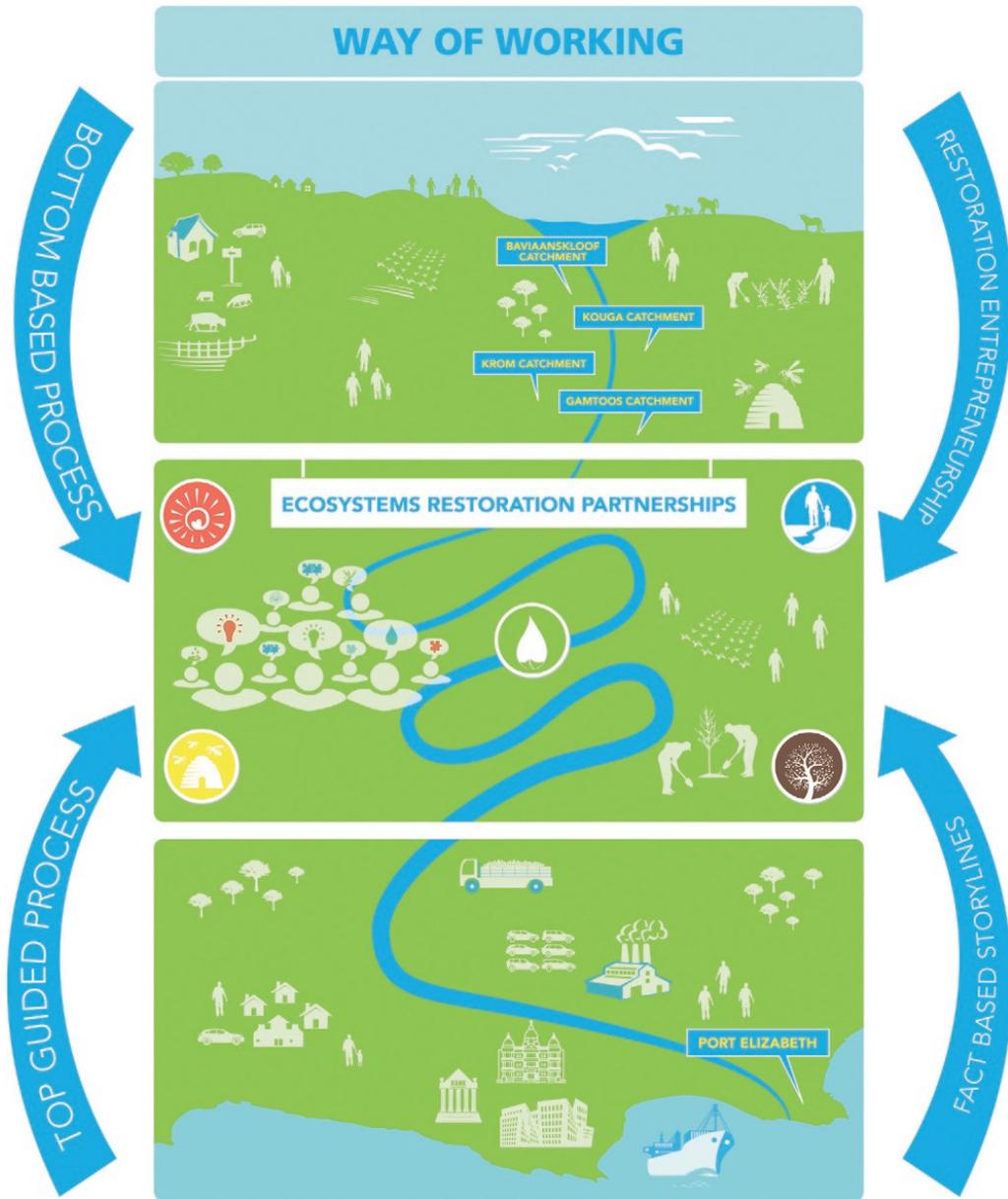


FIGURE 8.3.4
Living Land’s approach to working on the landscape.

collaboration and effectiveness, it is critical to adopt a bottom-up approach that facilitates social learning and change.

The objective of the bottom-up-based process is to inspire, create a landscape strategy, and enable collective action to address the needs and dreams of the people—by and for the people. This process creates innovation that is sustainable, locally owned, applicable, and collaborative and addresses the

local needs. Despite its impressive achievements with this bottom-up approach, Living Lands has, over time, come to appreciate that the innovations emerging at the local level needed to be aligned with and supported by more regional and national initiatives and has consequently begun integrating this bottom-up approach with a top-down-guided process that creates an enabling environment to prototype and upscale the local innovations and collaborations (as illustrated in [Figure 8.3.4](#)). This approach aims to build ownership and willingness among local stakeholders that is supported by an integrated effort by the government and private sector to implement and mainstream sustainable local policies and programs. The ultimate objective is to foster business partnerships and collaborations that integrate and catalyze resources and funding for sustainable innovations that facilitate adaptation to climate change and other social-ecological crises. This is to support the landscape and local stakeholders in their process of prototyping and mainstreaming their solutions.

To accomplish this, Living Lands has now teamed up with the Commonlands (based in the Netherlands) to implement their Four Returns model. This approach looks for ways to inspire, as well as produce returns on natural capital, social capital, and financial capital through collaborative investments in restoration and sustainable agriculture (see Chapter 4.6 in this book). This approach has created a language for engaging with business and investors to upscale investment in restoration and agriculture and build business partnerships.

Currently, Living Lands and Commonland are also in the process of expanding their social learning processes to the two neighboring catchments (the Kouga and Kromme), which, together with the Baviaanskloof, supply around 70% of the existing water supplies for Port Elizabeth City, as well as all the water for the downstream Gamtoos Irrigation Scheme. In partnership with Commonland, the Four Returns Project is currently being initiated in all three catchments and the downstream areas to form partnerships among business, government, and civil society in and around the Nelson Mandela Bay catchment areas to strategically and collectively explore investments in restoring the resilience of the degraded ecosystems. More specifically, we hope to increase local water and food security, improve livelihoods, and create a green and sustainable economy. We hope to encourage participants to work together to inspire people in other landscapes to take similar action. To support these processes, we are in the process of designing and initiating participatory water model development processes and water monitoring programs.

8.3.6 CONCLUSION

It is we—all of humanity—who are the cause of the ecological and social problems we are facing today. More particularly, it is the limited and disconnected way that we see ourselves and each other and the socio-ecological system that is the core of our problem. In this section, we have shown that we can change this situation. Living Lands has found that the key is to create safe spaces and opportunities for people to reconnect to themselves, one another, and their environment. We have found that we can do this through the collective social learning process called the U Theory process. This is a nonlinear (indirect) way that allows us to shift our focus back to ourselves (individually and collectively) so that we can begin to see ourselves, each other, and the system as a whole. Once we have made this shift in perspective, the solutions will become evident to us, and the mutual understanding and collaboration that has developed during the process of bending our perspective back onto ourselves will give us the collaborative power to implement the solutions.

We believe that integrating the living landscape approach and the Four Returns model creates the inspiration and social capital that we need to deal with the social and ecological divides. As we are

experiencing in our Four Returns project, a return of inspiration (reconnection with Self) enables people to form collaborative ventures to deal with the other two divides. This reconnection process also involves reconnecting the bottom-based processes with key enabling agents such as business and government at the top (macro scale). In doing so, Living Lands and Commonland are enabling the first two reconnections that provide the means through which the third ecological divide is addressed and reconnected. However, we recognize that this is just our own experience and that each situation will be different.

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