

# Just transformations to sustainability in Europe: Lessons from the Just Scapes project

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*Justscapes*

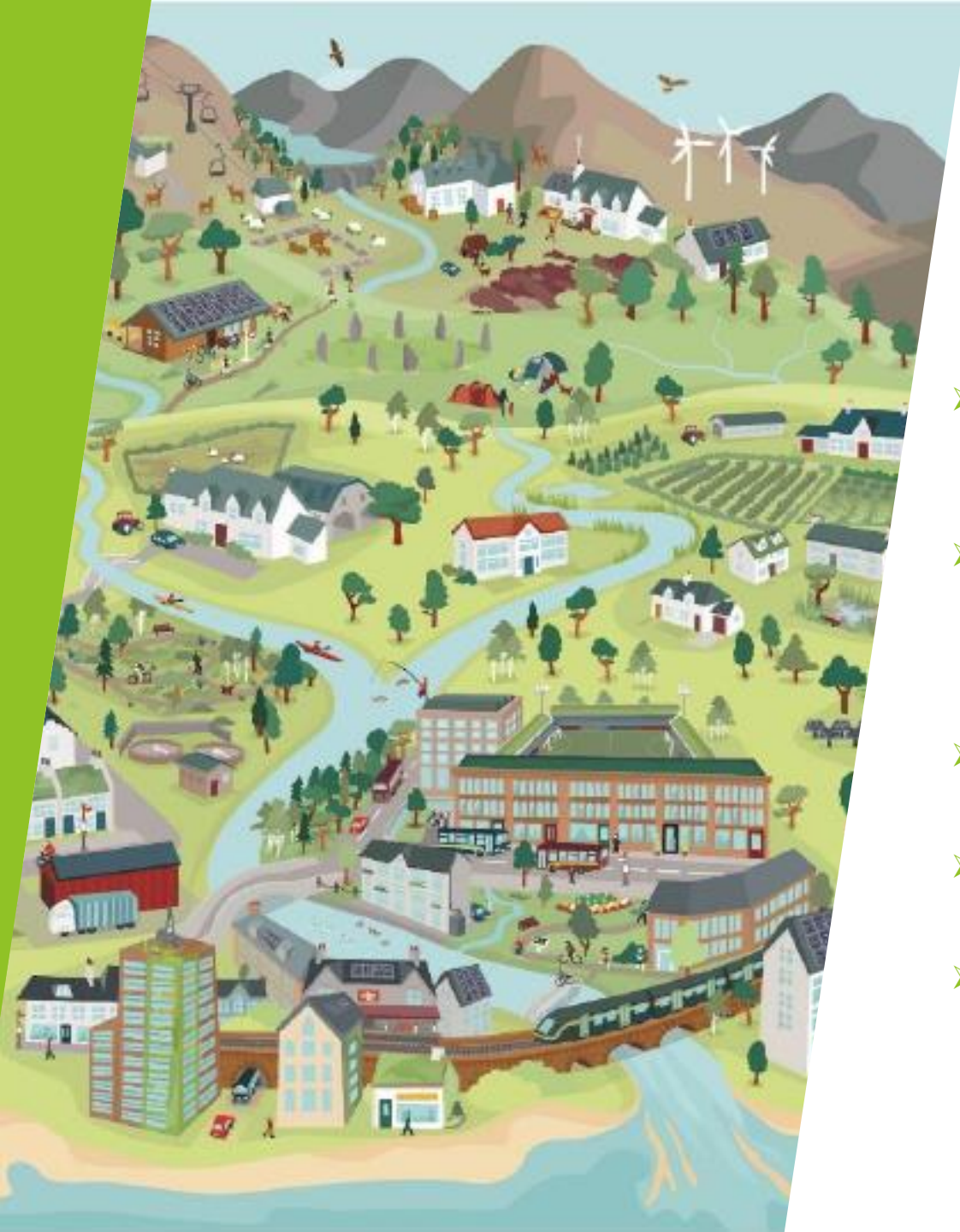
# Just transformations to sustainability in Europe: Lessons from the Just Scapes project

David Brown (Centre for Landscape Regeneration, University of Cambridge)



## Outline

- ❑ Background
- ❑ Just Scapes project
- ❑ Case studies & Methods
- ❑ Just transformations framework
- ❑ Scottish Highlands case study



## Just transition of the land?

- Profound repurposing of rural areas in response to climate change mitigation and adaptation and net-zero policy targets
- Afforestation, reduced deforestation, landscape restoration (forests, peatlands + wetlands), reduction in livestock grazing, rewilding...
- Opportunities and risks for rural communities
- Unevenly experienced and contested, entwined with power and land inequalities
- “Who decides what kind of transformation is needed, of what and for whom?” (Larson et al., 2021)

# Justice barriers

- ‘Justice barriers’ to successfully implementing landscape transformations and to meeting climate change targets.
- Environmental policies likely to be undermined or contested if they are widely perceived to be unfair or illegitimate or if people’s needs are not adequately taken on board by decision-makers (Martin et al., 2020).
- Increasingly strong evidence that inclusive and respectful restoration practices- especially those involving local leadership- are associated with improved social and environmental outcomes (e.g. Dawson et al., 2024)



# ‘Just Scapes’ project

- The ‘Just Scapes’ project aimed to advance our understanding of how to envision and enact ‘Just Transformations’ of European rural landscapes in response to climate change
- Interdisciplinary study exploring the societal dimensions of rural transformations
- Exploring how rural citizens and communities in Europe perceive the (in)justices arising from potential land-use transformations
- Adopts an empirical environmental justice approach by investigating the key justice claims (e.g. Sikor et al., 2014) made by diverse rural stakeholders across three case studies in Europe: **Scotland, France and the Czech Republic**



## Just Scapes

GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

University of East Anglia (UK), INRAE (National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and the Environment) and ESPOL (European School of Political and Social Sciences) (France), CzechGlobe (Czech Republic)



Graphic Recording: Marie-Pascale Gajnen  
[www.gajnen.com](http://www.gajnen.com)

# Research Questions

**What does environmental (in)justice look like in rural Europe in an age of climate-influenced landscape transformations?**

**How do these environmental injustices act as barriers to the realisation of just sustainable transformations in rural Europe?**

- ▶ Our research investigates experiences of environmental (in)justice across three sites: the Affric Kintail region in Scotland, the French Pyrénées (Arac Valley), and South and East Moravia in the Czech Republic.

# Case Studies

## French Pyrenées (Arac Valley)

- Located in the Pyrénées Ariégeoises regional natural park (South-west France).
- Historical and continuing importance of livestock farming to the economy and geography of the valley (shaping open landscapes).
- Since the 1950s, the decline of livestock farming has led to massive land abandonment and spontaneous forest regeneration.
- Importance of EU CAP subsidies in supporting extensive livestock farming.
- Newcomers support small-scale farming, agroecological projects and food-sovereignty movements.
- Consensus around support for livestock farming challenged in recent years by rewilding discourses and the climate mitigation agenda.



# Case Studies

## Czech Republic (South and East Moravia)

- A region in the South-east of the Czech Republic.
- Agricultural production (grain and vegetable farming), wine production highly important.
- Landscape trends of large monoculture fields, high-input industrial agricultural practices, deep detachment from the land.
- Area dominated by large agricultural cooperatives and few small-scale farms.
- Structural challenges to sustainable agricultural shifts.



# Case Studies

## Scottish Highlands (Affric Kintail)

- 'Affric-Kintail area', stretching from Drumnadrochit in the East to Kintail and the West coast of Scotland.
- Affric Highlands restoration initiative- landscape level approach through a cluster of landowners, managers and users.
- c.195,000 hectares of land, comprised of around 50 estates, 7 of which cover half of the land area.
- Recent push for landscape restoration- tree-planting, peatland restoration, stricter deer controls- and land-based investments.
- Social conflicts around landscape restoration (deer numbers, community benefits).
- Initial but not yet mature debates about the social dimensions of restoration in the Scottish Highlands.



# Methods

- ▶ In-depth, semi-structured interviews and participatory workshops (n=116) with a range of stakeholders including:
  - conventional land-users, e.g. livestock farmers, hunters
  - forest managers;
  - environmental NGOs;
  - local action groups and community organisations;
  - local residents;
  - local government members, and national policy-makers.
  
- ▶ Qualitative, thematic analysis of the data, with a focus on key narratives and embedded justice claims around land-use change.
- ▶ A common analytical framework inductively developed for understanding the key environmental justice issues across the three sites.
- ▶ Cross-case justice claims.

## E.g. Unequal access to land

- Highly concentrated ownership: Scotland- estate owners; France- larger livestock farmers; the Czech Republic- large agricultural cooperatives.
- Unequal access to land not only discussed as a barrier to social justice but also in relation to the potential for sustainability.
- Structural barriers to addressing land-based grievances and to sustainable landscape transformations
- The role of subsidy regimes (both agricultural and forestry subsidies) in sustaining unequal access to land and in generating perverse outcomes.

# Urban-rural burden-shifting

- Fears over increasingly restricted livelihoods and displacement of landscape values and priorities, rural spaces becoming ‘a green lung’ and a ‘playground’.
- Divergent perspectives on land-use and on landscape values between the longstanding citizens and the newcomers to the area (commuters, retired citizens, second homeowners).

*“The mountains and the countryside are beautiful when they are maintained [by livestock farming]. If it is to become a sort of Yellowstone, we will soon see people throwing peanuts at the last livestock farmer in Ariège, a cigarette stuck between his lips and a beret screwed on his head”* (locally elected person, French case)

# Political disempowerment and marginalisation

- Limited influence of citizens on land-use decision-making processes driven by a range of influential actors (state bodies, municipalities, private landowners).
- Those with smaller pockets of land (e.g. smallholder farmers) or non-landed residents feel disconnected from decision-making processes on local land-use change.

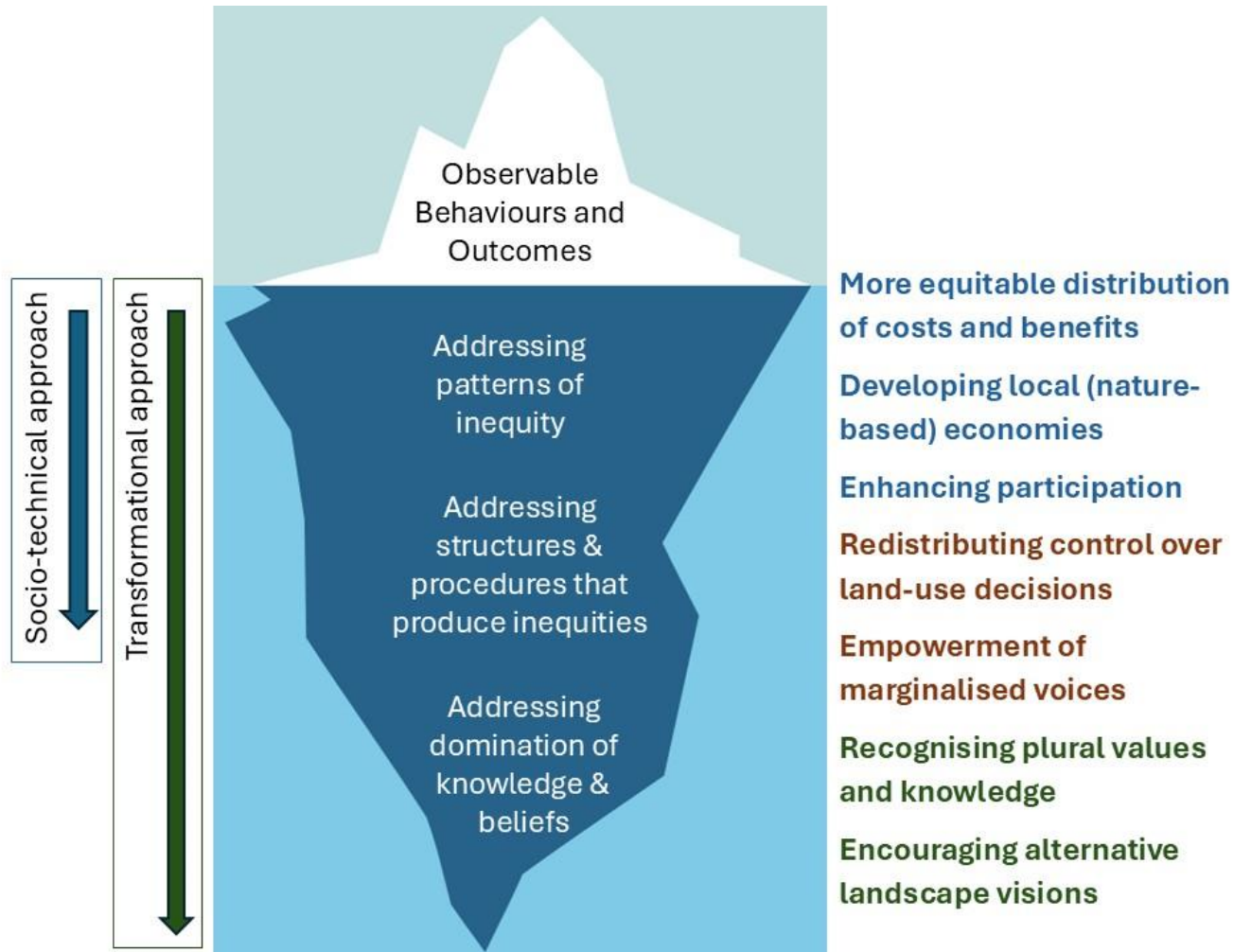
*"I am the land manager, and I have a real connection to the land since I work with it every day. Yet I am the least in the whole process of formulating the incentives and managing the land legislatively. This has been done by people sitting by the table, never working with soil a day in their life."* (Smallholder farmer, Czechia Case).

**Brown et al. (2024). Conceptualising rural environmental justice in Europe in an age of climate-influenced landscape transformations. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 110.**

# Just transformations of the landscape- Conceptual framework

- Diverse meanings and scope of just transitions
- Calls for ‘just transformations’ to sustainability (Bennett et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2020), combining sustainability and justice commitments across multiple sectors and scales.
- A shallow just transition vs. a deeper just transformation to sustainability.
- Emphasises the need for systemic change and underlying drivers of nature degradation (e.g. IPBES report)
- Confronts power and land inequalities, the root causes of ecological degradation and intertwined social injustices, prioritises empowerment of marginalised voices or local communities
- What is the political economy of a just transition?
- Widened scope of affected actors, a need for more fine-grained, intersectional justice analysis

# Iceberg model



# Just transformations of the landscape

## *What is just restoration in the Affric-Kintail landscape?*

- What is the nature and scope of just transition of land?
- What are the pathways and barriers?
- How will benefits be shared?
- Who is included?

**Integrating community revival with ecological restoration-**  
what would such a vision look like and how do we get there?

# Scotland case study findings

- ▶ Local people's senses of (in)justice around land-use change and landscape restoration relate to deeper questions around the transformations of Scottish rural landscapes.
- ▶ “...we need to ensure that carbon does not serve to bake in that model once again.”
- ▶ Highlighting the following elements:
  - ❑ *historical redress;*
  - ❑ *equitable, landscape-level distribution of benefits;*
  - ❑ *widening democratic involvement of communities;*
  - ❑ *recognition justice*

**Brown et al. (2025). Towards a transformative approach to just rural transitions: Landscape restoration in the Scottish highlands. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*. 8(6), pp.1839-1865**

# Just Landscape Restoration

## Socio-Technical Approach

- ❑ Responsible governance of land with improved public benefits
- ❑ More equitable distribution of costs and benefits
- ❑ Developing local (nature-based) economies
- ❑ Fair and inclusive opportunities for community benefits
- ❑ Enhancing participation of all stakeholders and empowering local communities
- ❑ Multi-stakeholder collaboration

Distributive and procedural justice

## Transformative Approach

- ❑ Redistributing control over land-use decisions and land access
- ❑ Historical redress for land injustices
- ❑ Developing wider landscape-level community benefits disentangled from land ownership
- ❑ Community capacities to shape their own agendas
- ❑ Prioritising empowerment of marginalised voices
- ❑ Recognising and respecting plural values and knowledge, polycentric visions of the landscape

Multi-dimensional justice: distributive, procedural, recognition, restorative, ecocentric

*Guidelines for*

**SOCIALLY JUST  
LANDSCAPE  
RESTORATION IN THE  
SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS**



<https://cdn.sanity.io/files/wql58zs5/production/2cdd7578a31dc0a353323dca2f811c38c4cde15b.pdf>

Thank you!

<https://just-scapes.uea.ac.uk/>

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