Seminar 4 — Governing a Sustainability Transition

IR227 Politics of Change

July 2026

What you'll do in 90 minutes

[Bridge to seminar] *Take your assigned country's transition. Map the regime, the niches, the landscape pressures (MLP). Map the multi-level governance structure (MLG). Assess polycentric vs. monocentric. Then a brief comparative reflection: what does the paired case reveal?*

- Six countries, three pairs.
- Each group: 3–4 students, one case.
- Three frameworks, one comparative reflection, plenary.

Three methodological points up front

1. A regime is a *configuration* — technologies + institutions + practices + actor networks + investments. Not just a technology.
2. MLG and MLP are different frameworks despite the similar name. Don't conflate.
3. "Polycentric" is more specific than "decentralised." Multiple coordinating centres, no single locus.

Six countries, three pairs

Pair archetype	Country A	Country B
High-income contested	Germany (Energiewende)	Denmark (wind)
Middle-income coal-dependent	Indonesia (JETP / PLN)	South Africa (Eskom / JET)
Resource-constrained niche-led	Kenya (geothermal + off-grid)	Bangladesh (SHS + adaptation)

Within each pair: same archetype, different politics / structure / outcome. (Geels 2011; World Bank Group 2017)

Recap: MLP three levels

Framework: Multi-Level Perspective

Landscape Slow-moving contextual conditions. Macroeconomics, demographics, deep cultural values, environmental pressures, geopolitics.

Regime Dominant socio-technical configuration. Five interlocking elements: technologies, institutions, practices, actor networks, investments.

Niche Where radical innovations emerge, protected from regime selection pressures.

Transitions require alignment: landscape pressure + regime opening + niche maturity. (Geels 2011)

Recap: MLG types

Type I Nested territorial jurisdictions, general-purpose competence. Federal-style.

Type II Overlapping non-nested task-specific jurisdictions. Functional-style.

Real systems are usually hybrid. (Liesbet and Marks 2003)

Recap: polycentric vs. monocentric

- **Polycentric**: multiple, partially-autonomous centres coordinating through shared rules and information. No single dominant authority.
- **Monocentric**: a single hierarchical authority.
- **Decentralised** $\neq$ polycentric. Decentralised systems can have a single locus that has chosen to delegate.

When polycentric works: high complexity, distributed information, multiple stakeholders, contested values. (Ostrom 2014)

Phase 1 — read and analyse (25 min, no laptop)

For your country:

1. Read your case.
2. Identify the regime, two or three relevant niches, and the dominant landscape pressures.
3. Verdict: is the regime stable, destabilised, or in transition?
4. Map the multi-level governance structure: which authorities at which levels?
5. Are the relationships Type I (nested territorial), Type II (functional task-specific), or hybrid?
6. Verdict: more polycentric or more monocentric? Defend the verdict by naming centres.
7. Does the governance structure help or hinder the transition?

Output: a short summary.

Phase 2 — draft (25 min, Claude allowed)

A one-paragraph diagnostic. The diagnostic must:

- Identify the regime as a configuration (technologies + institutions + practices + actor networks + investments).
- Name two or three relevant niches and how they are protected.
- Identify the dominant landscape pressures.
- Map the multilevel governance structure (Type I, Type II, or hybrid).
- Deliver a polycentric/monocentric verdict.
- Close with a comparative reflection on the paired case.

Optional: sketch the governance structure as a diagram instead of prose — a circle for each authority, a solid line for nested Type-I relationships, a dashed line for overlapping Type-II relationships, and a star around any authority that is a genuinely independent coordinating centre, then count the starred centres to justify your verdict. Happy to draft this with Claude if you'd rather describe it and have it drawn.

Phase 3 — exchange briefings (5 min)

Case: The diagnostic memo

- Swap your written briefing with your comparative-case group (same archetype, paired region).
- Read their verdict, evidence, and implication for action.
- Note one point of contrast to raise in the plenary: same archetype — why does the verdict differ?

Phase 4 — present (5 min per group)

Each group presents its own diagnostic, then names the contrast with its comparative case.

- High-income contested: Germany vs. Denmark — regime mass, scale, and the early-mover effect.
- Middle-income coal-dependent: Indonesia vs. South Africa — where does the resistance live?
- Resource-constrained niche-led: Kenya vs. Bangladesh — polycentric coordination architectures.

Then: cross-cutting reflection. Do the frameworks travel evenly across the three archetypes?

Three things to take away

1. Regimes are configurations, not technologies. The configurational view is what gives MLP its analytical purchase. (Geels 2011)
2. The frameworks travel unevenly. They were largely OECD-developed; non-OECD applications require productive adaptation. (Wieczorek 2018)
3. Polycentric is a structural feature, not a normative claim. The interesting question is how well the polycentric coordination works. (Ostrom 2014)

Tomorrow: power, ideas, and the integration question.

References i

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