


Multi-level perspective (MLP) and systems change

Objective 1.2

To become familiar with the multi-level perspective (niche, regime, landscape) as applied to systems change and transition.


Forging meaningful systems change is no simple matter. Contemporary researchers of sustainability transition introduced the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) model to explore how current systems of provision in society are made up of actors, assumptions, environments, laws, norms, practices, rules, technologies, and vested interest groups that interact in ways to maintain the status quo.

1.10 Watch “What is MLP—Multi-Level Perspective.” (2:29)



What is MLP - Multi Level Perspective

from **Daniel Oleson**



Oleson, Daniel. “What is MLP—Multi-Level Perspective,” video, 2:29, posted by the creator to Vimeo, November 26, 2012. <https://vimeo.com/54338623> <https://vimeo.com/54338623>

MLP helps us learn how, for example, incumbent firms and systems actors resist alternatives proposed by new actors, social groups, and grassroots movements seeking systems change. Think about the constellation of factors marginalizing more and more people from affordable shelter. Consider the dominant assumptions about private property, and the laws, rules, and vested interests of land owners, planners, real estate companies, the media, and local governments that comprise the current system. To advance systems change and identify key leverage points, we must accurately comprehend the relationships between the system’s components at different levels. If we do not, any efforts mobilized to change that system will be hampered.

MLP theorists call the constellation of factors that make up a system the regime. In each module in this course, we ask you to imagine how the different elements of the regime respond when confronting demands for change, including demands for drawdown.

Two additional levels in the MLP framework—the niche and the landscape—can have significant influence on how we think about the shape and rate of systems change. The landscape level focuses on macro-societal trends from outside that can significantly disrupt existing regimes. For example, the spread of neo-liberal ideology and policies globally over the last 40 years and the inequalities that have accompanied it. Or, the expanding use of fossil fuels in all aspects of our economy and their impacts on human life and natural systems over the last 160 years, for good and for ill. Both boost rising greenhouse gas emissions and global warming. Scientists predict increases in extreme weather events (drought and wild fires), or stronger hurricanes and bigger disasters. In turn, we see more social movements of concern seeking radical change. Stressors can open windows of opportunity for broad-based change led by diverse actors, whether grassroots or the state. We are particularly interested in how macro-level landscape strains create opportunities for micro-level alternative innovations to emerge and spread.

MLP theorists locate most innovations at the niche level. Some innovations aim at mitigating the sources and impacts of stress. Other root and branch innovations seek to radically transform the systems that are causing the problems. In this course, we expose you to many niche level innovations that ultimately aspire to systems change of some kind. Almost by definition, if a niche level innovation shows promise; for example, solar power or agro-ecological farming; it encounters resistance from incumbent actors in the electricity industry (coal, oil, natural gas) or the industrial agriculture sector. However, despite tough going, and with support by a small group of patient early adopters and actors, niche innovations improve performance over time. Skilled intermediaries emerge to diffuse the innovation and scale up its impacts, connecting innovators to supportive regime actors among bureaucrats, politicians, and social movements who can advocate for regulatory and policy change. In this sense, niche innovations become agents of systems change.

We encourage you to keep applying this multi-level perspective. It is a helpful tool for identifying 1) the key elements at different levels in a system, 2) the key actors supporting or thwarting an innovation, and 3) for exploring how each plane interacts and change does or does not occur. Ultimately, this should deepen your capacity to think and act strategically in your own social change efforts. Understanding MLP only gets us part way there, however, and to go further we need to look for additional inspiration and insight.