

# **What is Polycentric Governance?**

## **A Quick Answer**

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## First Step: It's Just a Two Word Phrase!

# Polycentric

*Descriptor: Adjective or Adverb*

# Governance

*Noun (Thing) or Verb (Process)*

## Governance

=

all the processes  
which determine the  
range of acceptable  
individual or  
collective choices  
available to members  
of the associated  
group or community.



**Collective decisions must be**

**discussed,  
made,  
implemented,  
enforced, &  
re-evaluated**

**by participants in that collective action.**

# Governance Occurs at a Macro-Level

Governance scales up the concept of collective decisions:

- Broad community of individuals, groups, and organizations who share at least some common interests and concerns
- Many inter-connected groups make multiple decisions on complex, interdependent problems/opportunities
- Multiple normative perspectives are always present
- Nested levels of rules and social expectations
- Long-lasting effects of governance choices on later options



**Governance encompasses all the processes which determine the range of acceptable individual or collective choices available to members of the associated group or community.**

Since governance itself constitutes a connected series of collective decisions,

**governance decisions must be**

**discussed,  
made,  
implemented,  
enforced, &  
re-evaluated**

**by (or for) members of that group or community.**

# **DMIER: Caveats and Explanations**

**Collective decisions may be discussed, made, implemented, enforced, and reevaluated by**

- 1. group members for themselves,**
- 2. by outsiders acting on their behalf (election, etc.),**
- 3. or by outsiders exerting power over them**

**The groups affected (or those doing the discussing, etc.) may be informal or formally organized.**



# Governance as Complex Process, Government as Organizational Network

- Governance is a process, or rather a collection of closely inter-connected processes.
- Government is an organization, or rather a semi-hierarchical network of inter-related public agencies.
  - Governance is more than just what governments do.
  - But it's easier to focus first on what governments do.



A **government** is constituted by a **complex network** of specialized public agencies, bureaus, councils, departments, legislatures, etc. Each unit has been assigned **partial authority** over certain matters, and their agents are **incentivized** to complete specific tasks, including:

- **The legal basics**: pass laws or write regulations, monitor compliance, adjudicate disputes, and enforce rulings by imposing sanctions.
- **Operations**: public agencies either directly produce, or indirectly procure and oversee the operations of private entities that produce, a wide array of public goods & services.
- **Define Responsibilities**: specify duties assigned to individuals serving in different official capacities, and write & and enforce procedures regarding their selection, appointment, promotion, or removal from office.
- **Rules and Procedures**: determine & oversee rules on how changes in procedures may be proposed, debated, approved & implemented, and who plays what roles in each step.
- **Constitutional change**: draft new constitutions or offer amendments to existing ones, and oversee approval and implementation of those changes.





***Private Corporations,  
Professional Associations,  
Voluntary Non-Profit Organizations  
and Individual Leaders and Citizens  
Can Play Critical Roles  
in All the Tasks of Governance***



# Government v. Governance (summary)

Governments are formally structured organizations that disperse partial authority to constituent agencies, bureaus, committees, departments, etc., to handle many specialized tasks

Governance processes can also involve

- operations of formally organized non-public organizations,
- informal processes inside all kinds of organizations as well as
- informal relationships outside any formal structure, public or non-public.



# What is Polycentric Governance?

*Governance involves **MANY TASKS** carried out by **MANY DECISION CENTERS** of **MANY DIFFERENT TYPES**:*

- ***governments** (networks of public agencies, each of which has partial authority to make decisions regarding certain tasks),*
- ***and** private, professional, voluntary and community-based organizations (each of which may be composed of multiple parts).*

*Since **poly** means **many**, the meaning of **polycentric governance** emerges naturally: **a system in which many diverse centers of partial authority collectively cover the full range of governance tasks.***



Ideally, Polycentric Governance includes ALL if the following modes of formal organizations and informal groupings:

- Multi-Level: Local, state/provincial, national, regional, global units of political authority, as well as cross-level linkages;
- Mixed-Type: includes both general purpose nested jurisdictions (as in federalism) and special purpose, cross-jurisdictional political units (such as special districts)
- Cross-Sectoral: public, private, voluntary, community-based organizations and all kinds of hybrid combinations thereof,
- Omni-Functional: incorporates specialized units for provision (selection of goals), production (or co-production), financing (taxes, donors), coordination, monitoring, sanctioning, dispute resolution, and every kind of policy tool that you can imagine,
- Plural-Community: enables relatively distinct subcultures to prosper simultaneously while retaining sufficient common ground to constitute a broader community.



# Main Contributions of Polycentric Governance to the Bloomington School

- Description of real-world processes of governance
- Framework for analysis of specific cases
- Building blocks for explanatory (causal) models of policy
- Normative ideal
- Basis for policy analysis and advocacy
- Expression of shared optimism



***Welcome  
to the wide, wild world of  
Polycentric Governance  
in the Bloomington  
School,  
and beyond!***



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