# P36 / Implementing Sustainability Transitions: Capacity, Coordination, and Contestation

**Topic :** Implementation/Street-Level Bureaucracy

**Chair :** Nicolai Goritz (Humboldt Universität Berlin)

**Second Chair :** Adrien Ludot (Humboldt Universität Berlin)

**Third Chair :** Jonas von Pfister (Humboldt Universität Berlin)

## GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Governments across the world have adopted increasingly ambitious agendas for climate neutrality, green industrial transformation, circular and bio-based economies, and just transitions. These agendas seek not merely incremental policy change but the transformation of production systems, infrastructures, technologies, institutions, and social practices. Their implementation therefore poses distinctive challenges: transition policies typically span multiple sectors and levels of government, combine interacting policy instruments, trigger social conflicts around the allocation of costs and benefits, require sustained administrative and political commitment, and unfold under substantial uncertainty over long time horizons.

Research on sustainability transitions has generated influential perspectives on transformative innovation policy, transformational system failures, policy mixes, and mission-oriented governance (Weber & Rohracher, 2012; Rogge & Reichardt, 2016; Haddad et al., 2022; Janssen et al., 2023). Yet this literature has paid comparatively greater attention to transition pathways, policy design, and governance architectures than to the processes through which transition-oriented policies are put into practice. Conversely, implementation research offers a rich body of knowledge on policy design, administrative capacity, inter-organizational coordination, political support, implementer behaviour, target-group responses, learning, and contextual conditions (O'Toole, 1986; Winter, 2012; Bullock et al., 2021; Sager, Mavrot & Keiser, 2024), but has only begun to engage systematically with the distinctive demands of sustainability transitions.

This panel brings these literatures into dialogue around the central research question: **How and under what conditions are ambitious sustainability-transition policies translated into implementation outputs and outcomes?** It invites work examining several related hypotheses. First, the cross-sectoral and multi-level character of transition policies makes coordination, responsibility allocation, and implementation capacity especially consequential. Second, implementation is shaped by the tension between transformative policy demands and existing organizational mandates, routines, resources, and institutional arrangements; misfit may generate adaptation, layering, resistance, or non-implementation. Third, political commitment, policy legitimacy, opposition of target groups, and distributional contestation condition whether administrative capacities can be mobilized and sustained. Fourth, because transitions unfold under uncertainty and over extended periods, learning, feedback, and adaptive implementation will gain greater importance for success, while also creating risks of drift from original objectives. Finally, similar transition policies may generate divergent implementation trajectories across places and sectors because these mechanisms interact with context.

By connecting implementation scholarship with sustainability-transition research, the panel seeks to develop more cumulative explanations of when, how, and why transformative policy ambitions are realized, modified, or frustrated in practice. Such endeavor is in line with the recent interest of socio-technical transition studies for public policy theory, which may help find practical answers to long-term policy challenges (Sewerin et al., 2020; Geels and Ayoub, 2025).

## CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites theoretical, empirical, and methodological papers on the implementation of policies intended to advance sustainability transitions. We are particularly interested in contributions that move beyond policy adoption or design to examine what happens when ambitious transition strategies, programmes, and instruments encounter administrative procedures of public organizations, political conflict, target groups, firms, civil society, and place-specific institutional contexts.

Papers may investigate how administrative and state capacity shape implementation; how policy mixes and

integrated strategies are translated into operational instruments; how their implementation is coordinated across ministries, agencies, sectors, and levels of government; how political support, legitimacy, stakeholder resistance, and distributional conflict affect delivery; how implementing organizations interpret, adapt, or resist transformative policy demands; how local and regional actors mediate national or supranational transition objectives; and how policy learning, feedback, experimentation, and adaptation influence implementation over time. We invite papers that study activities aimed to mitigate challenges during implementation, such as strategic framing and post-implementation redesign and their effects. Finally, we also welcome work that conceptualizes or measures implementation success and failure, connects implementation processes to policy outcomes, or develops implementation theory for policies aimed at systemic transformation.

Empirical contributions may address climate and energy transitions, green industrial and innovation policy, mobility, food and agriculture, biodiversity and nature protection, circular economy, bioeconomy, just transition, or other sustainability-related domains. Comparative studies across countries, regions, sectors, policy instruments, or implementation settings are especially welcome, as are single-case studies that provide strong theoretical leverage. The panel is open to qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches, including process tracing, comparative case studies, survey and experimental research, configurational methods, large-N analysis, and systematic analysis of policy evaluations or administrative data.

Across these contributions, the panel aims to identify which implementation mechanisms travel across transition domains and which remain context-dependent. We particularly encourage papers that explicitly connect sustainability-transition scholarship with theories and concepts from public policy and public administration, thereby helping to build a more cumulative research agenda on implementing transformative public policy.