

# Abstract

Multiple global crises – including the pandemic, climate change, and Russia's war on Ukraine – have recently linked together in ways that are significant in scope, devastating in effect, but poorly understood. A growing number of scholars and policymakers characterize the situation as a ‘polycrisis’. Yet this neologism remains poorly defined. We provide the concept with a substantive definition, highlight its value-added in comparison to related concepts, and develop a theoretical framework to explain the causal mechanisms currently entangling many of the world's crises. In this framework, a global crisis arises when one or more fast-moving trigger events combine with slow-moving stresses to push a global system out of its established equilibrium and into a volatile and harmful state of disequilibrium. We then identify three causal pathways – common stresses, domino effects, and inter-systemic feedbacks – that can connect multiple global systems to produce synchronized crises. Drawing on current examples, we show that the polycrisis concept is a valuable tool for understanding ongoing crises, generating actionable insights, and opening avenues for future research.

## Non-technical summary

The term ‘polycrisis’ appears with growing frequency to capture the interconnections between global crises, but the word lacks substantive content. In this article, we convert it from an empty buzzword into a conceptual framework and research program that enables us to better understand the causal linkages between contemporary crises. We draw upon the intersection of climate change, the covid-19 pandemic, and Russia's war in Ukraine to illustrate these causal interconnections and explore key features of the world's present polycrisis.

## Technical summary

Multiple global crises – including the pandemic, climate change, and Russia's war on Ukraine – have recently linked together in ways that are significant in scope, devastating in effect, but poorly understood. A growing number of scholars and policymakers characterize the situation as a ‘polycrisis’. Yet this neologism remains poorly defined. We provide the concept with a substantive definition, highlight its value-added in comparison to related concepts, and develop a theoretical framework to explain the causal mechanisms currently entangling many of the world's crises. In this framework, a global crisis arises when one or more fast-moving trigger events combines with slow-moving stresses to push a global system out of its established equilibrium and into a volatile and harmful state of disequilibrium. We then identify three causal pathways – common stresses, domino effects, and inter-systemic feedbacks – that can connect multiple global systems to produce synchronized crises. Drawing on current examples, we show that the polycrisis concept is a valuable tool for understanding ongoing crises, generating actionable insights, and opening avenues for future research.

## Social media summary

No longer a mere buzzword, the ‘polycrisis’ concept highlights causal interactions among crises to help navigate a tumultuous future.