

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 provide 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 unfolding crises, generating actionable insights, and opening avenues for future research.