PolyCIVIS
Methodological Bootcamp

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Framing the Polycrisis

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KEY INSIGHTS:

Research WP Presentation

Keynote speech from Prof. **Malte Brosig,** University of the Witwatersrand

Case studies from **Europe** and **Africa** and perspectives on **Polycrisis**

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On 31st of January, 2024, at the first PolyCIVIS conference in Brussels, the PolyCIVIS Methodological BootCamp provided an in-depth exploration of the concept of "polycrisis."

The event commenced with a presentation of the Research WP led by **Fadma Ait Mous** from Hassan II University of Casablanca (H2UC) and **Mauve Carbonell** from Aix-Marseille University (AMU).

The research work package aim to:

- develop a shared research agenda among the partners and to enable joint and sustainable knowledge production
- provide joint research instruments and tools;
- facilitate joint knowledge production and dissemination (conferences, publications).

Presentation of the Research WP

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Exploring the polycrisis through a Euro-African perspective

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Two main deliverables are expected:

1. The Polycrisis Database: will contain 300 to 500 entries of publications relating to the polycrisis in Euro-African perspective.
2. Edited volume «Facing polycrises together: a Euro-African perspective»
A final conference will take place in Aix-en-Provence (France) at the end of the project (Spring 2026).

The objectives of the workshop "Methodological bootcamp: Framing the Polycrisis" are to identify research priorities, themes and partners' expertise for the final conference/book; by themes, set the criteria informing the choice of publications to be reflected in the Polycrisis database.

"From Neologism to Promising Research Agenda? The Global Polycrisis and IR".

Prof. Malte Brosig's keynote speech, based on his article "From Neologism to Promising Research Agenda? The Global Polycrisis and IR" paved the way for discussions on the notion of polycrisis. While referring to the article, in order to determine how to create a research agenda **going beyond the buzzword "polycrisis,"** Prof. Brosig proposed to **look at the literature to define the concept and identify common elements in the definitions of polycrisis.**

Using the example of the interconnected problems in South Africa - unemployment, murder, food security, corruption, electricity crisis, economic stagnation, HIV - he points out the fact that those

Keynote speech (Prof. Malte Brosig)

are simultaneous multiple crises conditioning one-another with a chain reaction and no simple cause, that are reinforcing the polycrisis. This allows to point out some properties, such as the unboundedness, non-linearity, self reinforcement. Through the compared example of the war in Ukraine and the COVID-crisis, Pr. Malte Brosig also questions the role of human agency: while the first example is a direct consequence of human involvement, the second crisis was solved by the discovering of the vaccine.

By addressing intersectionality, the SDGs provide us with solutions: acting on one SDG has (positive) consequences on another one. Eventually, using a matrix of the "Known and Unknown", Malte Brosig raised attention around the uncertainty of polycrisis:

> *we don't know when, how and where a crisis spreads, we have not yet solved a polycrisis, we are not sure whether we are experiencing a polycrisis and which point in time is reached (beginning? end?).*

The discussions and interactions between the audience and the speaker highlighted three main axes of reflexion:

first, the importance to agree on how to do research (1),

then, the aspects of polycrisis that require special attention (2)

and, finally, the debate around the novelty of the notion "polycrisis" (3).

How to do research?

Many questions raised by the audience dealt with the topic of **how to conduct research on polycrisis.** The remarks highlighted the importance of **agreeing on one definition and framework,** but also one grammatical rule: are we talking about polycrises (plural) or polycrisis (singular)?

The definition of polycrisis should provide us with **tools to differentiate** between a challenge, problem, crisis, catastrophe and disaster and **the semantic** could help in doing so: for example, looking at the Greek root, the "crisis" is the shift in the sickness where the person could get better or worse, and in Chinese, it translates into a "dangerous opportunity". The difference between these notions and the possibility for "a crisis" somewhere to just be a "problem" elsewhere requires mobilizing specific tools encompassing these different dimensions in the building of a research agenda. This also requires to pay attention to **positionality, and the differences between European and African contexts.**

Moreover, the definition needs to be transdisciplinary and take into account the diversity of disciplines.

This also raises the question of the disciplines to be involved, and **whether to include researchers from scientific fields (i.e. hard sciences)** as well: humanities can make a good contribution, and sciences also present the inconvenience of not being rooted in humanities. Therefore, it was decided to include researchers from hard sciences, to ensure a transdisciplinary approach.

Similarly to research in science, **a modest approach** is recommended, to keep in mind "what we know and what we don't know" and focus on the crisis' management.

It is important in the research to use more **empirical data, explore examples** and **publish a database,** to **move beyond simplicity** and approach the concept that is for now still a political notion to **catch policy-makers' attention**.

Special focuses

These discussions also highlighted the wish of the stakeholders **to further explore some aspects of the notion "polycrisis",** such as the importance of human agency in all of the aspects of a polycrisis, the non-linearity condition that could be replaced by **multi-linearity** to involve a multidimensional approach to the definition, or the endogeneity that could be challenged by studying **exogenous factors** as well.

The proposition of **looking at polycrisis in terms of possibility, and crisis-induced innovation, to understand how to overcome them**, as well as the questioning of **why different crises lead to different outcomes** (the European integration was once a solution for a crisis and is now in danger because of another crisis) are also key elements in understanding crisis.

What is new?

Eventually, the last type of reaction can be summarized by the interrogation: **"what is new?"**, a question that can also give a key direction in undertaking the research and exploring the notion as well as selecting the data and examples of polycrisis. Indeed, crisis are **regular and normal in history** and crisis that reinforce themselves have been especially **studied in international relations** after the shift from realist international theories to **transnationalism.**

Similarly, **global politics** is familiar with the idea of **"multiple crisis" in system theory.** Therefore, it is required to look at what is unique in the current context, to approach the polycrisis. One possible answer provided here is **the scope and intensity effect**, that, in the opposite, question whether the polycrisis of today can really be compared to crises from the past.

Here, the Anthropocene and research on planetary boundaries indicate that polycrises are new since they reached a new level. These topics and questionings were also at the core of the discussions on the examples / case studies, that could already provide some answers.

Summary of the case studies

The different presentations in the afternoon raised similar questions to the ones following the keynote speech. They provided **tools from different domains to analyze the polycrisis, proposed solutions to polycrisis using illustrations or case studies, and highlighted the importance of communication for understanding or acting on polycrisis.**

Each case study faced the problematic of defining polycrisis and the different entanglements of crisis: "climate, migration, economic development, food safety and security, etc." (Gudrun Zagel / Roman Puff), "political, economic, social, environmental, health, moral, religious, identity-related" (Michaël Kasombo Tshibanda), "employment crisis, energy crisis, poverty, global warming, war" (Antoine Kernen), "health, social life, security, climate change, ancestral customs, cultures" (Salvius Bakari Amuri).

Altogether, **two aspects/causes/symptoms of the polycrisis were repeatedly addressed throughout the discussions and presentations: migration** (Adélie Chevée, Frederik Ponjaert & Anne Weyembergh) **and climate change** (Salvius Bakari Amuri, Sandra Arndt).

They are central in this notion, especially when looking at the global scale, or "common experience," that requires **avoiding a eurocentric bias,** that would **overlook geographical differences** in the experiences and the longer normality of crisis entanglement in some spaces.

The presentations shared the ambition of providing solutions for polycrisis and came up with three types of inputs. First, the various disciplines provided the audience with notions that can offer **perspectives in the study of polycrisis and their solutions.**

- For example, studies on the permafrost and the global climate dynamics can hand over **ways to deal with complex systems, non-linearity and human agency in front of uncertainty** (Sandra Arndt).

- Law, that is an important tool to tackle polycrisis, also offers techniques and methodologies to **address entangled problems**: with the **principle of proportionality,** two simultaneous problems can be solved despite contradictory measures ; **nondiscrimination** allows to keep all stakeholders involved, while the **minimum core guarantees and standard criteria** are ways to agree on the important threshold that one would use (Gudrun Zagel, Roman Puff).

- Case studies on **multidisciplinary projects** aiming at solving regional multiple issues caused by one problem, such as the PhytoKat project in the Katanga region, highlighted the **pertinence of involving researchers from different disciplines** in the presence of polycrisis (Salvius Bakari Amuri).

- Eventually, mutual trust can also be an axus for research: assessing **mutual trust between Europe and Africa, studying the relationship between mutual trust and crisis and questioning cooperation in the absence of trust** gives an understanding on the deployment of solutions (Frederik Ponjaert & Anne Weyembergh).

The aspect of mutual trust refers to cooperation, which is the second main thread of these presentations. **Cooperation, solidarity and governance are keys to finding solutions regarding polycrisis.** Collaborations between stakeholders, through a transdisciplinary approach or common work between institutions and states, is vital to address polycrisis, but require to be determined and respect specific rules in order to work. For example, knowing that **mutual trust is easier to find in regional/interregional set-ups** (Frederik Ponjaert & Anne Weyembergh) provides us with a tool to understand the frameworks in tackling polycrisis.

- The **African Union** is an example of scale for which polysolutions are discussed at a panafrican level, to identify common fields of action in polycrisis. This level of cooperation pointed out **the role of finance in enhancing some problems on the continent, or the advantage of developing a free trade area, reshaping financial institutions and reorienting the states actions to fight climate change** (Germain Ngoie Tshibambe).

- On a national scale, economic and political plans, such as the **emergence strategies implemented in Kenya, Cameroun, and Senegal**, are discussed in Africa.

They are based **on post-independence policies, the Chinese example and funds, and provide a non-Eurocentric strategy** on how to tackle simultaneously problems of employment, energy, poverty, war, global warming… (Antoine Kernen).

- Eventually, this cooperation can also rely on **solidarity mechanisms**, and non-governmental institutions. This was highlighted by the **implementation of mechanisms to react to migrant crises** resulting from different crises by cultural institutions willing to **support artists in their journey to Europe** (Adélie Chevée).

Finally, **the topic of communication around polycrisis** in the project also raised many questions.

- First, the semantics are important. "Polycrisis" is, as introduced in the morning session, a "buzzword" but it can also be a notion with an accurate research agenda, following the example of the overused word "mutual trust" that now has a legal meaning on the European scene (Frederik Ponjaert & Anne Weyembergh).

Moreover, some advocate for the use of **"polysolutions" instead of "polycrisis"** (Germain Ngoie Tshibambe) which corresponds to the idea that it is best **to share positive messages rather than negative ones** by analyzing them and presenting them with suggested solution (Dimitris Gouscos) and should also give hints on how to communicate around the project.

- The **way polycrisis are addressed in different spheres** can give leads on what to research about them. By studying the language, one can understand how **political, popular and scientific discourse shape the polycrisis themselves.** Therefore, the project should consider **cross-disciplinary discourse analysis of different spheres** (Michaël Kasombo Tshibanda).

- Eventually, these elements give some hints on how to **communicate about the project**, **especially for policy-makers or the broader public,** who would react better to positive messages that are easily understandable and **respect "epistemic rights"** - the right for citizens to understand political matters through simplified communications (Dimitris Gouscos).

Next Steps

This report acts as a starting point for our work, and helps identify the next steps. Our upcoming work includes methodological propositions, and an ongoing, multilingual data collection that can enrich the existing information we have on polycrisis.

This data needs to be delimited and validated, to ensure that the research is complete, accurate, consistent, and reliable. Our next steps include:

01 ESTABLISHMENT OF A SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE.

02 CREATE A BIBLIOGRAPHY THAT ALLOWS THE IDENTIFICATION OF CASE STUDIES/EXAMPLES OF POLYCRISIS, CONCEPTS FROM OTHER DISCIPLINES, STUDIES ON MULTIPLE CRISIS OR POLYCRISIS. À ESTABLISHMENT OF A SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE.

03 CLOSE COLLABORATION WITHIN THE NETWORK AND BEYOND

Conclusion

The answers to these questions will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that drive the polycrisis.

These data will show us how we can best move forward, generating further knowledge that is relevant to both African and European partners, on:

- The terminology of polycrisis
- How different disciplines explore the polycrisis
- the varying degrees of polycrisis' impact across regions
- The increasing interconnectedness between different disciplines – economic, technological, cultural, geopolitical, political, etc and how these relate to the polycrisis
- The different form of data we could collect: multilingual literature, cases studies, new research, etc
- The process through which we are able to collect the data
- The languages that we should include in the research

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