PolyCIVIS Agora Forum Manifesto

Polycrisis: Towards Adaptation and Transformation through Collaboration

Key takeaways

i) The polycrisis impacts the policy challenge.
ii) Strengthening democratic governance capacity is as important as crisis-response capacity.
iii) A central policy challenge is to close the gap between knowledge and action.
iv) Resilience must include citizens, local communities, and young people.
v) Africa-Europe cooperation is essential.
vi) The need for greater emphasis on implementation and institutionalisation.

Introduction

The PolyCIVIS [1] Network convened the Agora Forum [2], *"Polycrisis: Towards Adaptation and Transformation through Collaboration,"* in Brussels on 23 September 2026 as the closing activity of the PolyCIVIS European Union-funded Jean Monnet project. The Forum brought together specialists from research, policymaking, practice, civil society, international organizations, and youth organizations. It was organized around a central question: ***"How can governance systems become more adaptive, inclusive, and transformative in a world characterized by interconnected and compounding crises?"***

By bringing together different communities of policymaking, knowledge, and practice, the Agora Forum created a space for dialogue between research, policy, and practice. A keynote presentation and moderated roundtables on themes, *"Advancing the Polycrisis Framework: Insights from PolyCIVIS"* and *"Governing the Polycrisis: From Evidence to Action,"* provided the key focus areas of the Forum.

The Forum had six key objectives:

- to present and reflect on the principal findings and achievements of the PolyCIVIS project;
- to advance discussion of the implications of polycrisis for governance at local, national, regional, continental, and international levels;
- to examine how systems thinking, complexity science, foresight, and resilience approaches, including their application in teaching, can strengthen public policy and institutional capacity;
- to facilitate dialogue among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, civil society organizations, and youth representatives;
- to identify opportunities for future interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral, and Africa-Europe collaboration; and
- to develop practical recommendations for more adaptive, integrated, and transformative governance.

[1] PolyCIVIS is a European Union-funded Jean Monnet Network bringing together 21 universities across Africa and Europe. The network promotes interdisciplinary collaboration in research, education, and policy to address complex global challenges.
[2] The Agora Forum provides a space for open, interdisciplinary, and cross-regional academic dialogue under Chatham House rules.

Context

The international system is operating in an increasingly complex and uncertain risk environment. Geopolitical tensions, climate change, technological disruption, democratic backsliding, socio-economic inequalities, pandemics, and protracted conflicts can no longer be treated as separate policy challenges. Their interaction can generate cascading effects, place additional pressure on institutions, expose weaknesses in governance arrangements, and challenge conventional approaches to policymaking.

The PolyCIVIS project focus area, the polycrisis, is understood as the systemic interaction of overlapping economic, social, environmental, geopolitical, health, and technological crises. These interactions can reinforce existing pressures, generate cascading shocks, amplify vulnerabilities, and produce compounded, unpredictable, and prolonged effects that exceed the capacity of conventional governance frameworks.

Climate change, biodiversity loss, geopolitical conflict, pandemics, economic instability, and technological disruption illustrate the interconnected nature of contemporary risks and the complexity of the policy responses they require. Treating polycrisis as a defining condition of contemporary global politics requires coordinated, evidence-informed, and forward-looking approaches, together with stronger collaboration across disciplines, sectors, and levels of governance.
For PolyCIVIS, this meant developing interdisciplinary, intersectoral, transnational, and inclusive approaches that can contribute to sustainable and mutually beneficial outcomes in Africa and Europe.

PolyCIVIS: achievements and outputs

Since its establishment in 2023, the PolyCIVIS project has convened three annual conferences. In January 2024, the IEE-ULB hosted the PolyCIVIS Launch Conference in Brussels, examining a *"Common EU-Africa vision for 2030 in the face of polycrisis",* with particular attention to democracy and security. In 2025, the PolyCIVIS consortium held its Annual Conference in Dakar, Senegal. The conference included an Agora Forum on *"Strengthening Europe-Africa Cooperation on Climate, Environment, and Energy Transition in a Polycrisis Era"*, which culminated in the publication of the Dakar Communiqué. In 2026, the project's Final Conference was held in Aix-en-Provence, France. A Discussion Forum, "Polycrisis: Youth Resilience in the Face of Conflicts, Forced Migration and Climate Change", resulted in the Aix-Marseille Polycrisis Declaration, bringing together key findings, policy recommendations, and youth-led approaches to addressing the polycrisis.

The network has also implemented four Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs), short, intensive courses that combine periods of online learning and collaboration with a short period of physical mobility, addressing:

- Euro-Africa Trade and Investment Relations;
- The Polycrisis and Strategic Foresight;
- Understanding the Polycrisis: Studies in Polycrisis, Fragility, and Resilience; and
- Enhancing Skills in Polycrisis Management: African and European Approaches.

Work is also under way on an Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters (EMJM) programme proposal, *"Tackling the Polycrisis"*, involving European and African universities. Submission is foreseen for February 2027.
The project has published 21 Polycrisis Briefs, providing policymakers in Europe and Africa with practice-oriented analysis and strategic guidance. Considerable progress has also been made on the project's principal research output, the edited volume with provisional title *"Facing the Polycrisis Together: Experiences and Case Studies from Selected African and European Countries,"* scheduled for publication in 2027. In 2026, the project released the online PolyCIVIS Polycrisis Handbook, *"Participatory Methods for Teaching about the Polycrisis in Higher Education"*.
The project's outreach and communication activities have included 11 newsletters, 10 PolyCIVIS podcasts, and 12 polycrisis-related events during the period 2024–2026.

Key takeaways from the Agora Forum

A central conclusion of the Agora Forum was that the polycrisis requires a shift from managing individual crises towards strengthening the capacity of institutions and societies to understand, anticipate, and govern interconnected risks.

The significance of the PolyCIVIS agenda therefore extends beyond improving understanding of the polycrisis. It lies in translating that understanding into more adaptive, coordinated, and transformative approaches to governance.
The keynote and subsequent discussions highlighted several challenges of particular relevance to Africa and Europe:

- Health pandemics and health security;
- Climate change and food security;
- Growing insecurity, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, ongoing armed conflicts, including the Russia-Ukraine war and USA-Iran conflict; and the expansion of transnational crime; and
- Migration, including displacement and migration policies.

A presentation of the main dimensions of the PolyCIVIS project—policy relevance and engagement, teaching and pedagogical innovation, research and knowledge production, and communication and dissemination—provided the basis for discussion of what has been learned, what has worked, where shortcomings remain, and what should be done differently in a potential next phase.

i) The polycrisis impacts the policy challenge.
The defining feature of the polycrisis is not simply the number of crises occurring at the same time, but the interactions among them. Interconnected crises can produce cascading effects, compound institutional pressures, and generate forms of uncertainty that are difficult to address through conventional, sector-specific responses.

This requires greater attention to how risks interact across policy domains, levels of governance, and geographical boundaries. For policymakers, the implication is direct: crisis preparedness cannot be reduced to preparing for individual events or relying primarily on reactive measures.
Institutions need the capacity, including financial, to identify interactions among risks, anticipate possible cascading effects, and adjust responses as conditions change.
To achieve this, a stronger systemic perspective alongside existing sectoral expertise is required. In addition, anticipatory approaches and foresight can also strengthen decision-making under conditions of uncertainty.

ii) Strengthening democratic governance capacity is as important as crisis-response capacity.
The Forum discussions underscored the importance of adaptive, transformative, and democratic governance. Under conditions of uncertainty, institutions must be able not only to respond to crises but also to anticipate developments, coordinate across boundaries, learn from experience, and adjust policies and institutions as circumstances change. Strengthening democratic governance capacity is therefore essential to ensure that institutions are able to perform these functions effectively over the longer term.

This emphasizes the importance of institutional flexibility, cross-sectoral coordination, systems thinking, and integrated approaches to policymaking, while ensuring that governance remains transparent, accountable, and responsive to citizens. It also requires the capacity to revise policies as evidence and circumstances evolve.

These challenges are particularly nuanced where responsibilities are distributed across levels of government, policy sectors, donors, and institutions. Addressing the polycrisis requires a stronger shared understanding of its dynamics, adequate financial resources, and approaches that extend beyond a predominantly security-oriented conception of crisis. Coordination should therefore be treated as a core component of resilience and democratic governance. Institutions also need to distinguish between circumstances in which existing arrangements can be adapted and those that require more fundamental institutional or policy change.

iii) The policy challenge is to close the gap between knowledge and action.
A central lesson from the Forum is that evidence does not translate into policy by itself. Research, data, institutional experience, and lived experience can contribute to better decisions when appropriate institutional mechanisms exist to absorb, interpret, and apply that knowledge.

This has implications for policymakers, donors, international organizations, and research institutions. Policy engagement should not be regarded simply as the final stage of research dissemination. More sustained relationships among research, teaching, and policymaking are needed so that evidence can inform policy design, while policy challenges can, in turn, shape research agendas.

A potential next phase of the PolyCIVIS agenda should therefore place greater emphasis on the institutional and organizational conditions that enable knowledge to effectively reach, inform, and shape decision-making and practice, while advancing towards polysolutions that integrate diverse forms of knowledge, expertise, and societal perspectives. This would require the strengthening of mechanisms for knowledge mobilization and exchange to support and enhance institutional capacities, governance arrangements, and policy frameworks necessary to promote coordinated action and more responsive approaches to complex societal challenges.

iv) Resilience must include citizens, local communities, and young people.
The Forum broadened the understanding of governance by emphasizing how crises are experienced and managed by citizens and local communities. The effects of crises are differentiated across populations and places. Public trust, social networks, mobility, and locally generated forms of resilience are important dimensions of how societies respond to overlapping pressures. These perspectives complement institutional and macro-level analysis and can reveal where formal policy responses fail to reflect conditions on the ground.

Young people should likewise be recognized as agents of change and partners in governance, with a meaningful role in decision-making processes, rather than solely as beneficiaries of policy. Their active participation in shaping policies and priorities, particularly in crisis prevention, response, and recovery, together with support for social innovation and locally driven solutions, can strengthen societies' capacity to respond to changing conditions.

v) Africa-Europe cooperation is essential.

The Africa-Europe dimension is central to the PolyCIVIS approach. Contemporary crises are experienced within very different institutional, economic, and social contexts. Comparative engagement can therefore generate insights that are unlikely to emerge from single-region perspectives alone.

The priority is not simply to expand collaboration but to develop sustained and equitable forms of knowledge exchange and joint problem-solving. The Forum emphasized trust and reciprocity as essential foundations for an equitable Africa-Europe partnership.

It further highlighted the importance of strengthening trust between African and European partners, noting that EU migration policies and their implementation can affect perceptions of reciprocity and confidence in the broader Africa-Europe partnership.

Participants also advocated for an Africa-Europe partnership that extends beyond investment and economic considerations, placing greater emphasis on the broader social and human dimensions of cooperation, particularly the well-being of individuals and societies, the strengthening of social cohesion, and the long-term sustainable development of communities.

The continuation of the Blended Intensive Programmes, the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master programme application, further Africa-Europe academic collaboration, and the planned edited volume provide concrete mechanisms for contributing to the creation of a more sustained and enhanced equitable Africa-Europe partnership.

vi) The need for greater focus on implementation and institutionalization

The Forum indicated that a potential next phase of the PolyCIVIS project should consolidate the foundations established during the current project phase while placing greater emphasis on implementation.

In this regard, four priorities were highlighted by participants:

1. Strengthen the evidence base on interconnected and cascading risks and develop methods capable of addressing complexity and uncertainty.
2. Build adaptive institutional capacity, particularly across policy sectors, levels of governance, and organizational boundaries.
3. Strengthen the research-policy interface so that evidence, expertise, and lived experience can more effectively inform decision-making.
4. Institutionalize Africa-Europe collaboration through sustained mechanisms for research, education, mobility, and knowledge exchange.

The objective is to move beyond diagnosing the polycrisis towards building the capacities required to anticipate, manage, and adapt to and, where necessary, transform in response to interconnected challenges.

Conclusion

The Agora Forum reinforced the importance of approaching the polycrisis as a governance challenge characterised by interdependence, uncertainty, and rapid change. The discussions highlighted the need for institutions capable of working across policy boundaries, learning from emerging evidence and experience, and adjusting their responses as circumstances evolve.

A priority is to sustain and strengthen the PolyCIVIS consortium and define a future programme of research, education, and policy engagement. This should include strengthening the evidence base on interconnected crises, deepening the research-policy interface, and developing institutional and educational approaches that support adaptive and transformative governance.

The Africa-Europe dimension provides an important foundation for this next phase. Continued collaboration can support comparative learning, strengthen shared knowledge, facilitate academic mobility, and ensure that diverse experiences and institutional contexts inform responses to and decision-making for common challenges. The planned continuation of academic programmes, research collaboration, and knowledge exchange provide concrete mechanisms for sustaining this agenda.

Participants at the Agora Forum demonstrated a shared commitment to deepening understanding of the polycrisis and embedding that knowledge in research, education, institutions, and policy practice. The longer-term objective should be to strengthen the capacity of partners across Africa and Europe to learn collectively, adapt to changing conditions, and develop responses to interconnected challenges that are both durable and transformative.

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