

A Cascade of Failures: The Polycrisis Defined - Edge of Collapse - Medium

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A short explanation of the simultaneous global crises.



I have written quite a bit about the [polycrisis](#), but mostly from an environmental/ecological standpoint. While I posit that the underlying elements of every aspect of the polycrisis stem from resource overshoot, there is actually much more to it.

To be clear, we live in the age of the polycrisis — a cacophony of interlocking disasters, a perfect storm of humanity’s worst failures converging into a single catastrophic reality. It’s not just one crisis. It’s everything, everywhere, all at once, and it’s spiraling toward us faster than we can comprehend.

[Climate change](#), [economic instability](#), political fragmentation, pandemics, and [resource exhaustion](#) are no longer isolated issues; they are compounding, amplifying, and feeding off one another. If you thought the chaos of the past decade was as bad as it gets, brace yourself. We are only at the beginning.

The Genesis of a Terrifying Concept

The term *polycrisis* isn’t just some intellectual buzzword conjured up in academic echo chambers. It has roots in the work of French theorist Edgar Morin and economic historian Jean-François Rischard. In the early 2000s, they sought a term to encapsulate the idea that crises are interconnected in ways that exacerbate each other. The polycrisis isn’t just about having multiple problems at the same time; it’s about the way these crises combine to create something exponentially worse.

Let’s be clear: this isn’t hyperbole. A wildfire isn’t just a wildfire anymore. It’s a climate change disaster, a biodiversity catastrophe, a public health emergency, and an economic nightmare — all at once. And as these crises interact, the systems designed to address them buckle under the weight of their complexity.

The Definition: What Is a Polycrisis?

A polycrisis is the overwhelming convergence of crises that are interconnected in ways that make them resistant to resolution. It’s not just a pandemic *and* an economic collapse; it’s how the pandemic disrupts supply chains, which in turn accelerates inflation, which then destabilizes political systems, which then fuels further economic despair.

The defining feature of a polycrisis is that these issues cannot be solved in isolation. Tackling one aspect often worsens another. For example, attempts to stabilize the economy by propping up fossil fuel production only deepen the climate crisis, setting the stage for future disasters.

In today’s world, everything is linked: ecological degradation, economic inequality, geopolitical instability, and social fragmentation. It’s a Gordian knot of our own making, and there is no Alexander to cut through it.

Why the Polycrisis Feels Unstoppable

The global polycrisis is not just inevitable — it’s accelerating. Here’s why:

- **Climate Breakdown:** [The Earth is warming](#) at an unprecedented rate, fueling disasters like wildfires, hurricanes, and droughts. In the United States, wildfires now consume entire towns, while droughts threaten the viability of agriculture in California, the country’s breadbasket. Rising sea levels are already rendering coastal cities like Miami unlivable. Yet, instead of aggressive action, we get incrementalism and [corporate greenwashing](#).
- **Economic Instability:** [Inflation](#), [housing crises](#), and [massive wealth inequality](#) are creating a fragile economy teetering on collapse. Your middle-class status? It’s hanging by a thread. Rising costs for essentials like food and housing are squeezing families, while billionaires hoard wealth at levels not seen since the Gilded Age.
- **Geopolitical Fragmentation:** The war in Ukraine is just one example of how power struggles destabilize entire regions. These conflicts create ripple effects, from refugee crises to skyrocketing energy prices. The United States, while distant geographically, is deeply entangled through energy markets, military commitments, and geopolitical alliances.
- **Social Fragmentation:** Polarization is eating away at the social fabric. Trust in institutions has plummeted, and misinformation spreads faster than facts. Your children are growing up in a world where the truth is contested at every turn, and society is increasingly divided into echo chambers.
- **Pandemics and Public Health Failures:** COVID-19 was a warning shot, not an anomaly. The lack of coordinated global action highlighted how unprepared we are for pandemics in an interconnected world. What happens when the next, deadlier pathogen emerges? Spoiler: it won’t be good.
- **Overpopulation:** With 8.2 billion people in the world, the polycrisis affects a vastly larger population than a century ago. And it will only get worse, as we’re expected to hit 10 billion by 2060.

The Critics: Does This Concept Overcomplicate?

Not everyone is sold on the idea of the polycrisis. Critics argue that it's too vague, too alarmist, and too difficult to operationalize in policy discussions. Some dismiss it as an academic exercise or a fatalistic excuse for inaction. They claim we're overthinking the interconnectedness and should focus on solving discrete issues.

But here's the catch: discrete solutions don't work. Climate change doesn't pause while we address income inequality. Pandemics don't wait for us to rebuild trust in public institutions. If anything, the critics' dismissal only underscores the helplessness of our situation. By denying the complexity, they ensure the solutions will never match the scale of the problem.

The United States Is Not Immune

If you think the polycrisis is someone else's problem, think again. The United States is a microcosm of everything that's going wrong globally.

- **Climate Disasters:** From the wildfires in the West to hurricanes in the Gulf, America is already experiencing the brutal reality of climate change. The recent wildfire smoke that blanketed the Midwest and East Coast was a chilling preview of a future where breathing clean air will be a luxury.
- **Economic Despair:** Despite your relatively comfortable income, rising costs for housing, healthcare, and education are eroding the middle class. The dream of leaving your children a better world? It's being replaced by the grim reality of saddling them with insurmountable debt and a collapsing economy.
- **Political Dysfunction:** Gridlock and partisanship have rendered [meaningful action impossible](#). Climate policy? [A joke](#). Economic reforms? Dead on arrival. The government is too paralyzed to tackle the crises that matter most, leaving families to fend for themselves.
- **Social Unraveling:** Gun violence, hate crimes, and polarization dominate the news cycle. Your children are growing up in an America where active shooter drills are a normal part of school life, and civility feels like a relic of the past.

Pie-in-the-Sky Solutions: Why They Won't Work

Let's not sugarcoat this: the proposed solutions to the polycrisis are a mix of wishful thinking and unworkable fantasy. Here's why:

- **Global Cooperation:** Advocates say we need unprecedented international collaboration. Have they looked at the world recently? Nations can barely agree on trade deals, let alone tackle a crisis this complex. The Paris Agreement? Toothless. The COP summits? Exercises in performative diplomacy.
- **Technological Innovation:** From carbon capture to lab-grown meat, techno-optimists pin their hopes on breakthroughs that are always "just around the corner." Meanwhile, emissions keep rising, biodiversity keeps vanishing, and the clock keeps ticking.
- **Behavioral Change:** The idea that individuals can "consume responsibly" their way out of the polycrisis is laughable. Your reusable bags and plant-based diet won't stop rising seas or reverse deforestation. It's a distraction, not a solution.
- **Resilient Communities:** While local initiatives are laudable, they are a drop in the ocean compared to the scale of the problem. Building community gardens won't stop hurricanes or stabilize global supply chains.

In truth, the polycrisis has outstripped our ability to respond. The systems that created these crises are the same ones preventing meaningful action. Capitalism, nationalism, and individualism — the pillars of modern society — are incompatible with the level of coordination and sacrifice needed to confront this reality.

What Does the Future Hold?

The future? It's bleak. Climate models predict more extreme weather, resource scarcity, and migration crises. Economists warn of prolonged recessions and systemic collapses. Political scientists foresee growing authoritarianism as governments struggle to maintain control. [The world you leave your children](#) will be poorer, hotter, and more unstable than the one you inherited.

This isn't alarmism — it's reality. The polycrisis is here, and it's not going away. You can choose to ignore it, but the consequences will find you. They'll arrive as wildfires that choke the skies, as [floods that wash away homes](#), as economic collapses that destroy livelihoods, and as social unrest that shatters communities.

The Takeaway — Welcome to the Polycrisis

The polycrisis is not a distant threat; it's the defining feature of our time. Its tendrils reach into every aspect of life, from the air your children breathe to the stability of your job and the safety of your home. And no, there isn't a silver bullet or a magic solution. This is the world we've created, and now we must live in it.

But perhaps the scariest part is this: we're still treating the polycrisis as if it's manageable, as if we have the luxury of time, as if tinkering around the edges will somehow fix it. We don't. The polycrisis is a runaway train, and there's no conductor at the wheel. The question isn't how we stop it — it's how we survive it. Or if we survive it at all.