

Whose Polycrisis? Navigating a Eurocentric Trap

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Abstract

The concept of polycrisis has gained considerable prominence in recent years as a way of describing the convergence of climate change, geopolitical tensions, economic instability, and global health emergencies. While originally introduced by Edgar Morin and later popularized by Adam Tooze, contemporary usage of the term often reflects a Eurocentric framing that foregrounds Western experiences of crisis. This paper critically examines the polycrisis narrative and argues that it inadequately accounts for the longstanding, structurally embedded crises faced by the Global South. Through case studies of the WTO Doha Round collapse, the Copenhagen climate negotiations, and the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the paper illustrates how global governance systems reinforce asymmetries of power and disproportionately burden developing countries. The analysis demonstrates that what is framed as a “new” global polycrisis in Western discourse has long been a lived reality in the South, shaped by colonial histories, unequal trade regimes, and inequitable access to health and climate resources. By highlighting these epistemic biases, the paper calls for a more inclusive, historically grounded, and justice-oriented understanding of global crises—one that foregrounds Southern perspectives and challenges the reproduction of Western-centric worldviews in policy and academic debates. Overall, the study argues that unless polycrisis discourse meaningfully incorporates Global South experiences, it risks reinforcing the very inequalities it seeks to explain.

Keywords: Polycrisis; Global South; Eurocentrism; Adam Tooze; Global Governance; Climate Justice; WTO Doha Round; Copenhagen Summit; COVID-19 Inequities; Postcolonial.

Introduction

The contemporary world is increasingly characterized by a complex array of interconnected crises, a phenomenon that has been aptly termed 'polycrisis.' This concept has garnered significant attention from academics, policymakers, and the public alike, as it encapsulates the multifaceted and overlapping challenges we face today, ranging from climate change and ecological disasters to economic inequality, political polarization, and violent conflict. Originally coined by philosopher Edgar Morin in his 1999 work "Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium," the term has evolved to reflect a broader understanding of the systemic crises that define our era. It was notably popularized by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in 2016 and has since permeated discussions at high-profile forums, including the World Economic Forum in Davos, where it has become a buzzword among global leaders. The polycrisis narrative posits that we are confronting an unprecedented convergence of challenges, as articulated by Columbia University historian Adam Tooze, who underscores that this moment of crisis is not merely a series of isolated events but rather a complex interplay of factors that have historical roots. Tooze's perspective invites us to consider the implications of these crises beyond their

immediate impacts, suggesting that they are deeply entrenched in a historical context that began with the financial crisis of 2008 and has been exacerbated by subsequent global events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical tensions such as the war in Ukraine. However, while the polycrisis framework seeks to present a comprehensive overview of global challenges, it risks being ensnared within a Eurocentric narrative that prioritizes Western experiences and perspectives. This raises critical questions about the inclusivity of the discourse surrounding polycrisis and the extent to which it reflects the realities faced by communities in the Global South. The disparities in crisis experiences between the Global North and South are stark; for many in the South, crises are not abstract concepts but daily realities shaped by historical injustices, economic exploitation, and ongoing vulnerabilities (Jessop, 2012; Pieterse, 2000). The narrative of polycrisis often neglects these lived experiences, leading to a skewed understanding of whose crises are prioritized and whose voices are amplified in policy discussions. This paper aims to critically examine the notion of polycrisis, particularly through the lens of Tooze's analysis, and to reveal the limitations of framing these interconnected challenges as predominantly Western crises. By exploring key events such as the breakdown of the WTO Doha Round and the failure of the Copenhagen climate talks, we can better understand how these crises disproportionately impact the Global South. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a poignant example of how global health crises are experienced unevenly, with marginalized communities in the South bearing the brunt of inequitable responses.

Literature Review

The concept of polycrisis describes the way today's global challenges are increasingly intertwined and mutually reinforcing, often making the world feel as though it is facing multiple emergencies at once. Rather than existing as separate problems, crises such as climate change, economic inequality, political instability, migration pressures, and public health threats interact with one another and compound their effects (McNamara & Bambra, 2025). This interconnectedness means that a disturbance in one area can trigger ripple effects across other parts of the system, producing social and economic consequences that are far more complex than the sum of their parts. In recent years, scholars, policymakers, and commentators have begun to argue that we are living through an age defined by this overlapping of crises, where old assumptions about linear problem-solving no longer hold. The word "polycrisis" has an interesting history. It was first coined by philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin in *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millennium*. Morin spoke of "interwoven and overlapping crises" and the "complex inter-solidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrollable processes, and the general crisis of the planet" (Morin & Kern, 1999: 74). His point was that the world's problems could no longer be addressed in isolation, since each one interacts with the others in ways that create new layers of risk. The term reappeared in political debate when Jean-Claude Juncker, then President of the European Commission, used it in a 2016 speech to Greek business leaders. He applied it to describe the mounting pressures on Europe at the time, including security concerns, the migration crisis, and the looming Brexit referendum, each of which threatened to destabilize the European project (Juncker, 2016). Juncker's framing brought the term into the policy mainstream and emphasized how multiple crises can collide, creating moments of extreme strain for governments, economies, and societies. Although the word has existed for some time, it is only in recent years that the idea of polycrisis has entered mainstream discussion. In October 2022, Adam Tooze, an economic historian at Columbia University and contributing editor for the *Financial Times*, brought the term to a much wider audience. He argued that the world is currently facing one of the most complex and overlapping sets of challenges in modern history. These include the escalating climate emergency, the threat of nuclear conflict, the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a global economic slowdown (Tooze, 2022). His framing of these issues suggested that what makes the

present moment so striking is not merely the severity of each crisis but the fact that they are all unfolding at the same time and interacting with one another. By January 2023, the idea had gained enough traction to feature prominently at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where policymakers, financiers, and corporate leaders embraced “polycrisis” as a useful way to describe the rapidly changing conditions that make “business as usual” increasingly unrealistic. In interviews, Tooze has explained that the sense of being overwhelmed by several crises at once should not be seen as a purely individual feeling but rather as a shared, collective experience. He has described polycrisis as the convergence of the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the cost-of-living and energy shocks, and the worsening climate crisis (World Economic Forum, 2023). According to Tooze, the roots of this convergence can be traced back to 2008, a pivotal year that brought the global financial crisis, the first signs of Russia’s renewed aggression with the war in Georgia, the collapse of the WTO’s Doha Round negotiations, and the failure of the Copenhagen climate summit. Together, these events marked the beginning of a new era of overlapping global turbulence. Tooze (Tooze, 2019) argues that the concept of polycrisis is crucial for making sense of the increasingly interconnected nature of global challenges. He contends that the crises of the twenty-first century, whether economic downturns, climate change, or political upheavals, should not be seen as isolated events but as phenomena that are deeply entangled with one another. A financial crisis can set the stage for political instability, which in turn can delay climate action or exacerbate migration pressures. Understanding these events in isolation, Tooze suggests, leads to a fragmented view of the world and risks missing the ways in which one crisis feeds into another, producing ripple effects across societies and regions. This is why he calls for a holistic and systemic approach, one that can trace the feedback loops and cross-cutting dynamics that make contemporary crises so difficult to resolve. Crucially, Tooze’s framework challenges the long-standing dominance of Western-centric narratives in global crisis discourse. Much of the scholarship and media commentary on these crises tends to focus on their impact on Europe or North America, implicitly framing the Global South as a secondary or passive arena where crises merely “arrive” rather than as a set of regions that experience and respond to crises in their own right (Pachauri & Singh, 2025). Farwa Sial (2023) warns that this kind of framing risks reproducing a subtle form of neocolonialism, because it positions the South as a victim of events driven by the West rather than as a space with agency, expertise, and its own histories of resilience and struggle. Reframing the analysis to include Southern perspectives is therefore essential if the concept of polycrisis is to serve as a genuinely global framework rather than one that reinforces existing hierarchies of power and knowledge. The breakdown of the World Trade Organization’s Doha Round negotiations is a powerful example of how the global trading system can perpetuate and even deepen inequalities between nations. The Doha Round was launched in 2001 with the stated ambition of creating a development-oriented trade agenda. Its central promise was to address the needs of developing countries by reforming agricultural subsidies, improving market access, and promoting fairer trade rules that would benefit the global poor (World Trade Organization., 2021). For many observers, this was an opportunity to correct structural imbalances in global trade that had long disadvantaged the Global South. However, as the negotiations progressed, it became increasingly clear that the interests of developed and developing nations were sharply divergent, and that the political will to find a genuinely equitable compromise was lacking (Mattoo & Subramanian, 2005; Popa, 2012). The decisive moment came during the WTO’s 2008 ministerial meeting in Geneva, which was described by WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy as a “moment of truth” for the multilateral trading system (Education International, n.d.). After nine days of intense discussions, the talks collapsed without agreement. A central sticking point was the Special Safeguard Mechanism, which would have allowed developing countries to raise tariffs temporarily in order to protect their farmers from sudden import surges. India’s trade negotiator, Kamal Nath, publicly blamed the United States for refusing to show flexibility on this issue, arguing that the

livelihoods of millions of small farmers “cannot be traded off for the commercial interests of the North” (The Guardian, 2008). Western media outlets at the time frequently framed the failure of the Doha Round as a missed opportunity for the poor, portraying it as a setback for global poverty reduction efforts. Yet many organizations working directly with marginalized communities in the Global South welcomed the collapse. Their argument was that the proposed agreement, even with cuts to Western agricultural subsidies, would have done little to address structural poverty (The Guardian, 2011). A World Bank report estimated that developing countries would gain only \$16 billion from the deal, while developed countries stood to gain five times as much, approximately \$80 billion (Fleshman, 2006). Critics also pointed out that the price of these modest gains would have been significant. In exchange for limited agricultural concessions, developing nations were expected to open their markets to foreign manufactured goods and services in ways that would have permanently restricted their ability to use tariffs to protect nascent industries. This would have denied them the same tools that the United States and Europe relied on during their own industrialization processes (Raja, 2005; Wade, 2006). As Stiglitz(2006) argues, the failure of the Doha Round ultimately left developing countries more vulnerable to volatile global markets, since no alternative framework was put in place to address their concerns. The episode also highlights the structural power imbalances embedded in the global trade system and raises a deeper question: when Adam Tooze identifies the collapse of the Doha Round as a turning point in the story of polycrisis, is he emphasizing its impact because it marked a failure for the Western-led project of globalization, rather than because it represented a moment of agency and resistance for the Global South? The failure of the Copenhagen climate talks in 2009 remains one of the most striking illustrations of how existing systems of global governance have struggled to respond to the climate crisis in a fair and effective way. The summit was initially presented as a historic opportunity to produce a legally binding agreement that would place the world on a path toward limiting global warming. Expectations were high that Copenhagen would deliver a breakthrough, particularly for vulnerable nations whose very survival is threatened by climate change. The Copenhagen Accord that emerged from the negotiations was an important symbolic step because it brought together a large number of countries under a shared framework for action. However, the accord ultimately fell short of what many had hoped for, as it failed to establish binding commitments for emissions reductions and relied instead on voluntary pledges (Bodansky, 2010; Dadush et al., 2009). Critics of the outcome, including economist Lord Stern, described the result as “disappointing” and placed much of the blame on the United States and European Union for failing to sufficiently engage with the priorities of poorer nations. Stern argued that the concerns of developing countries, particularly those most at risk from rising sea levels and extreme weather events, were not taken seriously enough by the wealthier nations that hold the greatest historical responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions (Stern, 2009). The negotiations were marked by significant tension between the Global North and Global South, with many developing countries calling for stronger commitments on finance and technology transfers to support adaptation and mitigation efforts. While the summit produced a pledge by wealthy nations to mobilize \$100 billion annually by 2020 to help poorer countries cope with climate impacts, the mechanisms for delivering this funding were left vague, and more than a decade later debates about climate finance remain unresolved (Oxfam International, 2010; Roberts et al., 2010). The failure to secure a binding agreement has had lasting consequences, particularly for nations least responsible for climate change but most exposed to its impacts. Rising sea levels threaten the existence of small island states, droughts and floods are worsening food insecurity across Africa and Asia, and increasingly severe storms are displacing millions of people each year(Levin et al., 2022). This disproportionate burden highlights the urgent need for a more equitable approach to climate governance, one that acknowledges historical responsibility and promotes what Roberts and Parks (2006) call “climate justice.” Copenhagen thus stands as a pivotal moment, revealing not only the limits of multilateral

cooperation but also the deep inequalities that shape who bears the costs of a warming planet. The COVID-19 pandemic stands as one of the clearest and most consequential illustrations of the deep inequities embedded within global health governance. While it was initially described as a universal crisis, affecting every country regardless of wealth, the experience of the pandemic revealed a far more complex and uneven reality. As the virus spread, it quickly became clear that marginalized communities, particularly those in the Global South, were disproportionately affected not only by the health impacts of the pandemic but also by the economic and political consequences of the responses to it. Lockdowns, while essential for containing transmission, devastated informal economies that provide livelihoods for millions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. According to the World Health Organization (The Yellow House, 2021), low- and middle-income countries faced significant obstacles in acquiring vaccines, medical equipment, and protective gear at the height of the crisis, even as high-income countries secured enormous supplies for their own populations. One of the most contested issues during the pandemic was the debate over intellectual property rights on vaccines and treatments. In 2020, India and South Africa put forward the TRIPS waiver proposal, which aimed to temporarily relax certain provisions of the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). The goal was to enable a more rapid and widespread production of COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics by manufacturers around the world, particularly in the Global South (World Trade Organization, 2020). While the proposal was supported by more than 100 countries and a wide coalition of civil society organizations, it was met with strong resistance from the European Union, the United Kingdom, and several other wealthy governments. These states argued that intellectual property protections were necessary to preserve innovation incentives, even as the pandemic raged on. As a result, negotiations dragged on for over a year, and the eventual agreement was so diluted that many public health advocates described it as too little, too late (So & Woo, 2021). The delay meant that vaccine production in many low-income countries could not scale up in time to prevent catastrophic waves of infection, prolonging the pandemic's duration and leading to tens of thousands of preventable deaths across the South. This failure of equitable distribution was mirrored in global vaccine allocation efforts. COVAX, the initiative created to ensure fair access to vaccines worldwide, struggled to meet its targets due to funding shortfalls, supply chain bottlenecks, and vaccine hoarding by rich countries. Data from the Our World in Data project at the University of Oxford highlights the extent of this disparity. By August 23, 2021, 32.5 percent of the global population had received at least one vaccine dose, with 24.5 percent fully vaccinated, yet only 1.4 percent of people in low-income countries had received even a single shot (Winchester, 2021). Research conducted by the Duke Global Health Institute showed that many high-income countries had secured enough doses to vaccinate their populations several times over, even before the first vaccines were authorized for use (Duke Global Health Institute, 2020). Some, such as the United Kingdom, reportedly bought enough to vaccinate their population four times over (The Guardian, 2021). This behaviour not only deepened the inequities between North and South but also slowed global recovery by allowing the virus to continue circulating and mutating in under-vaccinated regions. Beyond the immediate health impacts, the pandemic exacerbated structural vulnerabilities within the Global South. The United Nations Development Programme (2020) reported significant increases in poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity as a result of the crisis. Women, informal workers, and migrant labourers were among the hardest hit, as they often lacked access to social protection systems and were excluded from stimulus measures that many wealthier nations were able to implement. In several countries, school closures disrupted education for months on end, threatening long-term human development gains and widening existing inequalities. It is within this context that Adam Tooze's framing of the pandemic as part of the broader polycrisis becomes relevant. Tooze argues that the pandemic cannot be understood in isolation from other crises such as economic downturns, political instability, and climate change.

COVID-19 acted as a magnifier, revealing how fragile global supply chains are, how dependent the South remains on Northern-controlled pharmaceutical production, and how quickly inequalities can widen in times of crisis. However, his emphasis on the psychological aftermath of the pandemic, including its mental health consequences, has been criticized for reflecting a more Western-centered experience. Tooze has remarked on the importance of therapy and individual psychological resilience, describing how he personally relies on such practices to navigate crisis. Yet for many communities in the Global South, this kind of reflection was a luxury they could not afford while dealing with overwhelmed health systems, loss of income, and basic survival. Ultimately, the pandemic has highlighted the limitations of one-size-fits-all approaches to global health crises (Edelman et al., 2021). A framework that treats COVID-19 as a shared global challenge without acknowledging the vastly different starting points of countries risks obscuring the unevenness of both the suffering and the recovery. When seen through the lens of polycrisis, COVID-19 underscores how deeply interconnected health, economics, and geopolitics are, but also how power imbalances shape whose crises are addressed first. This makes the pandemic not only a public health emergency but also a moral and political reckoning for the structures that govern global solidarity. While some believe the current global polycrisis is unique and unprecedented, others argue that such crises have always existed in previous civilizations and that we can learn from history. However, for states and communities in the South, polycrisis as defined has been a constant feature of daily life since colonial times. The same pressures and tensions that plagued colonized populations continue to impact Southern communities daily. For the South, polycrisis is more local and individualistic, and its causes are not random epochal events; they stem from the West. To make polycrisis a truly global agenda, scholars and policymakers must shed their Eurocentric biases and incorporate the lived experiences of people in the South. Only then can it emerge as a truly global agenda representative of the international community. Otherwise, it will remain steeped in Eurocentrism like many other ideas and continue to be driven by Western interests.

Conclusion

The concept of polycrisis, as articulated by thinkers such as Edgar Morin and popularized by figures like Adam Tooze, offers a critical lens through which to examine the interconnected crises facing our world today. However, the discussion surrounding polycrisis raises significant concerns regarding its Eurocentric framing, which often prioritizes Western experiences and narratives while marginalizing the realities faced by communities in the Global South. This paper has explored how the polycrisis narrative, while ostensibly global, frequently reflects the interests and crises of the West, particularly in its treatment of key events such as the WTO Doha Round breakdown and the Copenhagen climate talks. The experiences of communities in the Global South reveal that for many, the polycrisis is not a recent phenomenon but a persistent reality shaped by historical injustices, colonial legacies, and systemic inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic further exemplifies this disparity, as the inequitable distribution of vaccines underscores the ongoing challenges faced by low-income countries. As scholars and policymakers engage with the polycrisis framework, it is imperative to incorporate diverse perspectives and lived experiences from the Global South to foster a more inclusive understanding of global crises. To address the multifaceted nature of polycrisis effectively, we must transcend Eurocentric biases and prioritize the voices and needs of those most affected. Only through this comprehensive approach can we hope to develop solutions that are equitable, sustainable, and truly representative of the global community. In doing so, we can transform the polycrisis narrative into a catalyst for meaningful change that acknowledges the interconnectedness of our world while addressing the unique challenges faced by all.

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