

Polycrisis Mapping: Stakeholder Needs Analysis Report

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Executive summary

An emerging set of organizations and individuals propose that an intersystemic approach—looking at the interactions between different natural and social systems—is vital to addressing global crises. And terms such as polycrisis are gaining both traction and attention – some of it critical.

A number of organizations have identified a need to map the emerging field of actors adopting this polycrisis¹ lens. Life Itself, OMEGA, the Cascade Institute and Post Carbon Institute have all taken interest in carrying out independent mapping initiatives, and identified that aligning their efforts can be beneficial.

However, the organizations involved have both shared and varying interests, needs and objectives related to mapping. The term polycrisis is also a concept still very much in formation, and the field even more so. Mapping can also mean different things to different people, and the needs behind mapping can also vary. Furthermore, creating a map obviously depends on the area to be surveyed and the exact bounds of the “polycrisis domain” may vary, even amongst this smaller group of stakeholders.

Life Itself therefore has therefore performed some initial user research on the “mapping” needs. This process set out to answer two broad questions:

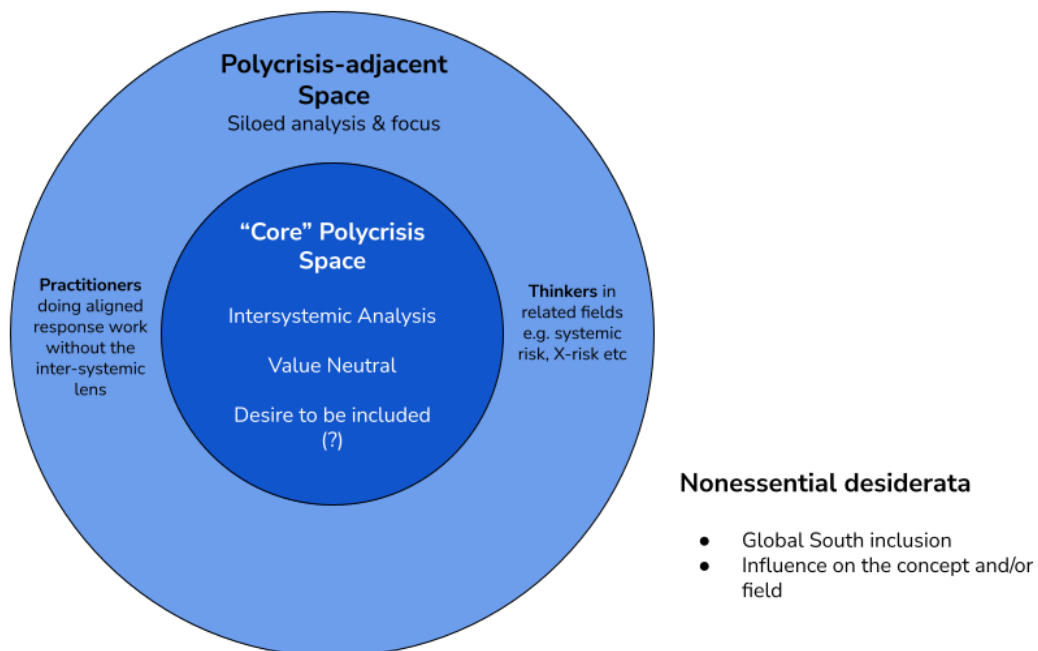
- 1) How does each stakeholder understand the borders of a potential map i.e. who do they think should be included (and not included)?

¹ We use polycrisis here and throughout as a shorthand for intersystemic crisis analysis, independently of terminology used by these actors.

2) What are each stakeholder's needs for mapping, and where do they overlap?

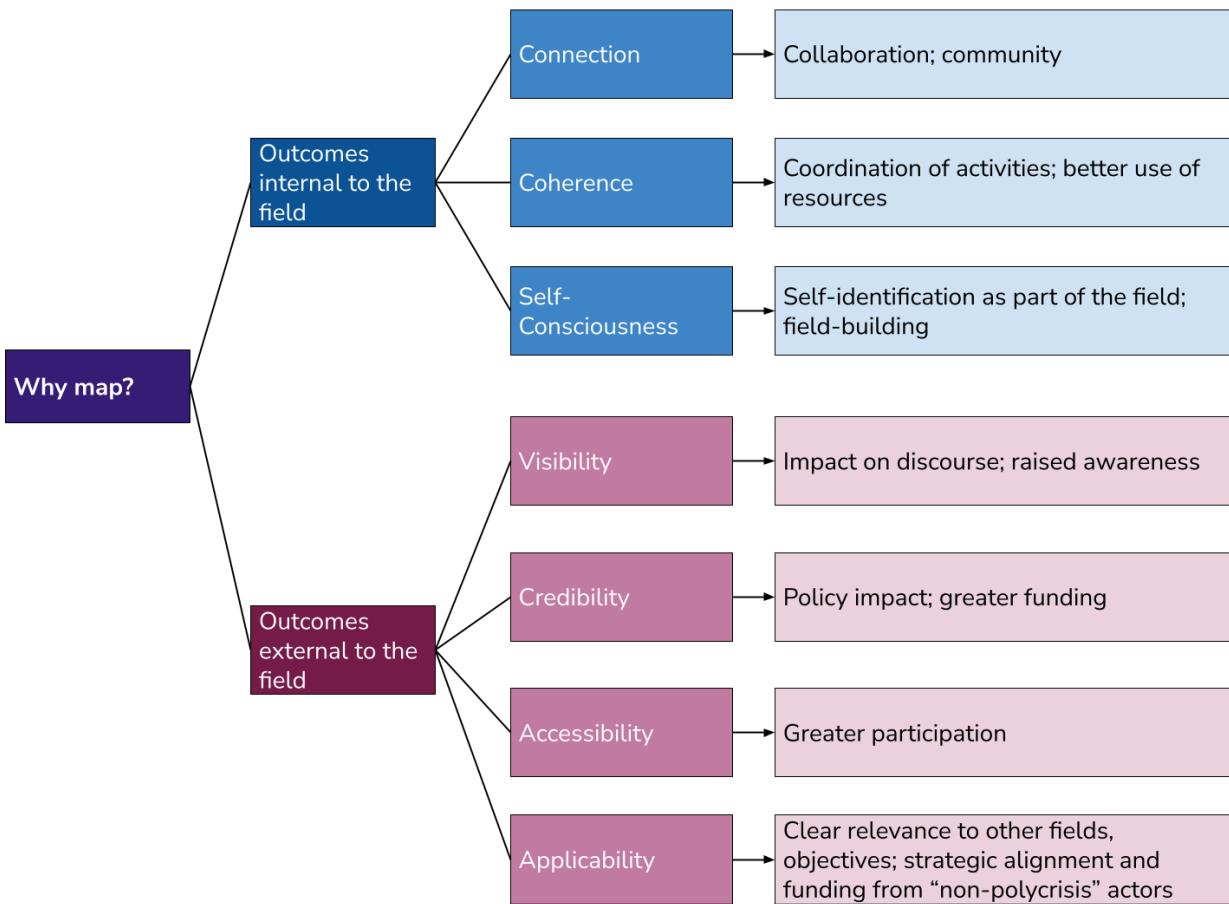
Below are two pictographic summaries of the answers to each question synthesized from the interviews. We provide a more detailed explanation of these diagrams in the full report.

Borders of the polycrisis space



Features of the polycrisis field as agreed by interviewees, and the outer polycrisis-adjacent ring which was also flagged as desirable to map. The nonessential desiderata were agreed as priorities, but not conditions for inclusion.

Mapping needs



Interviewees' needs could be grouped under seven high-level outcomes, shown in the third column of the diagram. These have been linked to concrete impacts for clarity.

Report

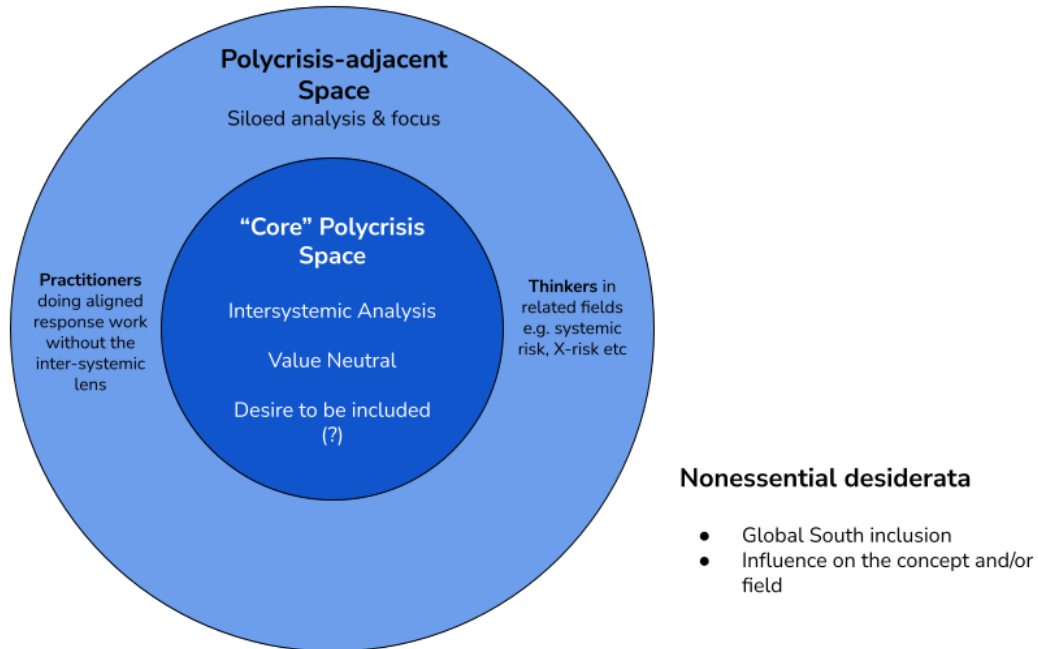
Interviewees

Life Itself interviewed the following stakeholders:

- The Cascade Institute (Scott Janzwood, Michael Lawrence)
- Post-Carbon Institute (Asher Miller, Zachary Walsh)
- OMEGA (Stanley Wu, Mark Valentine)
- One Project (Evan Steiner)
- VKRF (Irene Krarup) **Note, VKRF declined to be interviewed on the record.**

Irene provided helpful guiding reflections, but asked that they not be included in the report.

Boundaries and inclusion criteria



Key criterion: demonstrably using an intersystemic analysis

The key determinant of whether an actor was in the “polycrisis space” was that they **demonstrably used an intersystemic analysis to guide their activities.**

For example, actors such as **Adam Tooze**, **Nouriel Roubini** and the **Centre for the Study of Existential Risk** were all highlighted for inclusion on these grounds, despite different foci and framings.

Actors working in specific areas e.g. climate, or the intersection of climate and food, were agreed as still eligible for inclusion if they demonstrated a wider awareness of the interactions between multiple systems. The **Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research** was presented by an interviewee as an example of such an organization.

Interviewees demonstrated differential priorities for focus, for example between academic and academic-adjacent actors versus practitioners, however all agreed that the map should capture everyone demonstrably using a polycrisis lens in their work.

Key criterion: desire to be included

One interviewee flagged that **desire to be included** was an important criterion. Their view was that the map should not attempt to convince actors that they are in the polycrisis space who may not wish to be. While this was only expressed once, we have included the point here for consideration as we deem it important.

Value and conceptual neutrality

Interviewees agreed that the **map should be value-neutral**, and that normative criteria about responses to polycrisis should not determine inclusion. They also agreed that **use of any given term or conceptual framing (e.g. polycrisis vs megathreats vs metacrisis etc) should not determine inclusion or exclusion.**

Polycrisis-adjacent actors

Multiple interviewees flagged the **value of having an outer ring of polycrisis-adjacent actors**. These could either be **thinkers in related but distinct disciplines**, such as existential risk analysis, or **practitioners whose work would constitute an effective response** to polycrisis. In each case, these adjacent actors would not adopt a wider polycrisis lens to frame and direct their work, and instead demonstrate more traditional siloed thinking. This siloing was identified as the key exclusion criterion.

Inclusive of Global South and influential actors

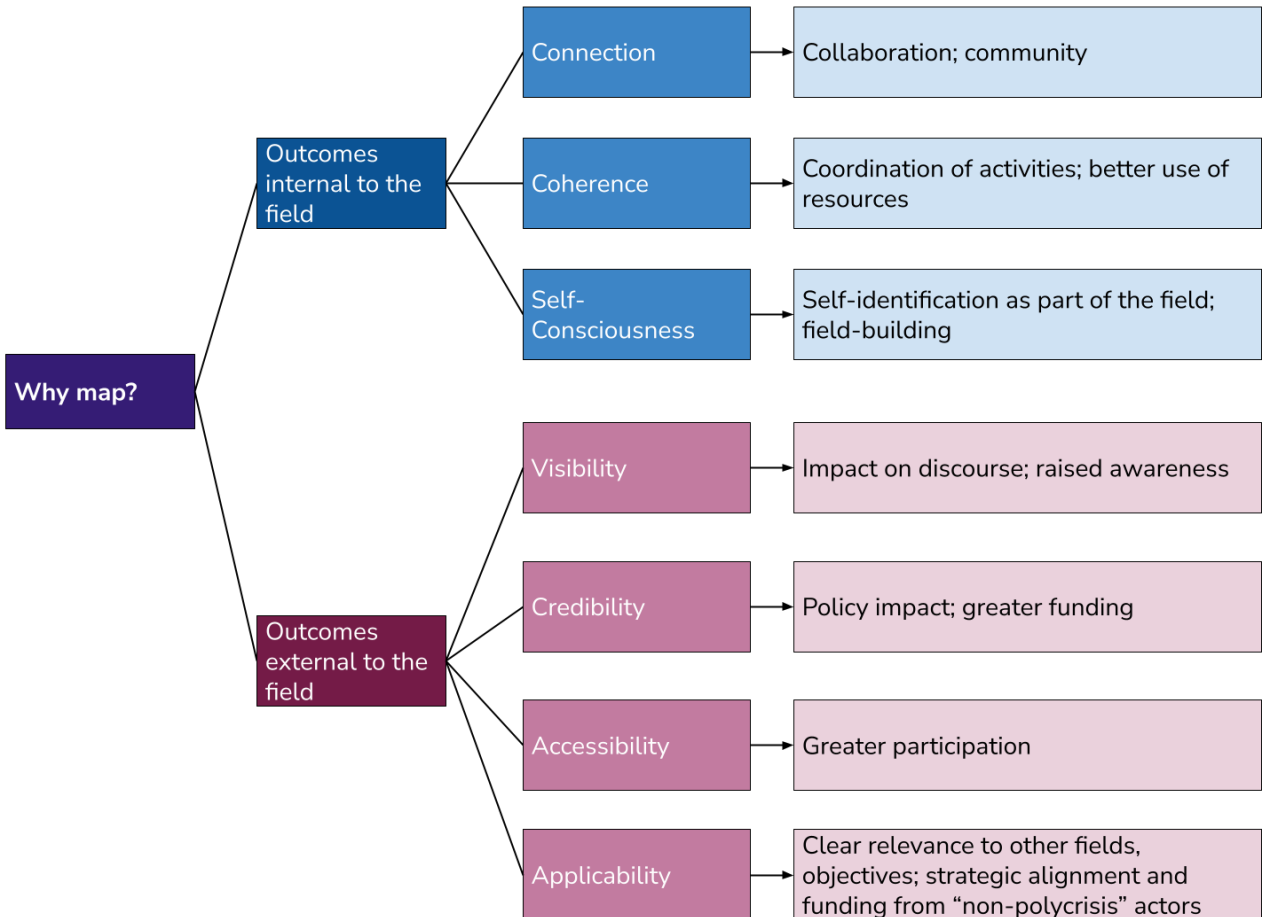
Finally, there was convergence around two other criteria which were not necessary for inclusion, but nonetheless deemed important. First, interviewees expressed a desire for the map to be **inclusive of actors and perspectives from the Global South** and agreed that proactive effort should be made to seek these out.

Second, some interviewees flagged the importance of identifying and mapping those **actors who were particularly influential in shaping or making salient the polycrisis concept or field**.

Needs from mapping

This section summarizes mapping needs identified by interviewees. For a detailed breakdown of the needs of specific interviewees in the form of job stories, see the appendix.

Interviewees' reasons for mapping could be grouped into seven categories, seen in the third column of the diagram below. We will briefly outline these, along with example needs for each item.



High level mapping outcomes—under which stakeholder needs have been grouped below—linked to concrete impacts.

Internal outcomes

These are desired outcomes from mapping which would manifest internally to the field.

Connection

Actors doing polycrisis work connect with one another. A greater number of more diverse and relevant connections occur due to the map. Actors can engage with others for advice, collaboration and a wider sense of community and support.

Example needs:

- Convenors of events and networks know and can communicate with all those actors doing relevant work so they can invite them
- Polycrisis actors can easily see and connect with one another directly to collaborate so that individual “connectors” in the space do not become bottlenecks
- Academic actors can connect with relevant practitioners to use their expert analysis to support response
- Funders are connected with potential grantees they weren’t otherwise aware of, so they can disburse grants to the most impactful and aligned actors possible
- Actors know who in the field has specific expertise in certain areas so that they can seek advice from and collaborate with these experts to refine their own work and thinking
- Actors responding to the polycrisis can find support from peers so that they do not feel alone and isolated

Coherence

Polycrisis actors are more aware of others' ideas and thinking, and align their own strategies and activities accordingly. Work becomes more complementary, even in the absence of direct collaboration.

Example needs:

- Friendly funders have a shared awareness of what's happening in the field which they can use to coordinate their funding strategies around
- Academic actors working on similar themes are aware of what one another are doing so that they can avoid duplicative research
- New ideas and publications are widely picked up in the field so that there is a continuous growth in collective knowledge and innovation which drives the evolution of the field
- Practitioners doing similar things differentiate and align their activities so that funders are not faced with choices around which "competitor" to fund

Self-consciousness

People begin to identify as part of the polycrisis field who have not done so before. A shared conceptual frame of reference develops, along with a (burgeoning) shared identity.

Example needs:

- Actors in the field have conceptual clarity and a shared frame of reference with one another so that they can engage in discussion and explore collaboration without talking past one another
- Fostering broad-based agreement around the nature of the crises faced so that this can act as the foundation for more informed discussions on how to address them
- Identifying actors using polycrisis thinking without knowing it (i.e. while unaware that there is a broader conceptual umbrella for their way of thinking) so that they can be invited into the field

External outcomes

These are outcomes from mapping which would manifest outside of the field i.e. which shift how the “outside world” views and interacts with the field.

Visibility

The field and its ideas become more widely known. They have a greater and more wide reaching influence on mainstream discourse. The nuances of the field and the relationships between the actors within it are better understood.

- Ensuring written and media content about the polycrisis reaches as wide an audience as possible so that the ideas it contains are absorbed and acted upon by the maximum number of people

- Making polycrisis ideas visible to potentially influential mainstream actors so that they become a matter for their discussion and consideration
- Understanding who is working in the field, how they relate to each other and whether their work competitive or collaborative in order to inform strategic funding decisions

Credibility

The field and its ideas are legitimated as worth taking seriously and supporting.

Policymakers and other key decision-makers use polycrisis thinking and the advice of key actors in the field to shape their decisions. More funders fund polycrisis work.

“Good” polycrisis thinking can assert itself versus more deficient uses of the concept.

- Making the polycrisis field and ideas contained within it compelling to influential mainstream decision-makers so that they actually adopt and act on these ideas
- Communicating how the different narrative threads in the polycrisis field cohere so that they can be presented in an integrative, mutually supportive way
- Becoming aware of and publicizing major mainstream nonprofits and institutions (e.g. Oxfam, OECD departments) who are already beginning to think through a polycrisis lens so that these can be gestured to convince more conservative funders that the field/concept is an appropriate thing to fund
- Communicating the polycrisis framing in a nuanced way so that it is not simply dismissed as “that thing from Davos”

Accessibility

Concrete avenues to get involved are presented. More people begin to get involved in polycrisis relevant activities than would have done otherwise.

- Creating channels for community participation by those who have newly come across polycrisis content so that they can be supported through the emotive process of moving from understanding to accepting to acting without them feeling alone, getting fatalistic or falling for false solutions

Applicability

The relevance of the field and its ideas to other areas is clear. The field has a strong value proposition it can present to other actors with distinct foci and objectives. More actors outside the polycrisis space (e.g. single-issue NGOs) align their strategies and activities with polycrisis thinking. Funders otherwise uninterested in funding “pure” polycrisis work begin to fund work in their spheres with polycrisis analysis in mind (e.g. funding organizations using polycrisis thinking to specifically address global poverty).

- Showing colleagues how a polycrisis lens relates to and adds value to their work so that they grasp its strategic importance, act in line with it and don't cut off our organization's support for the field
- Becoming aware of who is doing sector specific work (e.g. food systems) through a polycrisis lens so these can act as recommendations to funders which align with their grantmaking priorities and help them edge towards a more systemic approach

- Making a value proposition to the broader finance community that they should adapt their investment strategies in line with a polycrisis lens as a matter of self-interest so that more resources are mobilized in more positively impactful ways

Risks of doing mapping

The interviews also highlighted some potential risks from mapping. These are worth flagging and we recommend addressing them in any shared strategy.

Centring and universalising global north thinking

If the map is seen not to adequately engage with different understandings of polycrisis in the Global South (or the unique Global South context more broadly), or simply to underrepresented Global South actors, then it risks being criticized for centring and universalising global north thinking.

Intellectual imperialism and co-optive inclusion

The field is quite heterogeneous. At the same time, there is an agreed need for a degree of value-neutrality. It is possible (and likely) that many actors, particularly in the Global South, will not take kindly if they sense they are being “lumped in” with actors such as WEF.

Great care must be taken in any effort to create a cohesive map that covers *both* more radical and more mainstream actors, and particularly both Global North and South actors. Otherwise we risk accusations of co-option. The Post-Growth Institute was [publicly called out](#) recently and forced into a [walk-back and apology](#) due to just such a dynamic. As well as reputational risk for us as stakeholders, the more pressing concern is that the polycrisis concept itself is discarded as “imperialistic”.

Securitization of a value-neutral concept of polycrisis

Value-neutrality was agreed to be desirable. However, it risks creating ammunition for the securitization² of the polycrisis concept, or other such uses of it to justify undesirable ends. We must ensure that our work does not end up being influential in harmful ways, and this requires serious thought around how value-neutrality and framing are dealt with.

Disengagement of influential actors with a perceived value-laden concept of polycrisis

On the other hand, if our presentation comes across as too value-laden, even if this is not intended, then we risk scaring away influential, mainstream actors.

² Securitization refers to the designation of phenomena as security threats, often to justify extraordinary responses. See: <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/01/14/securitisation-theory-an-introduction/>

Conceptual incoherence from trying to draw a single boundary around diverse actors

Given the huge divergences present across values, prognoses and proposed courses of action, not to mention types of actors, there is a risk that attempting to draw a singular boundary around the “polycrisis space” will just create more conceptual incoherence and confusion.

Map quickly becomes out of date and of little use due to lack of upkeep

Keeping a map up to date is a resource intensive task, and one that has the potential to fall by the wayside as discrete pots of mapping related funding are diminished.

Particularly in such a rapidly evolving field, this risks a large amount of effort and resources being spent on something which quickly becomes close to useless.

Considering how long-term sustainability can be built into any map from the start is vital, both via longer term funding streams and wider community buy-in and contribution.

Opportunities for interoperability with other upcoming resources are missed

Many organizations flagged that they already have or are in the process of launching related resources e.g. a wiki, polycrisis.org site, resilience.org, The Long View.

Ideally data standards used for the map will support interoperability with other content to support the “polycrisis commons” approach. This interoperability should be considered when deciding on things like data fields and map functionality.

If opportunities for interoperability are missed at the design phase, there is a risk of a siloed and fractured knowledge ecosystem or significant extra future work to try to cohere the pieces retroactively.