

A Boundary Makes a Map

*Reflections from building a prototype directory
of actors responding to the polycrisis*

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Life Itself Research



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Executive Summary

We built a prototype directory of actors responding to polycrisis in the “global south”, consisting of 90 initial organizations and 25 in detail. In this report we describe the process and reflect on the key question of what characterizes an “actor responding to the polycrisis”.

Introduction

Context: we wanted to build a directory/mapping

We wanted to create a prototype directory of actors responding to the polycrisis with a focus on actors in the global south. (For a variety of reasons: the reasons for mapping were explored and questioned in detail in our previous report).¹

However, we don’t have a good definition (yet) of polycrisis and hence of actors *responding to a polycrisis*

A key question in any mapping or directory is who to include – i.e. what defines the (fuzzy) boundary of the map. Or, conversely, who or what is at the center of the map and what is more on the periphery.

From our interviews with key stakeholders, we had discovered that there was, as yet, limited agreement on what exactly defined a polycrisis even amongst those leading

¹ ‘Polycrisis Mapping: Stakeholder Needs Analysis Report’ (2023). Available [here](#) (restricted access).

stakeholders.² This obviously is also true in terms of defining *actors responding* to the polycrisis. (For example, is Greenpeace a polycrisis actor? Is WEF a polycrisis actor? etc.) How, then, to proceed?

Our approach: make an initial directory bootstrapped with rough criteria and snowball sampling, then reflect and refine

Given this lack of clear boundary – or a clear center – we decided that the best approach was to get started in some manner or other. Specifically:

- Start with some rough criteria and a snowball sample approach. Our rough criteria were:
 - Intersystemic analysis: seeing issues arising from systemic or intersystemic sources. For example, take malnutrition: one could just see malnutrition as caused by lack of food (not systemic). However, instead an (inter)systemic lens would look at the impact of underlying stressors like climate change or ethnic conflict. Or, for example, seeing ecological crises as linked to certain worldviews and cultural attitudes rather than just, for example, fossil fuel use.
 - Intersystemic action: addressing the problems inter-systemically, i.e. engaged in “paradigmatic” change that aims to transform multiple systems and the worldviews/narratives in which they are rooted.

² ‘Polycrisis Mapping; Stakeholder Needs Analysis Report’ (2023). Available [here](#) (restricted access).

- Generate the initial directory: We identified more than 90 initial organizations and did detailed desk research on more than 25 to build up an initial directory (available [here](#)).³
- Reflect on results to refine the “boundary” of the map/directory: this is the contents of this report
- Iterate: (future work beyond the scope of this project) continue this process based on the newly clarified boundary

This report reflects on the question of what organizations are “responding to the polycrisis”

This report is a companion to the main directory. Through creating the directory we came to reflect expansively on the question of what is the “boundary” (or center) of this mapping: i.e. what does it mean for an organization to be “responding to the polycrisis?” Specifically, we examine 6 examples from our full list:

- Summarize what they are up to and key information relevant to our assessments
- Outline - and question - how they demonstrate intersystemic analysis and intersystemic action
- Invite you as the reader to reflect on what you think

Finally, in the concluding discussion we raise some key questions and share a few thoughts on preliminary criteria which could help going forward to address this question of how to assess the connection of a stakeholder with polycrisis response.

³ Life Itself’s Polycrisis Response Mapping Directory can be found here:
<https://airtable.com/appihB5LGqUeA5bI5/shrLQk7H2HhKDmd6P/tbllP3ZWZvi9E1QaY>. The directory contains information on organizations’ activities, operating regions, key issues, key publications, and more.

Examples from our Directory

Ecosocial and Intercultural Pact of the South

 <https://pactoecosocialdelsur.com/>



Advocacy & Organizing Platform

'The Ecosocial and Intercultural Pact of the South (Pacto Ecosocial del Sur) is a broad platform which was created in June 2020 against the dynamics of capitalist readjustment, further concentration of wealth and destruction of ecosystems that were emerging amid the COVID-19 crisis to develop shared horizons of a future with dignity for Latin American societies.'

Their [manifesto](#) for a social, ecological, economic and intercultural pact for Latin America has been signed by over 3500 individuals and over 600 organizations from over 16 different Latin American countries. It has also been signed by over 200 people from outside Latin America.⁴

⁴ The Argentinian Association of Environmental Lawyers/CAJE, one of ORA's global anchor partners, was one of the original signatories of their July 2020 declaration: <https://pactoecosocialdelsur.com/quienes-somos/>.

Operating Region: Latin America

Systems foci: Climate; Community; Economy; Ecosystems; Energy & Resources; Policy, Planning & Law; Politics; Worldviews

Activities: Advocacy & Organising; Convening & Coordination

Issues: capitalism; communities; ecological collapse; energy transition; environmental justice; inequality; international/multilateral institutions; material resources; poverty; social justice; social movements; water

Field/Approach: Just Transition; Wealth Redistribution; Rights of Nature; Buen Vivir; Agroecology; Food Sovereignty; The Commons; Decolonization; Local Economies

Intersystemic Analysis

In the organization's latest declaration from March 2023, they see humanity and the planet as facing multiple interconnected crises which reinforce and worsen each other.

The Bogotá Declaration, titled 'Towards a Pact with the Earth: Geopolitics of Transitions and Re-Existences', begins by recognizing:

Three years after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the 'new normal' has been imposed with signs of chaos and instability. This new status quo global [sic] reflects the worsening of several interconnected crises (social, economic, political, ecological, health, and geopolitical), which reinforce each other while having a civilizing dimension. With great concern, we also observe a weakening of institutions and democratic practices worldwide, with a parallel strengthening of far-right ideologies and authoritarianism, as well as the perpetuation of a culture of war at various levels, deeply associated with capitalism, colonialism, and the exacerbation of patriarchy and racism.⁵

⁵ 'Towards a Pact with the Earth: Geopolitics of Transitions and Re-Existences' (2023), p.1. Downloaded from: <https://pactoecosocialdelsur.com/bogota-declaration-towards-a-pact-with-the-earth-geopolitics-of-transitions-and-re-existences/>.

Intersystemic Response

They call for ‘radical transformation that recognizes and paves the way for other modes of existence in balance and reciprocity with the fabric of life’; in other words, paradigmatic change of both systems and the worldviews/values that underpin them.⁶ They also outline practical examples of what this entails, for instance:

Ecosocial transitions cannot be limited to the energy issue. A structural transformation of the energy system is essential, but also of the productive and urban model, as well as of the links with nature: deconcentrate, deprivatize, decommodify, demercantilize, decentralize, depatriarchalize, dehierarchize, de-racialize, repair, and heal. To achieve this, we must disconnect our economic, social, and cultural structures from fossil fuels, the mandate of nature exploitation, and the developmentalist and El Dorado-inspired imaginary.⁷

Their Manifesto for an Ecosocial Energy Transition articulates some of the fundamental values and principles of their vision of socio-ecological transition:

We can transition away from the neoliberal economic system in a direction that sustains life, combines social justice with environmental justice, brings together egalitarian and democratic values with a resilient, holistic social policy, and restores an ecological balance necessary for a healthy planet. But for that we need more political imagination and more utopian visions of another society that is socially just and respects our planetary common house.⁸

⁶ ‘Towards a Pact with the Earth’, p.3.

⁷ ‘Towards a Pact with the Earth’, p.6.

⁸ ‘Manifesto from the Peoples of the South: For an Ecosocial Energy Transition’ (2023), p.3. Downloaded from: <https://pactoecosocialdelsur.com/manifesto-for-an-ecosocial-energy-transition-from-the-peoples-of-the-south/>.

Their practical activities include: organising people and groups around manifestos, open letters, campaigns, and declarations; sharing multimedia content; hosting public events, debates, and conversations.

Society for Alternative Learning and Transformation (SALT)

<https://saltnet.org/chumvi/>



Alternative Education and Community

Transformation NGO

'SALT offers alternative learning which is deep and transformative. SALT is committed to working with like-minded partners and communities to build examples of alternative solutions with communities in Kenya and beyond in Africa. SALT accompanies communities through deep and transformative processes based on holistic knowledge systems of the indigenous and local peoples both in schools and with communities. Through community dialogues, ecological maps and calendars and nature experiential learning processes, communities revive their indigenous knowledge and practices rooted in their Earth-centred methodologies. SALT approach is holistic and engages every aspect of humans; inner and outer, secular and sacred, matter and spirit, tangible and intangible, quality and quantity.'

The screenshot shows the SALT website homepage. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links to Home, About us, Where we work, Our Contribution, News & Articles, Gallery, Get Involved, and a search bar. Below the navigation is a large banner with the text "WE ARE THE SALT OF THE PLANET EARTH". A quote from Simon Mitambo, CEO, SALT, is displayed: "Among the indigenous peoples and local communities, salt has a deep socio-cultural, ecological and spiritual meaning. Salt plays a great role in ritual purity through cleansing and restoring harmonious relationship between people and Planet Earth. The world today needs the same salt to bring meaning to life and to re-connect the humans with true sense of who they are. We are the salt; the Society for Alternative Learning & Transformation (SALT) - Simon Mitambo, CEO, SALT." A "READ MORE..." button is at the bottom of the banner. At the very bottom, there's a footer note about natural phenomena losing symbolic implications.

The screenshot shows a section titled "OUR STORIES, ARTICLES AND EVENTS". It includes a quote from Thomas Berry: "It's all a question of story. We are in trouble now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story." Below the quote are three articles with images: "Water Is Life: African Earth Jurisprudence Practitioners Share Their Stories In A Webinar", "Sacred River, Sacred Land: A Community Goes 'Back To Roots' In Kenya", and "Guardians Of Planet Earth: Protecting Biodiversity In Africa". Each article has a "READ MORE..." button at the bottom.

Based: Nkubu, Kenya

Operating Region: East Africa

Systems Foci: Community; Ecosystems; Education; Food; Policy, Planning & Law; Worldviews

Activities: Advocacy & Organizing; Convening & Coordination; Consulting & Advisory; Education; Research

Issues: biodiversity; communities; globalization; governance; land; water

Field/Approach: Agroecology; Indigenous/Traditional Living; Sustainable Development; Rights of Nature; The Earth System & Sustainability; Circular Economy; Green Economy; Food Sovereignty; Narratives; The More-than-Human

Intersystemic Analysis

SALT's work is rooted in intersystemic analysis:

Globalization and industrial revolution has hugely disconnected the humans [sic] from their natural world. The two systems have promoted neo-liberal economic development approaches that has [sic] commodified Nature, land and natural resources. The industrial revolution has failed to deliver our individual needs by supporting false and misleading notions of 'progress' and 'development'. [...] The current crises in the world; financial, fluctuations in food and oil prices, the land grabs and the growing evidence of climate chaos are a testimony that we need a radical change in providing the alternatives that are more appropriate for communities and ecosystems. SALT thus has a niche to offer alternative learning which is deep and transformative. SALT is committed to working with like-minded partners and communities to build examples of alternatives [sic] solutions with communities in Kenya and beyond in Africa.⁹

⁹ 'Who we Are', SALT, <https://salt.net.org/chumvi/about-us/>.

Intersystemic Response

Their intersystemic analysis motivates their work for ‘deep and transformative’ change that is ‘based on holistic knowledge systems’.¹⁰ They describe their work as integrating various polarities: ‘SALT approach is holistic and engages every aspect of humans; inner and outer, secular and sacred, matter and spirit, tangible and intangible, quality and quantity’.¹¹ Their practical activities include: ‘engag[ing] communities through community dialogues, experiential learning, drawing of ecological maps and seasonal calendars around the issues that really affect them. SALT does monthly community dialogues working with farmers, clan leaders, spiritual leaders (Mugwe and Laibon), healers, diviners and seers and custodians of seeds and sacred natural sites’.¹² These activities sit within four interrelated Strategic Objectives that represent the organization’s current focus: 1) Regenerating Sacred Natural Sites & Watershed Areas; 2) Promotion of AgroEcology & Integrated Livelihoods; 3) Learning from Nature & Culture amongst the Youth; 4) Institutional Development, Networking & Collaboration.¹³

Purposeful



Feminist Hub Working in Africa and Globally

‘Purposeful is a feminist hub for girls activism, rooted in Africa and working all around the world. We believe that another world is not only possible, it is already

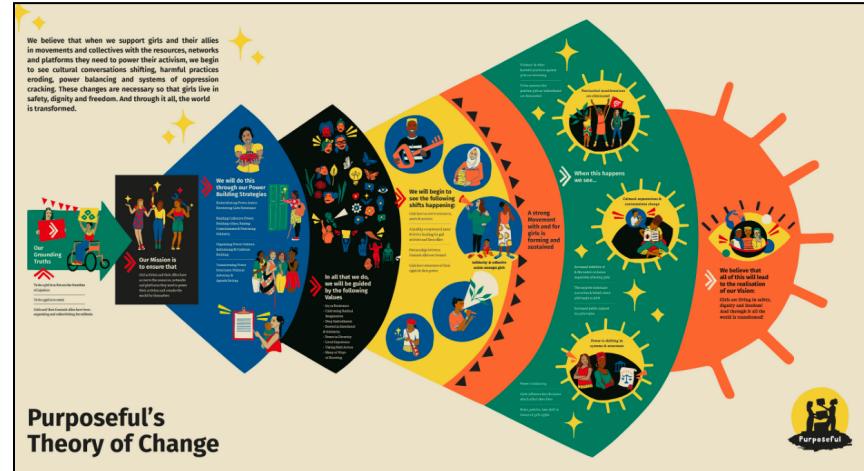
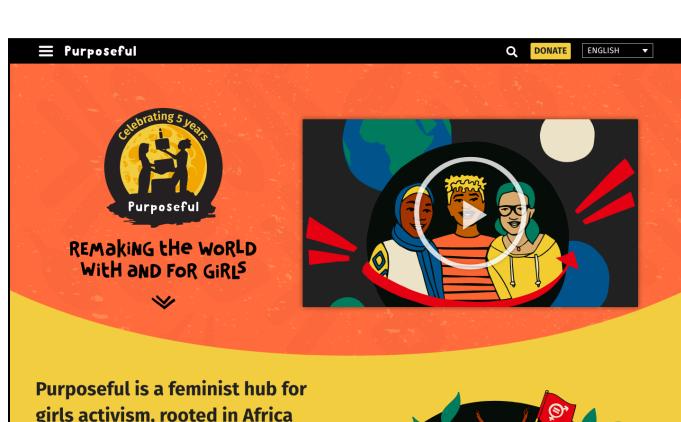
¹⁰ ‘SALT Approach to Working with Communities’, SALT, <https://saltnet.org/chumvi/about-us/approach/>.

¹¹ ‘SALT Approach to Working with Communities’.

¹² ‘SALT’s Rapid Response’, SALT, <https://saltnet.org/chumvi/where-we-work/>.

¹³ ‘SALT Thematic Areas’, SALT, <https://saltnet.org/chumvi/about-us/what-we-do/>.

being built right here and now, in the ways that girls are organising with each other, imagining with each other, pushing us all a little further towards liberation.'



Based: Freetown, Sierra Leone & London, UK

Operating region: Global

Systems foci: Community; Economy; Education; Health; Politics; Worldviews

Activities: Advocacy & Organizing; Convening & Coordination; Education; Philanthropy; Research

Issues: environmental justice; human rights; inequality; material resources; poverty; social justice; social movements

Field/Approach: Wealth Redistribution; Decolonization; Narratives

Intersystemic Analysis

Purposeful 'seek to address the interlocking forces of patriarchy, imperialism and white supremacy, and the many ways in which they manifest in girls' lives: from the lack of access to opportunities, regressive legislation to specific practices such as Female Genital Mutilation and other forms of violence and discrimination girls face'.¹⁴ In their 2021-2025 Strategic Framework for their With and For Girls Fund, they note that 'public health, the economy and girls' safety and bodily autonomy are inextricably

¹⁴ 'Purposeful's Theory of Change' (2021), p.3. Downloaded from: <https://wearepurposeful.org/who-we-are/our-theory-of-change/>

linked.¹⁵ In other words, through their lens of power analysis they see how political, economic, social, and cultural systems are deeply interconnected.

Intersystemic Response

Their Theory of Change works towards social, economic, and political shifts.

Specifically, the outcomes to which they seek to contribute are: 'Girls have access to resources, assets & services'; 'A healthy ecosystem of more & better funding for girl activists and their allies'; 'Partnerships between intergenerational Feminist allies are formed'; and 'Girls have awareness of their rights & their power'.¹⁶

They seek systemic change as well as change of underlying narratives and worldviews: 'Our Theory of Change is largely informed by movement theory. The shifts described above all contribute towards forming, strengthening and sustaining a movement around girls in order to secure girls rights, and transform the systems, institutions and structures that oppress them as well as challenge the narratives and ideologies that justify their oppression'.¹⁷

They recognise that change is required at multiple, interconnected levels: their Theory of Change is informed by Gender@Work, a 4-quadrant framework integrating individual-systemic and formal-informal axes.¹⁸ They also understand change as consisting of individual, collective, communal, and structural layers, and describe these layers as 'overlapping multidirectional and mutually reinforcing'.¹⁹

¹⁵ 'With and For Girls Strategic Framework 2021-2025' (2021), p.4. Downloaded from: <https://wearepurposeful.org/who-we-are/our-strategic-planning/>.

¹⁶ 'Purposeful's Theory of Change', pp.10-11.

¹⁷ 'Purposeful's Theory of Change', p.12.

¹⁸ 'Gender at Work Framework', Gender at Work, <https://genderatwork.org/analytical-framework/>.

¹⁹ <https://wearepurposeful.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Inside-the-circle-english.pdf> p.15.

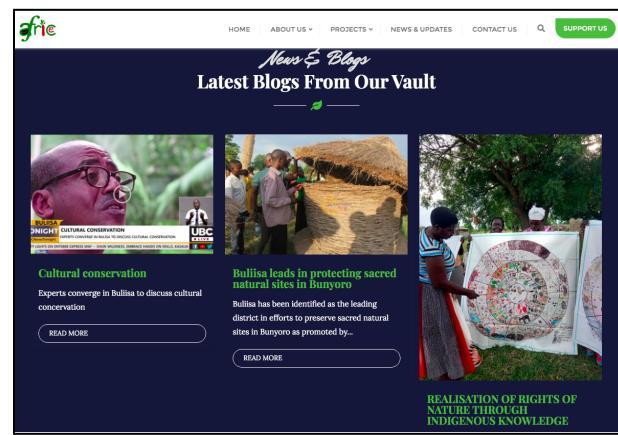
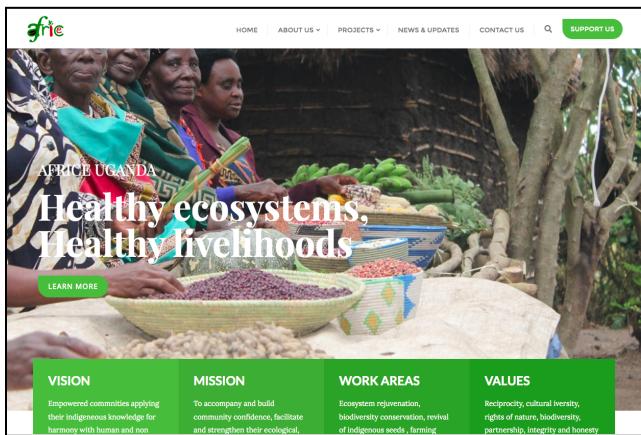
African Institute for Culture and Ecology (AFRICE)

 <https://africeug.org/>



Earth Jurisprudence NGO

'African Institute for Culture and Ecology [AFRICE] is a non-governmental organization that is registered in Uganda; and broadly focuses on working with communities to revive their knowledge and practices on food, land and ecosystems conservation. It was founded in 2016 and fully registered with the Uganda NGO board in 2017. AFRICE's main goal is to empower indigenous communities to strengthen their cultural practices for conservation of food, land and natural heritage. We currently work on two program areas within three communities of Bagungu of Buliisa along Lake Albert, Banyabutumbi of Rukungiri along Lake Edward and Basese of Kalangala island in Lake Victoria.'



Based: Kampala, Uganda

Operating region: East Africa

Systems foci: Community; Ecosystems; Food; Policy, Planning & Law; Worldviews

Activities: Advocacy & Organizing; Convening & Coordination; Education

Issues: biodiversity; climate change; communities; environmental justice; governance; human rights; land; material resources

Field/Approach: Rights of Nature; Indigenous/Traditional Living; Agroecology; The More-than-Human; Pluralism; Decolonization; Human Flourishing; Cultural Anthropology, Sociology, & History; Ecological Civilization

Intersystemic Analysis

AFRICE's work is informed by Earth Jurisprudence, a philosophy and practice of seeing governance, legal, ecological, and cultural systems as deeply intertwined.²⁰ They are one of the founding members of the African Earth Jurisprudence Collective, alongside SALT, who are also profiled in this report.

In their work, they treat biodiversity and cultural diversity as interwoven. For instance, they write: 'The inextricable link between seed and cultural practices means that the loss of indigenous seed is followed swiftly by a loss of cultural traditions (and vice versa). The push for modern hybrids and genetically modified (GM) seed threatens biodiversity as well as cultural diversity'.²¹ That is, cultural and ecological systems share the same roots such that a threat to one is a threat to the other, and protecting one is protecting the other.

Intersystemic Response

Their work integrates transformation of systems and underlying worldviews. As they put it, Earth Jurisprudence is 'a philosophy and a practice that calls for a transformation

²⁰ 'Earth Jurisprudence & Rights of Nature', AFRICE, <https://africeug.org/earth-jurisprudence-rights-of-nature/>.

²¹ 'Community Seed & Knowledge', AFRICE, <https://africeug.org/community-seed-knowledge/>.

from human-centred to Earth-centred ways of seeing and being in the world'.²² Key to their work is the preservation and revival of traditional indigenous community knowledge and practices. Their four main work areas are: Ecosystems Regeneration; Revival of Indigenous Seed; Biodiversity Conservation; and Traditional Farming Systems & Agroecology.

Their practical activities include: facilitating community dialogues and intercommunity exchanges; training community animators; paralegal and legal training; community eco-cultural mapping and calendar training, and drafting community constitutions and community ecological governance plans.

Accountability Lab

 <https://accountabilitylab.org/>

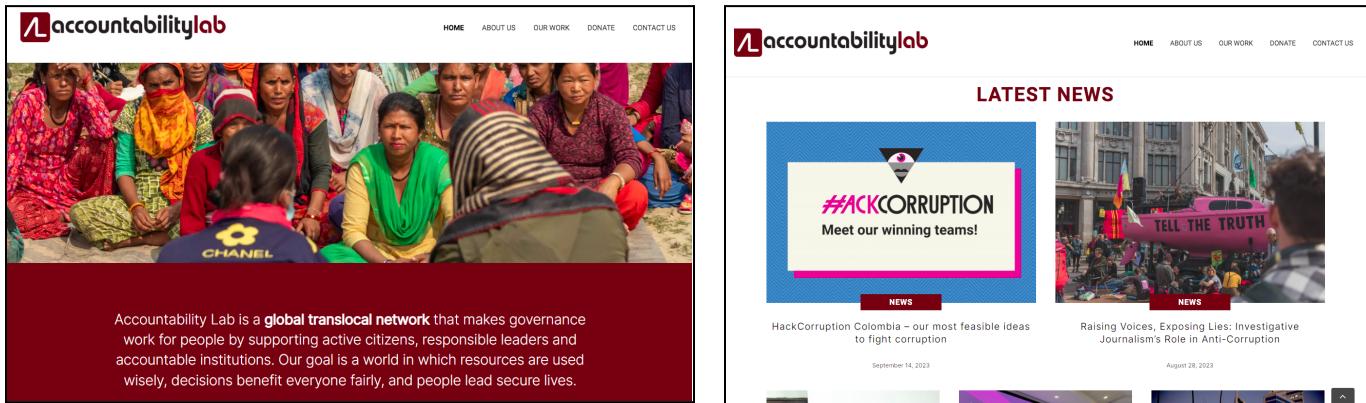


Global Network of
Accountability Labs

'The Accountability Lab was founded in early 2012 as an effort to work with young people to develop new ideas for accountability, transparency and open government. It has evolved into a global network of local Accountability Labs that are finding new ways to shift societal norms, solve intractable challenges and build "unlikely networks" for change. Externally, this means convening and supporting others within the accountability space to push towards collective goals. Internally, this means actively coaching, mentoring and developing the next generation of accountability thinkers and practitioners. Our vision: a world in which resources are used wisely, decisions benefit everyone fairly, and people lead secure lives. Our mission is

²² 'Earth Jurisprudence & Rights of Nature'.

to make governance work for people through supporting active citizens, responsible leaders and accountable institutions.'



Based: Network labs in Liberia, Mali, Mexico, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa, Zimbabwe and a global base in the US.

Operating regions: East Africa; Central Africa; Middle East & North Africa; West Africa; Southern Africa; South Asia; Latin America; US & Canada

Systems foci: Climate; Community; Policy, Planning & Law; Politics; Security & Defence; Technology

Activities: Advocacy & Organizing; Convening & Coordination; Education; Research

Issues: energy transition; environmental justice; governance; land; material resources; social justice

Field/Approach: Participatory & Deliberative Democracy; Just Transition; Narratives; Adaptation & Resilience; Data Sovereignty

Intersystemic Analysis

Accountability Lab's focus on a need for increasing accountability of those in power is based on an analysis of pressing global issues as deeply interconnected and mutually exacerbating. In their 2023-2026 Strategic Framework, they write:

The global crises of the past three years have reconfirmed the centrality of accountability and open governance to any efforts to create a more fair, just and equal world. The problems we face are intersectional- we cannot talk about

pandemics, climate change or social and political exclusion, for example, without understanding that these are problems of governance as much as anything else. Politics everywhere is becoming more contentious; extractive global systems are exacerbating global divides; and inequality is increasing dramatically.²³

As they see it, the increasing interconnectedness of global systems threatens civic capacity to respond to risks and crises:

As society has become more networked, we have found it more difficult to connect with each other to push for meaningful reforms. We have seen increasing threats to open societies; and despite rising fears about issues like immigration and climate change, there has been a continued lack of accountability of those in power.²⁴

Intersystemic Response

Accountability Lab pay attention to complex patterns of cause and impact not only in the issues they address but also in their own activities:

Accountability relates to complex social and political dynamics and building it requires multiple inter-related [sic] activities- it is not linear, nor is it singular. [...] We view a theory of change not just as a way to map out inputs, outputs and outcomes but as a way to understand in practical terms the causality between them; and to support double loop learning (learning that recognizes that the way a problem is defined and solved can be a source of the problem itself). As a result our theory of change is not an agreed, defined diagram- it is a living document that we amend and refine over time as we learn on the ground.²⁵

²³ 'Accountability Lab Strategy 2023-2026' (2023), p.4. Downloaded from: <https://accountabilitylab.org/our-impact/>.

²⁴ 'Why Accountability,' Accountability Lab, <https://accountabilitylab.org/why-accountability-lab/>.

²⁵ 'Theories of Change' (2023), p.1. Linked in 'Accountability Lab Strategy 2023-2026', p.8.

The change they seek to bring about is deep-rooted, involving changing social and cultural norms as well as political institutions and systems. Their three core areas of work are: 'shifting norms and behaviors'; 'equipping reformers for collective action'; and 'influencing policies, processes and practices'.²⁶

They seek to work in ways that looks for synergies between different topics:

Accountability Lab is not a traditional social accountability organization- we have the unique ability (through our creative approaches and focus on accountability as a value, not a theme) to frame a multiplicity of challenges as accountability issues, and in this way drive long-term solutions that get to the heart of the problems. This also allows us to build unique coalitions and "unlikely networks" that break down silos that may exist.²⁷

As part of their 2023-2026 strategy, they are focusing on four strategic themes which they see as interconnected (and which weave together social, environmental, governance, technological, and political systems). These are: inclusion, climate justice, digital governance, and civic agency.

Culture Hack Labs

 <https://www.culturehack.io/>



Not-for-profit Consultancy

'Culture Hack Labs (CHL) is a not-for-profit consultancy that supports organizations, social movements and activists to create cultural interventions for systems change. We do this in two ways: 1. Providing tools and training for

²⁶ 'Accountability Lab Strategy 2023-2026', p.7.

²⁷ 'Accountability Lab Strategy 2023-2026', p.9.

culture hacking and 2. Engaging in Cultural Interventions. We amplify voices of those who are protecting life, weave webs of solidarity, and defend that which is sacred. We collect and map large volumes of social data using the Culture Hack platform designed specifically for narrative work. We then analyze the networks, language, and deep logics to create life-centric narratives to evolve culture.'



Based: Distributed team

Operating regions: Latin America; US & Canada; Western Europe

Systems foci: Economy; Ecosystems; Politics; Worldviews

Activities: Advocacy & Organizing; Consulting & Advisory; Convening & Coordination; Education; Research; Technology Development

Issues: capitalism; ecological collapse; environmental justice; inequality

Field/Approach: Narratives; Food Sovereignty; Local Economies; Indigenous/Traditional Living

Intersystemic Analysis

The theory of change outlined in their 2023 narrative research report, 'Territories of Transition' sees major global struggles as deeply interconnected and driven by present cultural narratives: 'At Culture Hack Labs, we believe that all power rests on the ability to harness and control language; and humans make sense of their world through stories. They reveal how our struggles - from land to labour, biodiversity and even our

very bodies - are part of the same global system, one that prioritises the production of capital - in other words economic growth - over Life, everything else, and at the expense of everything else'.²⁸

In the same report, they also draw attention to the links between specific crises to argue for the need for radical change: 'Global crises of recent years have highlighted the interconnectedness of our collective and challenges and exposed the flaws in our social systems. From the COVID-19 pandemic's connections to biodiversity loss and cross-species virus transmission, to the war in Ukraine's linkages to the world's dependence on Russian oil, to the increase in record-breaking climate change events, we are constantly reminded of the need to transform our relationship with the land on which we depend'.²⁹

Intersystemic Response

Therefore, Culture Hack Labs seeks paradigmatic change, focusing on transforming the cultural underpinnings of systems: 'As a collective we are at a pivotal transition point reckoning with a dominant culture of colonialism, patriarchy, and industrialization. We expose, disrupt and shift cultural assumptions to create new narrative spaces for possibility, hope and justice'.³⁰ They do this in two main ways: by providing tools and training for 'culture hacking' and by engaging in cultural inventions for systems change.

²⁸ 'Territories of Transition' (2022), p.5. Downloaded from: <https://www.culturehack.io/issues/issue-02-territories-of-transition/territories-of-transition-a-narrative-research-report/>.

²⁹ 'Territories of Transition', p.4. Similar intersystemic analysis of current global crises is also present in the introduction to their earlier narrative research report, 'Transforming the Transition', available at: <https://www.culturehack.io/hacks/>.

³⁰ Homepage, Culture Hack Labs, <https://www.culturehack.io/>.

Two examples of cultural interventions they have undertaken are: 1) Cura Da Terra, a cultural intervention working with the fourteen major tribes of the Brazilian Amazon to ‘co-create narratives of responsibility, reciprocity and regeneration in times of systems collapse’ and 2) Yo Prefiero El Lago, a cultural intervention to ‘stop the development of a new international airport, the largest mega project in Latin America, to protect Lake Texcoco and the surrounding community near Mexico City’.³¹

³¹ ‘Hacks’, Culture Hack Labs, <https://www.culturehack.io/hacks/>.

Discussion

Having shared these examples, we will reflect on what it means to talk about ‘polycrisis response’.

Let’s begin by noting two key concepts: first, as the Cascade Institute argues, the polycrisis is an emergent phenomenon, meaning that it is **greater and different in kind than the sum of its parts and therefore needs to be addressed as a whole.**³² Second, the concept of a **crisis**, which consists of the interaction between slow-moving stressors and fast-moving triggers.³³

In practice, this brings several questions: first, what counts as a crisis? For example, is climate change a crisis or not? Is everything that is not working a crisis? If so, this seems like a broad definition of crisis.

Second, and most importantly for polycrisis mapping: does an organization need to be tackling specific interlocking crisis triggers and stressors in order to be explicitly a polycrisis response? **What does it mean to respond to a crisis, and how is responding to a crisis, or even multiple crises, different from responding to a polycrisis?** If an organization only works on one aspect (or one crisis) does that mean it is **not** responding to the polycrisis?

³² Lawrence, M., T. Homer-Dixon, S. Janzwood, J. Rockström, O. Renn, and J. F. Donges, ‘Global Polycrisis: The Causal Mechanisms of Crisis Entanglement’ (2023), Version 1.0, Pre-print, Cascade Institute. Downloaded from: <https://cascadeinstitute.org/technical-paper/global-polycrisis-the-causal-mechanisms-of-crisis-entanglement/>.

³³ Lawrence et al., ‘Global Polycrisis’, p.13.

The example of Purposeful

Let's start by looking at one of our examples: Purposeful. Purposeful's main work is transforming 'the interlocking forces of patriarchy, imperialism and white supremacy'.

They are clearly addressing a deep injustice in our world. But is what they are addressing a 'crisis'? Or even a polycrisis? Is engaging with underlying power structures addressing a slow-moving and intersystemic stressor and therefore addressing an ingredient of the polycrisis? If addressing any underlying stressor for the polycrisis counts as responding to the polycrisis then we have quite a broad criterion and very many organizations are responding to the polycrisis. However, if we narrow the definition, what are we left with: only those organizations who are explicitly acting on many crises at once? (So maybe the UN?)

Secondly, there may be a difference between underlying stressors that cut through the core of multiple systems and those that sit primarily in one or two. For instance, the Cascade Institute name increased interaction between human and wild-animal gene reservoirs as an example of a stressor in the human-viral ecology system, and chronic healthcare underfunding as a stressor in the healthcare system.³⁴ Is addressing these stressors different from Purposeful tackling social injustice, or Accountability Lab tackling corruption, or Culture Hack Labs tackling harmful cultural narratives?

³⁴ Lawrence et al., 'Global Polycrisis', p.17.

A simple 3x3 matrix

In our discussions, we have come up with a framework that might help to clarify some of the questions above. The following 3x3 matrix maps the extent to which an organization is using ‘polycrisis’ thinking against what kind of action they are engaged in. We have roughly categorized the example organizations profiled in this report as well as proposing some example organizations from outside our directory that exemplify some of the other cells in the matrix.

		(Explicitly) using polycrisis thinking ...		
		Yes	Kind of	No
Engaged with polycrisis?	Engaged with addressing multiple crises? e.g. climate change and rising inequality	e.g. intersystemic analysis and using polycrisis terminology	e.g. intersystemic analysis	
	Engaged with addressing a crisis? e.g. climate crisis	E.g. Cascade Institute; Post Carbon Institute; World Economic Forum(?)	E.g. Ecosocial and Intercultural Pact of the South; SALT; AFRICE; Culture Hack Labs	
	Engaged with ongoing harm or injustice? (but not obviously a crisis)		E.g. Greenpeace(?)	Solar VCs?? Tesla??

We welcome reflections from readers regarding this matrix and its application, as well as suggestions of example organizations that might fit within cells closer towards the upper-left corner (i.e. more explicitly polycrisis response).

Harms vs Crises

One question we run into when we try to categorize organizations into the above matrix is: what *is* a crisis?

As the Cascade Institute put it, ‘all crises involve harms, but not all harms arise from crises’.³⁵ In their definition, crisis occurs when a system is pushed suddenly out of equilibrium with harmful consequences.³⁶ But what happens when harmful consequences of a crisis continue to spill out over time? And what about ‘slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes’ such as global heating, deforestation, ocean acidification and more, which have already been described as ‘slow violence’ – do they not count as crises?³⁷

These questions matter because the definition of what constitutes a crisis is a political question: it’s about what collectively we pay attention to and allocate resources towards resolving. As the Cascade Institute note, drawing on the work of Barry Buzan et al.: ‘declaration that a crisis is occurring is often a key step in the securitization of an issue: a problem like cross-border migration or climate change becomes a crisis, and thus a matter of national security not because of its inherent features, but because

³⁵ Lawrence et al., ‘Global Polycrisis’, p.15.

³⁶ Lawrence et al., ‘Global Polycrisis’, p.13.

³⁷ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p.2.

certain actors convince relevant audiences (generally policymakers) that the issue constitutes an existential threat to the nation and therefore requires responses outside the realm of normal politics'.³⁸

By polycrisis response, do we mean preventing triggers, relieving stresses, or alleviating resultant harm? Do we mean blocking the vectors by which crises can travel within and across systems?³⁹ Another possibility is: removing obstacles to effective intervention.⁴⁰ These questions matter because they point us towards the question of: where are the most useful places to intervene?

Does polycrisis call for ‘poly’ response?

Another question that the above matrix raises is how to make sense of different orientations or aspirations of polycrisis response. In the above matrix, the World Economic Forum is located in the same cell as Cascade Institute and Post Carbon Institute. But how similar are these organizations’ orientations to polycrisis?

As Farwa Sial argues, some powerful international financial institutions are adopting the term ‘polycrisis’ to justify business as usual.⁴¹ And as a participant in one of our stakeholder interviews said: ‘I’m not sure we want a map of a drug cartel that understands the polycrisis, and is seeking to exploit government instability to advance

³⁸ Lawrence et al., ‘Global Polycrisis’, p.5.

³⁹ See Lawrence et al., ‘Global Polycrisis’, p.7 for an explanation of four vectors that can transport a crisis within and across systems.

⁴⁰ Asher Miller and Richard Heinberg discuss some obstacles to meaningful intervention in: ‘Welcome to the Great Unraveling: Navigating the Polycrisis of Environmental and Social Breakdown’ (2023), *Post Carbon Institute*, pp.32-39. Downloaded from: <https://www.postcarbon.org/publications/welcome-to-the-great-unraveling/>.

⁴¹ Farwa Sial, ‘Whose Polycrisis?’, 27 January 2023, *Developing Economics*, <https://developingeconomics.org/2023/01/27/whose-polycrisis/>.

its product marketing. ... That might be an extreme example. But I think {what we're doing is} sensemaking, it's looking for fellow travelers. Maybe we're all converging on a similar destination, even if we're coming at it from a different starting point'.⁴² How do we find those who are seeking similar destinations, instead of those who depart from similar analysis to potentially radically different ends?

One way to make sense of different responses to global polycrisis is through the three dimensions of action proposed by Joanna Macy: holding actions to hold back and slow down harm; structural changes to create alternative systems and institutions; and shifts in consciousness to lay the psychological, spiritual, and emotional foundation to sustain the new structural alternatives.⁴³ In this framework, the Ecosocial and Intercultural Pact of the South, with advocacy and organizing as their main activities, are primarily engaged in 'holding actions', whilst also gesturing towards 'structural change'. Meanwhile, SALT is engaging in the creation of structural alternatives and work to shift consciousness. Not one of the pillars of action is sufficient on its own: this framework reminds us that effective response to polycrisis needs multiple approaches and multiple loci of action. **In other words, a polycrisis calls for 'poly' response.**

Viewing polycrisis response as 'poly' itself helps us to remember that different actors are living and working in different sociopolitical and bioregional contexts. This means they face different threats, pressures, and obstacles. In one of our research interviews, we heard a story of an advocacy worker in an African country whose children were kidnapped and we heard of death threats faced by advocacy workers as reprisals from political leaders against their work. We heard that they draw primarily on an informal national network of activists and advocacy workers for support in such circumstances

⁴² Stakeholder interview conducted by Life Itself in 2023 to understand polycrisis mapping needs.

⁴³ Joanna Macy, 'The Great Turning', Active Hope, <https://www.activehope.info/book-key-themes/the-great-turning>.

and that training from a foreign organization in practices for personal protection, such as protecting the security of communication devices, has been supportive to their work. These experiences are an important reminder that challenge and support look very different in different political contexts.

As the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures research collective point out, the ‘multiple, converging crises that we collectively face [are] experience[d] in highly uneven ways’.⁴⁴ The distinction they draw between contexts of ‘high intensity’ and ‘low intensity’ struggle complexifies our understanding of crisis, because what registers in a low-intensity struggle as a disruption of normality (and therefore counts as crisis by the Cascade Institute’s definition) might in a high-intensity struggle instead be an intensification of existing violence (less clear whether this counts as crisis by the same definition).⁴⁵

We are also aware that the language of polycrisis may serve some groups and not others in terms of connecting with their target audiences. One interviewee shared that the concept of polycrisis resonated with their work but that in their work and communications they favor ‘lighter words that the communities and the beneficiaries and the people who are also power holders are used to so that we’re not being advocates that are speaking outside the context of their country’.⁴⁶ Another interviewee shared that in their own research into narratives of polycrisis they were finding that the ‘polycrisis’ term was currently being used within a relatively narrow circle of actors with a certain kind of ‘cultural programming’ within a Western educational or academic context and less so in movements on the ground. This does not mean that building

⁴⁴ Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective, ‘The Storm Categories’, *Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures*, <https://decolonialfutures.net/the-storm-categories/>.

⁴⁵ Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective, ‘The Storm Categories’.

⁴⁶ Stakeholder interview conducted by Life Itself in 2023 to understand the polycrisis response field.

coherence in the polycrisis field is not useful work; rather, it is a reminder that coherence does not mean universality. How can we best develop and support context-specific responses, and take seriously that polycrisis will not be solved by singular, hegemonic solutions?

On the questions raised in this discussion and all that we have shared in this report, we welcome hearing different perspectives and look forward to continuing to learn collectively.