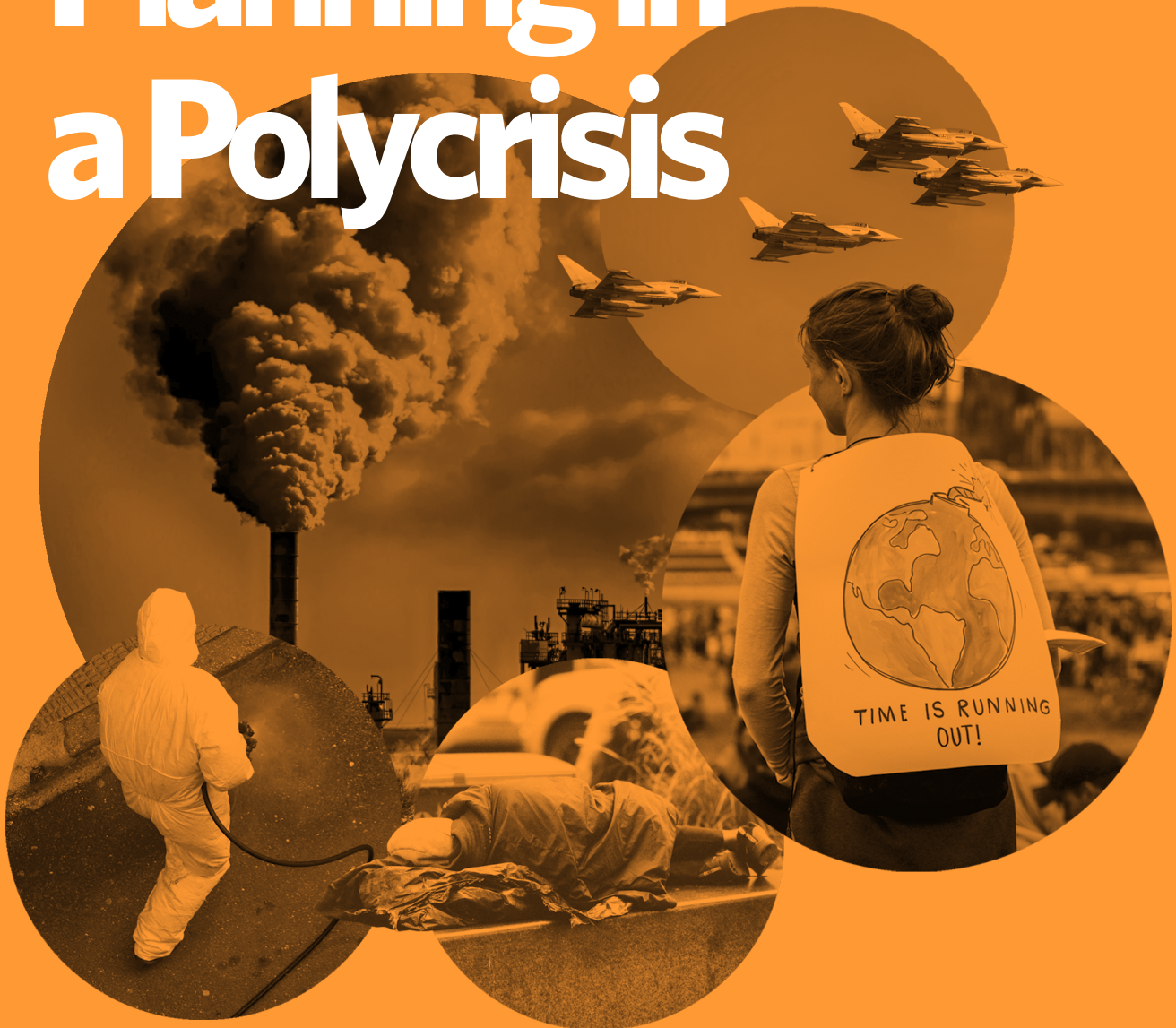


CIP Conference Special

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Title

# Planning in a Polycrisis



On July 8, 2025, a group of nearly 50 planners from across Canada came together in Toronto at the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP) annual conference to explore the evolving role of the planning profession in the context of polycrisis. Designed and facilitated by Intelligent Futures, the session created space for honest reflection, bold ideas, and collaborative exploration. Grounded in nearly 200 contributions from participants, this document summarizes the core insights, questions, and reflections that shaped the conversation.

## What is a Polycrisis?

### Defining Polycrisis

“Polycrisis” describes a situation where multiple crises are not only happening at the same time, but also interact with each other in ways that make the whole problem worse than the sum of its parts. In a polycrisis, diverse issues – for example, a health pandemic, an economic downturn, and a climate disaster – become intertwined and amplify one another’s impacts. This is different from simply facing many separate crises at once; a true polycrisis arises when overlapping problems compound each other, creating a complex challenge that is harder to manage or resolve than each crisis on its own. In short, it’s the *interconnection* of crises that defines a polycrisis, not just their simultaneity.

### Origin and Rise of the Term

The term *polycrisis* was originally coined by French philosopher Edgar Morin in the 1990s. It remained a niche concept for some time, but the idea gained new life in recent years. In 2016, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker invoked “polycrisis” to describe the complex cluster of challenges (from debt to refugees to Brexit) facing Europe. More recently, Columbia University historian Adam Tooze helped popularize the term around 2022 as a way to explain our current era of overlapping global emergencies. The notion entered global discourse prominently at the World Economic Forum – for instance, the WEF’s Global Risks Report 2023 warned of rising “polycrises,” where disparate crises “interact such that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each part. Today, leaders and experts increasingly use “polycrisis” to frame discussions about issues like climate change, pandemics, geopolitical conflicts, and economic instability happening all at once, rather than in isolation.

## Why It Matters for Professionals

For professionals in fields like planning, policy, infrastructure, and community development, the concept of a polycrisis is more than a buzzword; it highlights a critical shift in how we must approach problem-solving and risk management. Key implications include:

- **Holistic Planning:** Traditional plans that address one issue at a time are often insufficient in a polycrisis. Crises in different domains (economic, environmental, social) can trigger or worsen each other, so professionals need to think across systems. For example, infrastructure managers should consider how a flood might disrupt supply chains or public health. Planning with a systems perspective helps ensure that interventions in one area don't unintentionally magnify problems in another. This means stress-testing plans against multiple concurrent scenarios, not just single hazards.
- **Risk and Resilience:** The polycrisis concept underscores the importance of building robust, flexible systems that can withstand shock combinations. It calls for moving beyond siloed risk assessments toward integrated strategies. As one EU foresight report notes, traditional risk methods focus on isolated events, whereas a polycrisis lens brings a more comprehensive understanding of interconnected risks. For professionals, this translates to strengthening resilience – for instance, developing infrastructure or policies that maintain essential services under compound crises (like an earthquake during a pandemic). It also means having contingency plans that address cascading failures and cumulative impacts.
- **Cross-Sector Collaboration:** No single agency or sector can tackle a polycrisis alone. City planners, emergency managers, public health officials, and community leaders all need to work together. The polycrisis framework encourages breaking down professional silos: sharing information, coordinating responses, and jointly prioritizing actions. By acknowledging that economic, social, and environmental challenges are interlinked, policymakers and developers can coordinate more effective and unified responses to these challenges. This collaborative approach helps communities avoid “one-step-forward, two-steps-back” outcomes, where solving one problem inadvertently aggravates another.

Polycrisis is a useful lens for today's professionals because it captures the reality of complex, overlapping challenges that define our era. Understanding this concept prompts more strategic foresight, encourages integrated solutions, and fosters resilience in the face of uncertainty. Rather than inciting despair, the idea of a polycrisis can spur decision-makers to prepare in smarter ways, ensuring that plans, policies, and projects are robust enough to handle a tangle of crises, not just one.



## What's pushing, pulling, and holding planning back in the context of polycrisis?

Planning as a profession is increasingly called upon to respond to a world marked not by isolated challenges, but by a convergence of interconnected crises, known as a polycrisis. Climate change, housing affordability, infrastructure breakdown, cost-of-living pressures, and declining public trust are no longer separate domains; they are overlapping systems of stress that multiply each other's impacts. In this context, the traditional role of the planner, often rooted in technocratic expertise and siloed mandates, must evolve. The Futures Triangle exercise invited participants to explore this shifting landscape and map out the forces shaping the future of planning. By examining the Pulls (aspirational futures), Weights (barriers and constraints), and Pushes (external drivers of change), planners collectively explored what needs to change, what is holding us back, and what forces are making transformation unavoidable. The discussion reflected a profession under pressure, but also rich with possibility...if it can embrace new ways of thinking and working.



## Pulls: Desired Futures

Participants described a future where planning builds inclusive, healthy, and resilient communities. There was strong support for values such as care, equity, and sustainability, as well as the use of tools like AI and data to inform and improve decisions. The vision includes more collaboration across sectors, community-led processes, and a move away from rigid, top-down models. Long-term thinking, diverse voices, and access to housing, green space, and services were seen as essential to keeping planning relevant and impactful. The following key themes capture the future that participants believe planning should move toward:

- Values like compassion, care, sustainability, and equity
- Integration of AI and data to improve planning processes
- A shift toward collaborative, multidisciplinary approaches
- Greater citizen input and a move away from top-down norms
- Long-term thinking, green standards, and innovation over imitation
- Recognition of diverse cultural values, Indigenous rights, and affordability
- Visions that center health, accessibility, and inclusivity in urban form

## Weights: Barriers and Constraints

Many barriers continue to slow progress. Participants pointed to outdated rules, bureaucracy, and a culture of status quo thinking that resists change. There's also growing distrust in institutions, limited support from higher levels of government, and market forces that prioritize profit over public good. These weights keep planning reactive and rigid, at a time when communities need agility and innovation. Themes identified by the group included:

- Slow, rigid decision-making systems, including outdated legislation, bureaucracy, and zoning
- NIMBYism, erosion of public trust, and disinformation
- A dominant emphasis on free-market economics and housing as investment, not shelter
- Lack of intergovernmental support, especially from higher tiers of government
- Legacy mindsets, such as utopian or status quo planning disconnected from present needs
- Institutional inertia, funding gaps, and disconnect between policies and implementation

*"We need to define or re-define planning to keep it relevant."*

*"Planning needs to be more about compassion and care—less about control."*

*"The weight of the status quo is strong—bureaucracy, outdated zoning, and rigidity still stifle innovation."*

*"Most people aren't experiencing enough benefits from collective action to believe in it."*



## Pushes: Drivers of Change

At the same time, big shifts are pushing the profession to evolve. Climate change, housing stress, and failing infrastructure are demanding urgent action. New technologies like AI, demographic changes, and rising public expectations are reshaping how planning is done. There's also pressure to build trust, engage communities in new ways, and move faster. These forces are making it clear: planning can't stay the same; it needs to adapt to stay relevant. The forces compelling transformation include:

- The climate crisis, housing affordability, and infrastructure strain
- Technological disruption, especially the rise of AI and the need to modernize public-facing planning tools
- Changing demographics, including immigration, an aging population, and population growth
- Rising cost of living and urgency around service delivery
- Declining trust in institutions and the emergence of reactionary politics
- The push for bottom-up engagement, flexibility, and more responsive governance

Together, these dynamics illustrate the pressure-cooker conditions planners are working within, caught between legacy systems and urgent, interconnected crises. The exercise revealed the need for a transformed role for planners: one that is less siloed, more adaptive, and firmly grounded in systems thinking and collaborative leadership.

*"AI could make some planning roles irrelevant—but it could also make them more human."*

*"People are losing trust in the system, and we can't plan effectively without trust."*



## Charting a bold path forward

Through a shared lens of renewal and responsibility, participants offered a bold suite of principles, behaviours, and practices to help propel the planning profession into a future shaped by polycrisis. (With some editorial licence from the Intelligent Futures team), These ideas reflect a collective commitment to growing our positive influence in the face of complexity, uncertainty, and accelerating change. What follows is a snapshot of the Principles and Behaviours these planners believe are essential for making a meaningful impact in this new era.

### Principles

**Equity Isn't Optional.** If your plan only works for the well-connected, it's not a good plan. Stop designing for the influential or average and start planning for those most often left out.

Behaviours:

- Build real, long-term relationships with underrepresented communities, grounded in trust and commitment to the long-term, not just tied to project timelines.
- Use equity impact assessments, and design outreach that actually removes barriers, not just to say you did it, but so more people can genuinely take part.

**Lead with Purpose, Not Partisanship.** Planning should serve the public good, but it can't pretend politics don't exist. Understand the landscape, navigate the tensions, but stay anchored in what really matters.

Behaviours:

- Map the political landscape early, but keep the mission in focus.
- Reframe technical work around real public outcomes—and challenge yourself to make sure those outcomes aren't just what your professional training says they should be.

**Break the Rules When They're the Problem.** If outdated policies block progress, rewrite them. Planning must flex for the future, not fossilize the past.

Behaviours:

- Work with allies inside the system to pilot new approaches.
- Use prototypes, demonstrations, and test cases to push change forward.

***"Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."***

- Rep. John Lewis (1940-2020)

**Plan for What's Urgent, and Be Deliberate About What's Next.** You can't ignore the fire in front of you—but you also can't let urgency define the future by default. Planning must tackle today's pressures while intentionally shaping where we're headed.

Behaviours:

- Use scenario thinking to hold space for the long view.
- Build flexibility into plans so they can evolve as new pressures emerge.

## ***"Practice playful opportunism"***

- Bob Willard

**Cut Through the Fog.** Planning jargon doesn't build trust. Plain language does. Be clear about trade-offs, name the hard choices, and stop hiding behind process when what people want is honesty.

Behaviours:

- Speak human, not planner-ese.
- Use storytelling and visuals to make information clear and relatable.
- Be transparent about limitations, trade-offs, and areas of uncertainty.





**Collaboration or Bust.** No one solves a polycrisis alone. Bring in unusual allies, build unlikely partnerships, and remember: shared problems need shared power.

Behaviours:

- Create spaces where collaboration is genuine, where people actively participate in shaping the decisions, not just react to them. Share power early, and build the process together from the start.
- Be willing to rethink what engagement even means. It's not just informing or consulting; it may require co-creating the questions, the process, and even the goals from the ground up.

**Don't Let Expertise Kill Imagination.** Knowing your stuff is important. But clinging to old answers can blind you to better ones. Stay open, stay humble, stay learning.

Behaviours:

- Look beyond your community or field for ideas worth stealing.
- Make time to reflect on what's no longer working, and what might.

***"In a wicked world, relying upon experience from a single domain is not only limiting, it can be disastrous."***

- David Epstein

**Use Data, But Honour Lived Experience.** Data helps make sense of patterns, but it doesn't tell the whole story. Value what people know from experience, and make space for diverse worldviews—especially those long ignored. The best plans are built on both evidence and empathy.

Behaviours:

- Understand Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural perspectives, and lived realities as critical sources of insight, not side notes.
- If you want to hear new voices, you need new ways of showing up. Change where you go, how you ask, and who's leading the conversation.

***"Equity is not a finite resource. Especially when we understand it as love."***

- Joy Donnell

## Rethinking Practice to Meet the Moment

The realities of the polycrisis call on planners to show up in new ways. This is a time to rethink not just what we do, but how we do it—our mindsets, our processes, and the tools we rely on. By grounding ourselves in shared values and embracing new ways of working, we can strengthen our impact in the face of complexity. Every conversation, project, and decision is a chance to shape a more resilient and equitable future. No one has all the answers, but together, we can chart a path forward that reflects the complexity of our world and the care we have for the people and places we serve. Let's carry this momentum forward and lead with purpose, curiosity, and courage.



## Let's make progress, together.

The future doesn't wait, and making progress through complexity takes more than good intentions. If you're ready to move your organization or community forward in a thoughtful, future-focused way, we'd love to help. At Intelligent Futures, we work alongside teams to make sense of uncertainty, design practical strategies, and build real momentum for change.

Let's talk about what's next and how we can help.



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