

# INSIGHT BRIEF

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## Beyond Integration: UNU-CRIS's Multidimensional Approach to Global Regionalism

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*This Insight Brief is based on the intervention of the author during the UNU-CRIS 25th Anniversary Roundtable on the Past, Present and Future of Regionalism Studies, organised during the EU in International Affairs (EUIA) Conference in Brussels, May 2025.*

### Introduction/Background

I have had the great privilege to be associated with UNU-CRIS, its staff, and visiting academics and colleagues over a good number of years as a conference participant, back in the early 2000s, as an Academic Advisory Committee (AAC) member and, most recently, for a couple of terms as AAC chair. I have worked closely and collaborated with both former Director Luk Van Langenhove until 2016, and Philippe De Lombaerde, both as *ad interim* and now director. I have also had the privilege of working with former UNU-Rector David Malone, as well as current Rector Tshilidzi Marwala, including at our annual advisory board meetings and special events to celebrate the Institute's achievements and progress. This included a splendid celebration at the Town Hall in Bruges last year.

Thus, I have been involved in the UNU-CRIS project for quite a while and, therefore, have a good understanding of the workings and importance of the institution in the three levels

### Highlights

UNU-CRIS (United Nations University - Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies) has a long-standing history of robust engagement, with its work extending across the local (Flemish), regional and global levels.

The institute has demonstrated its relevance and adaptability by evolving its research to address contemporary global issues and by shifting from a Eurocentric focus to the global and multidimensional nature of regionalism.

It has been ahead of its time, anticipating critical debates on a 'regionalised world' and challenges to multilateralism. Its evidence-based work is now more crucial than ever in a world of diffused power and conflicts.

UNU-CRIS's research is deeply aligned with the broader UN mission and the SDGs, directly contributing to the necessary reform of global governance by focusing on the increasing importance of the "regional-global nexus."

at which it operates: the local, or Flemish level; the regional, or European level; and the global, international level. If you examine the current research clusters and issue areas in which UNU staff and colleagues are involved, you can see this clearly – cities, digital governance, migration, climate change, to name a few.

This interdependence is important, and always has been, and UNU-CRIS has established a place for itself at all these levels. One of its many achievements has been precisely to keep pace with different processes of change and to maintain its presence and relevance. This insight brief will aim to show this by reviewing its journey alongside some of its achievements and challenges, guided by three questions:

- How do you assess the role of UNU-CRIS in the academic landscape?
- How has it adapted to changing – and sometimes challenging – circumstances?
- How does UNU-CRIS fit within the broader UNU/UN agenda?

I also want to argue that, while the position of UNU-CRIS in both the academic and international landscape in which it operates has changed considerably over the years, whether

## UNU-CRIS Over Time

It is evident that I admire the diversity and ambition of the work done, as well as the many partnerships forged with different universities and research institutes around the world, in keeping abreast of major developments and **global trends** in regionalism. I use this term ‘global’ deliberately, and it is what I want to focus on here.

One of the earliest UNU-CRIS publications, *Global Politics of Regionalism*, is a splendid and pathbreaking collaborative effort between Luk Van Langenhove, Mary Farrell, Björn Hettne, and others, the latter being one of the ‘greats’ in post-Cold War regionalism studies and with a fantastic array of contributions, many of whom are themselves leading authors in the field. Without being immodest, I was one of them, and I am proud to have participated in this very early UNU-CRIS project, which further contributed to setting the ‘new regionalism’ show on the road and establishing its **global** and **multidimensional** reputation in international debates. This global dimension is not something that all scholars have readily embraced, particularly back then, in the early 2000s, when Europe, and copying or ‘emulating’ Europe, was foremost on people’s minds, making it the obligatory point of reference and approaches to regionalism.

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in terms of issue areas and approaches, or even core beliefs about regionalism and its purposes, the work it does is arguably more important now than ever. This is demonstrated by acute new regional conflicts, the ongoing challenges to multilateralism, the global diffusion of power, and the greater devolution of authority and growing assertiveness of different regions and their actors.

Today, we are living in a ‘world of regions’, a regionalised world, but no longer part of, as Peter Katzenstein once put it, a ‘US imperium’. That reality, if it once existed, has almost certainly passed.

I experienced this first-hand because I was also involved in an earlier project on regionalism in world politics with a colleague and friend, Andrew Hurrell, which precisely looked at, but also went beyond, Europe. There were many questions at that time about how much non-European regionalisms *really mattered* and whether regionalism among ‘developing countries’ was an important subject to pursue. I

know this because Oxford University Press, the publisher, was initially quite sceptical, back in the 1990s, about the viability of the volume. After seeing a few chapters, however, they agreed to publication, and the book became an important reference point at the time.

The other aspect that people tended **not** to focus on then was regionalism’s multidimensionality, something UNU-CRIS has also helped to expose, including in this book and, of course, in subsequent and current work; the clusters are nothing if not multidimensional. Again, so much early work on comparative

regionalism revolved around debates on customs unions, free trade areas and the often, with hindsight now, impossible goal of **deeper** integration. While later work moved, for example, into the security and human security arenas widely conceived, connecting it much more to the emerging multilateral world, there was still scepticism about regionalism's ability to deliver across these areas. Yet we now know, not least from the UN experience across different issue areas, how much the different elements of the system depend on regional allies and partners, states, and non-state actors. The area of peace operations shows this clearly.

Thus, the global politics of regionalism and accompanying projects have led to a new direction, a shift away from Eurocentricity, although not entirely. Of course, we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater here, as the saying

goes, and we are after all in Brussels, at the heart of the European project, and in a conference on the European Union and International Affairs (EUIA), where we are discussing the EU's roles in a changing world order, roles which I, as a British citizen, hope will increasingly draw Britain back in - the signs so far are positive.

UNU-CRIS, today with its new university partners in Brussels and Ghent, has rightly never neglected the EU dimension. Following on from the project mentioned above, we had [EU-GRASP](#), an impressive EU-funded project that explored the evolving EU role in peace and security debates from both academic and policy angles. Running from 2009 to 2012, the project, in its own words, aimed at contributing to the 'articulation of the role of the EU as a global and regional security actor in peace and security.' This was as important then as it is now, as Europe today seeks precisely to rearticulate that role at a time of new challenges and conflict, including war. One might argue that UNU-CRIS was ahead of its time and anticipating the kinds of debates we are having today.

I would say that Luk Van Langenhove was also ahead of his time in predicting a more 'regionalised' world order, though this order may not be emerging in quite the manner he anticipated. In *Building Regions: the Regionalization of the World Order*, Luk invited the unthinking and rethinking of states, regions and multilateralism in ways that resonate today. We may have moved beyond 'new regionalism' debates and theories, but new forms of regionalisation and unthinking

and rethinking multilateralism are very much back in vogue, and globalisation has not delivered on its promised goals.

There have been multiple research offshoots and further EU-funded packages, too many to mention here, but I would also like to refer to the role that the current director, Philippe De Lombaerde, has played throughout the existence of UNU-CRIS in bringing quantitative rigour to some of the more qualitatively informed reflections on the nature and rise of regions and regionalism. His work on measuring the indicators

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of integration, yielding several publications—both solo and co-authored—has provided us with much-needed hard evidence about patterns of global regionalism. One of the current research clusters at UNU-CRIS is precisely working on the Regional Integration Knowledge System (RIKS), building on an earlier database of knowledge about both *de jure* and *de facto* regional integration.

### **The UN and UNU-CRIS**

I could say much more on the above points, but let me finally turn to the question of the UNU-CRIS relationship with the UN family, something that concerns me as an IR scholar and friend of UNU-CRIS, and also now that I have recently joined the UNU Council. Working with former Rector Malone and now Rector Marwala, we have been regularly reminded of the importance of keeping the larger **UN mission** and priorities at the forefront of our research on the regions.

We can see that much of the UN mission, including, for example, working towards the SDGs, is already well embedded in the UNU-CRIS work. I would also note that over ten years ago, Philippe and colleagues precisely edited an innovative and forward-looking volume in 2012 entitled *The UN and the Regions*, which examined the important and evolving relationship between the UN and regional organisations in delivering peace and security at the time. That was a dozen years ago; things look quite different today, but it hardly needs saying that this relationship has assumed even greater significance, for all the reasons I gave at the start. The world

has shifted on its axis, power has become more diffused, and multilateralism has been challenged by new geopolitics. Regions and their actors are back on centre stage. The UN itself has taken note, and the multiple statements made over the years by different UNSGs about the role of regional agencies in supporting the UN project have assumed **new urgency**.

Secretary-General António Guterres has repeatedly stated that the current structures of global governance and the UN system itself are outdated, no longer reflect contemporary global realities, and require multiple reforms. At the launch of a new Advisory Group on Local and Regional Governments (United Nations, 6 October 2023), he noted:

*“As we consider ways to make multilateral institutions more effective, and to meet the current and future challenges facing people and planet, we need the perspectives and engagement of local and regional authorities.”*

In my own work, which to some extent mirrors that of UNU-CRIS, I have repeatedly emphasised the importance of recognising the emerging ‘regional-global nexus’ in terms of institutional development, design, and performance as well as in the normative domain. UN reform, challenging as it may be, is one part of that. I’ve only just joined the UNU Council, but even from our earliest interactions, I know that the kinds of issues we are looking at reflect questions that also lie at the heart of UNU-CRIS’s mission. I look forward to contributing to that debate and supporting the work of the 13 institutes that currently form part of the UNU family.

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