

STRENGTHENING GLOBAL CARE SYSTEMS FOR CLIMATE RESILIENCE

by the African Care and Climate Innovation Alliance (ACACIA) Hub

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Executive Summary

Climate and care crises both emerge from the same extractive economic model that degrades ecosystems while exploiting largely invisible care work, most of which is undertaken by women and girls. Climate change and climate-related shocks generate vulnerability in households, induce risk in livelihoods and health, and undermine critical infrastructure such as water systems, and, at the same time, damage local ecologies. These collectively have the effect of intensifying unpaid care as households work to secure food, water, energy and healthcare and to support displaced or ill family members. Underinvestment in childcare, healthcare, eldercare, social protection and community support forces families to absorb the impact of these climate-related shocks with unrecognised and uncompensated labour, effectively turning unpaid care into a hidden subsidy for climate adaptation. Instead, if care is seen as part of climate resilient infrastructure and reframed as essential to adaptation and resilience, societies will recognize and invest in strong care systems to generate healthy ecosystems. This will reduce vulnerability, expand adaptive capacity and sustain the conditions for life. The investment in these systems is lacking and requires a connection between climate policy and fiscal and macroeconomic policy.

This policy brief argues for such a transformative response which centres care within both climate finance and macroeconomic policy. Care should be recognised as core resilience infrastructure. Governments, donors, and other entities responsible for climate action can utilise time-use data and care-responsive budgeting to make unpaid work visible, and ensure investment in climate-resilient water and sanitation systems, renewable energy, transport, health, childcare, education and eldercare solutions to reduce daily burdens. Centring care would mean adopting universal social protection floors and accessible care services which can redistribute responsibility across households, communities, employers and the state. Directing climate finance (i.e. the Green Climate Fund, the Fund for Responsible Loss and Damage, and the Adaptation Fund) toward decent paid care work, care infrastructure and crisis-care mechanisms, alongside broader shifts that prioritise wellbeing over profit, democratise ownership of resources, centre public investment and support a green and caring global economy; turns care from an invisible buffer into a cornerstone of a just, climate-resilient transition.

THE PROBLEM: INTERSECTING CRISES AND INVISIBLE IMPACTS

Care work consists of direct and indirect activities that sustain life, such as childcare, eldercare, healthcare, cooking, cleaning, collecting water and fuel, and supporting the physical, emotional, health and developmental needs of people and households (ILO, 2018). It also has an environmental dimension, because care depends on healthy ecosystems and stable access to water, food, energy, and land, making the relationship between care and climate fundamentally reciprocal (Almeida et al. 2024; Phalatse et al. 2025).

The climate crisis and the care crisis are mutually reinforcing emergencies produced by unsustainable production and consumption, ecological destruction, and the persistent devaluation of the labour that sustains people and communities (Fraser, 2023). Climate shocks increase care burdens by damaging homes, livelihoods, water systems, health systems, and local ecologies, thereby requiring more time and labour to secure food, care for the sick, support displaced family members, and maintain everyday survival (Climate and Care Initiative, 2024).

The care-climate nexus conceptual framework (Phalatse et al. 2025) clarifies that care must be understood expansively: as person-to-person care, as social infrastructure, and as environmental care that supports the conditions for life itself (Figure 1). A stable environment enables care, but climate change erodes that foundation. Conversely, investment in care systems reduces vulnerability, expands adaptive capacity, and strengthens collective resilience (Almeida et al. 2024; Phalatse et al. 2025).

What is of major concern, is that much of climate finance has been taken from development aid (CARE International, 2023). This means that vital funding intended for health and food security is being redirected to climate change. This contradicts UNFCCC commitments that require climate funding be new and additional contributions to already existing development aid, not reallocated. There is also a bias in climate finance flows, which are targeted at technology for mitigation purposes. For example, energy and transport received more than 66% of climate finance for mitigation in 2021/2022 (CARE International, 2023). The adaptation gap (the difference between adaptation finance and societal need) is a significant problem as climate impacts increase in intensity.

Adaptation interventions remain significantly underfunded compared to mitigation, and despite the goal of adaptation finance being to support the most climate-vulnerable countries, funding allocation is often driven by institutional capacity, donor interests, and profitability rather than vulnerability (Venner et al., 2024).

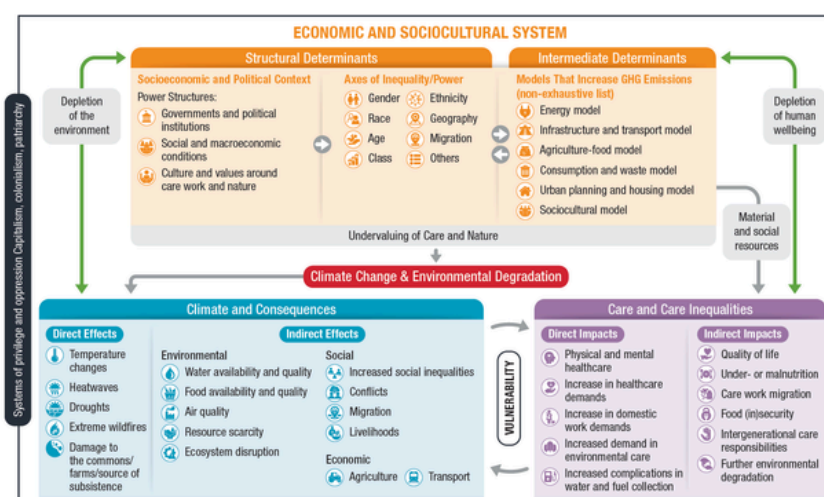


Figure 1: Conceptual framework linking care, care inequalities and climate change.

Since most climate finance is provided as loans rather than grants, many countries argue that this approach increases debt burdens and contradicts UNFCCC principles that emphasise the responsibility of industrialised countries to support climate adaptation in developing nations (Phalatse et al., 2025). This is likely to be exacerbated as climate finance has seen a blow from shifting priorities of key global powers such as the USA.

THE CASE FOR CARE AS CLIMATE INFRASTRUCTURE



Investment in care should be treated as investment in climate-care infrastructure. Care systems, such as healthcare, childcare, eldercare, social protection, community networks, and caregiving infrastructure, are part of the social foundation that allows people and communities to prepare for, withstand, and recover from climate shocks (Climate and Care Initiative, 2024).

The case for social infrastructure investment can support care work and job creation. The ILO (2018) estimated that the global care workforce comprises 381 million workers, including 249 million women and 132 million men, accounting for 11.5 per cent of total employment worldwide and 19.3 per cent of global female employment. The same report finds that doubling investment in the care economy could generate 269 million new jobs by 2030. These figures strengthen the case for treating care as a low-carbon, labour-intensive pillar of a just transition. However, existing climate funds rarely finance care explicitly, even though they already support adjacent sectors such as health, water, sanitation, and social protection (UNDP, 2025).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: 5R FRAMEWORK

Integrating the care-climate nexus into climate finance requires a more ambitious and evidence-based policy agenda. The recommendations below are intended to support the goals of the Paris Agreement, particularly by strengthening the integration of care within the UNFCCC Global Goal on Adaptation, thus financing care and care work through funds operating within the UNFCCC financial architecture (i.e. the Green Climate Fund, Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage and the Adaptation Fund).

1. Recognise care as climate infrastructure

Governments and climate-finance institutions should explicitly define care systems as core resilience infrastructure in climate strategies. This should be supported by the implementation of time-use surveys, care-burden analysis, and care-responsive budgeting so that unpaid care work becomes visible in policy and financing decisions.

3. Redistribute care across households, communities, markets, and the state

The burden of care should not continue to rest primarily on women and girls. Public policy should expand universal social protection floors, childcare, healthcare, and community care services so that responsibility for care is shared more fairly across households, communities, employers, and the state. This is a key premise of the ILO Guidelines for a Just Transition, which calls for universal social protection floors to reduce caregivers' economic vulnerability and encourage a human-centred transition. Care financing should be cautious of promoting payments to women as caregivers which reinforces stereotypes. Instead, men should be supported to engage more in care work through behaviour change.

2. Reduce unpaid care burdens through social and physical infrastructure

Reducing care burdens should mean more than installing time-saving technologies. It should include public investment in climate-resilient basic services such as in water, sanitation, renewable energy, transport, healthcare, childcare, education, and eldercare systems that reduce time poverty which is intensified by climate stress. The Adaptation Fund already supports childcare provision, flexible schedules, labour-saving technologies, and social protection as legitimate adaptation design features in instances where unpaid care work limits women's participation.

4. Represent caregivers in climate governance

Climate governance should mandate the meaningful participation of care workers, unpaid caregivers, women's organisations, Indigenous peoples, marginalised communities, disability organisations, and grassroots care networks in the design, allocation, and monitoring of climate finance. Inclusive governance is necessary to ensure that funding priorities are co-created with those most affected, rather than imposed through technical top-down systems that overlook care. This meets the standards of the UNFCCC Gender Action Plan, which asks for women's full, equitable, and meaningful engagement in all aspects of climate policymaking.

5. Remunerate care and direct climate finance toward care systems

Climate finance should support decent paid care work, care infrastructure, and social protection rather than crowding them out. This could include creating dedicated budget lines or funding windows for care within the Green Climate Fund, piloting care-resilience windows in the Adaptation Fund, and creating a ring-fenced care recovery facility in the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage to finance caregiver stipends, trauma support, community kitchens, childcare hubs, eldercare, and culturally grounded recovery programmes.

MACROECONOMIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

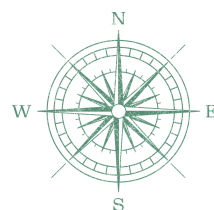
In addition, as Elson (2024) notes, underlying the devaluation of caring for the people and the planet is a finance-driven economic system. Attempts to mobilise finance for investment in mitigation and adaptation can only achieve limited success when the economic system is governed in this way (Elson, 2024; Diski, 2022; Muchala, 2021). The following are important macroeconomic policy changes that are required for a caring and climate resilient economy:

- **Reorient the economy:** Put wellbeing above profit, move away from energy-intensive and polluting industries towards activities that care for people and the planet and end GDP growth as the main economic objective.

- **Change ownership models:** Democratise ownership of natural resources and basic services, support public renewable energy companies and cooperatives, roll back private provision of care services, and support alternative ownership models throughout the economy.

- **Change how the government raises and spends money:** Put public investment in decarbonising physical infrastructure and expanding social infrastructure at the centre of fiscal policy, supported by progressive taxation.

- **Support a global green and caring economy:** Build efforts to reorder the economy around climate justice through debt relief, gender-sensitive climate finance, reforming international financial institutions, and curbing tax havens.



CONCLUSION

Climate and care crises are mutually reinforcing, and the central insight for policymakers is that climate action that ignores care will fail to deliver resilience and justice. Paid and unpaid care work, whether social or environmental, is already functioning as hidden adaptation, yet remains structurally undervalued and underfunded even as climate shocks intensify its demands. To change course, climate strategies and finance must recognise the value of care systems, reduce unpaid care burdens through investment in climate-resilient social and physical infrastructure, redistribute responsibility for care via universal social protection and public services, ensure that caregivers and affected communities hold real power in climate governance, and remunerate care by directing dedicated, predictable climate funding toward decent care jobs, care infrastructure and crisis-care mechanisms. Climate policy must be coupled with macroeconomic reforms that put wellbeing above profit, democratise ownership of resources, and align fiscal and financial systems with a green and caring economy. These actions offer a pathway to a just transition which supports the regeneration of nature and life.

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