



Care Work, Climate Change & Private Sector Development Synthesis Note



Unpaid care work is vital to society but often overlooked and under-valued.



Climate change intensifies the demands for care work and weakens care systems.



For effective, care-sensitive work, funders can, for example, require consideration of care in the design of climate policy and programmes.



In every country, women perform more hours of unpaid care work than men.



Climate interventions can improve or intensify care work.

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Introduction

As [previous DCED research](#) has shown, **unpaid care work is vital to society but often overlooked and under-valued**. Care work is unequally distributed, with women doing more care work than men and, in Latin America, the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa, **women perform 3-5 times more hours of unpaid care work than men**. This imbalance is a key constraint to women's economic empowerment (WEE), limiting women's ability to take up paid formal employment, including green jobs in low-carbon sectors, due to time and mobility constraints posed by their care responsibilities.

Climate change and environmental degradation are pressing challenges facing the world, causing more frequent, intense and unpredictable extreme weather events such as heatwaves, droughts, floods, wildfires, and severe storms. There is an increasingly urgent need for



Care work is:

Direct personal care provided to children, the elderly, people with disabilities or illnesses, and indirect care, such as household work like cooking, cleaning, and collecting firewood or water. Some definitions in the literature also include environmental care work; caring for animals, plants and common spaces on which households depend. Care work can be paid or unpaid and, in every country in the world, women carry out more hours of care work (particularly unpaid care work) than men ([Climate & Care Initiative, 2025](#)).

Unpaid care work is fundamental to any economy's functioning but usually not counted in standard economic policymaking or in economic measures such as GDP ([Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, 2024](#)).

societies and communities to adapt and become resilient to climate-related shocks and changes. See Annex 1 for key climate-related definitions.

The care and climate crises are intertwined; emerging evidence suggests that climate change and environmental degradation increase and intensify unpaid care work. The increased frequency of extreme weather events and the reduced availability of natural resources (e.g. fuel and water) adds to the burden of domestic duties (e.g. walking further to collect scarcer resources). Food insecurity, health impacts, and displacement caused by climate change and environmental degradation also increase the need for caregiving. **Climate-related programmes and interventions can reduce or redistribute unpaid care work if designed to be care-sensitive,** but there are few good examples of this in practice. In fact, some climate mitigation and adaptation strategies can inadvertently increase the burden of unpaid care work.

Looking at the interdependence of care and climate change is therefore sensible. Yet, the linkages between care and climate have generally been overlooked in policies, programs and research; the care-climate nexus has only in recent years attracted interest from organisations such as UN Women, Oxfam and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). This synthesis note reviews the existing literature, targeting private sector development teams within donor and development agencies, with the primary objective of enhancing the effectiveness of policies and programmes related to both care and climate.

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Research on
care-climate
linkages

Much of the literature describes the theory and evidence for looking at the nexus of care and climate, as part of a strategic process to centralise care in the climate agenda. The theory covers two key points: **climate change increases the amount and drudgery of care work, and climate-related interventions can also increase the amount and drudgery of care work if they are not designed to be care sensitive.** Some publications also go on to make recommendations on what a care-sensitive climate policy or

programme would look like, particularly [The Asia Foundation & Fundación Avina \(2025\)](#) which focusses on practical policy recommendations for addressing care and climate together and [Southern Centre for Inequality Studies \(2024\)](#) which sets out a conceptual framework for linking care and climate policy. The most comprehensive piece of literature on care and climate overall is [Oxfam \(2022\)](#).

Much of the literature stresses that **unpaid care is not being impacted by climate change in new or unique ways**; the effects are similar to how other stresses like systemic violence, resource insecurity and poverty effect both the amount and drudgery of unpaid care, and care infrastructure. People, especially those based in remote rural areas, have been feeling these effects for a long time with a variety of causes. However, **what is different about the effects of climate change is that the rate of change is unprecedented**. Extreme events are increasingly regular, and systems are not adapting quickly enough.

Climate change increases unpaid care work

Climate change intensifies care work in two key ways, outlined below (Tables 3.2 and 3.3 in [Oxfam \[2022\]](#) provide a more detailed summary).

> *Climate change intensifies the demands for care work*

The effects of climate change are particularly severe for people with rural livelihoods in low-income countries as they are generally more reliant on natural resources and do not have the capacity to adapt or become resilient to climate changes quickly enough. **The natural resources that people depend on become scarcer, requiring an increase in the time caregivers spend collecting such resources** (fuel, water, food). Travelling further for resources leaves caregivers more vulnerable to other risks, such as sexual violence along routes. Climate change can also mean that it becomes more difficult for farmers to keep plants and animals alive e.g. in droughts or floods, reducing land productivity and increasing the demand for environmental care work.

Food insecurity, water scarcity and extreme weather events also increase the number of people that require direct care due to illness (for example, from heat stress during a heat wave, water-borne diseases during a flood or psychologically following any traumatic event), and reduce the number of carers to provide the care. Such events also increase indirect care work e.g. cleaning up post-disaster, alongside environmental care work, e.g. increased agricultural load post-disaster from failed crops and sick animals. When displacement is necessary, care responsibilities then also increase in aid camps where access to resources is generally more limited ([Babugura, 2019](#)).

> **Climate change weakens care systems**

Climate-related disasters destroy care infrastructure such as elderly care homes, daycare centres for children, and health services, increasing the burden of individual caregivers. When people are displaced due to climate change, social networks that are essential sources of care work can be lost.

Additionally, public funding is used up adapting to climate change and rebuilding after extreme weather events which leaves little funding for public care services.

Climate interventions can improve or intensify care work

Climate change interventions have historically been seen as gender neutral, but can reproduce, exacerbate or introduce new inequalities where they don't pay attention to care, and to who carries out the care. However, interventions can also help support the recognition and redistribution of care work when coupled with social norms interventions ([Grantham, 2022](#)). For example, time-use surveys have found that energy-efficient and clean energy technology can significantly reduce the burden of domestic work for caregivers in LIMCs, bringing both green and WEE benefits (as women's time is then freed up for other activities, including paid work, and women's exposure to violence while collecting fossil fuels is reduced).

Women's care work is critical to consider in all PSD programming, but programmes particularly focussing on climate mitigation and adaptation often depend on unpaid environmental care work in areas such as climate-smart agriculture, reforestation and waste management, overlooking the competing demands on caregivers' time, and their wellbeing ([The Asia Foundation & Fundación Avina, 2025](#)). New labour-intensive tasks (e.g. learning new farming methods) often fall on women who are also the main caregivers of a household and end up with a 'double day' of work ([Oxfam, 2022](#)). *"Studies based on sex-disaggregated data have shown that when gendered differences are not taken into consideration in the technology design process or when they are introduced to agricultural households, which they often are not, climate-smart technologies do not work well for them (Doss 2001; Beuchelt and Badstue 2013; Bryan et al. 2018, 418; FAO and CARE 2019)"* ([Oxfam, 2022](#)). **Without care-centred intervention, climate programmes are likely to see fewer caregivers able to participate, and ultimately therefore are more likely to fail.**

Lastly, **investments in green energy overlook the value of care work.** As has been similarly noted in literature on job creation and WEE more generally, programmes should take care services into account in order to involve caregivers in new opportunities in the energy transition, e.g. by providing high quality care at skills trainings, entrepreneurial and formal workplaces. This is particularly relevant given increasing focus by donor and development agencies on the principles of a just transition to ecologically sustainable economies for all.

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Designing care-sensitive climate policy and programmes

[Oxfam \(2022\)](#) and [Butt et al. \(2020\)](#) recommend that the following ‘4 or 5Rs’ frameworks is integrated across mainstream climate policy and programmes including, for example, energy transition and climate finance. The 4R framework involves recognizing, reducing, redistributing and representing care work, and a 5th R is sometimes added on rewarding care work. This framework is already being used by bilateral donors and development agencies in their work on care and WEE. [Oxfam \(2022\)](#) sets out how the 5R framework can be applied to climate policy and programming:

5R Framework	Gender-just AND care-sensitive climate action
Recognize care work	Recognize and value care work as foundational to a decarbonized, climate-just society. Recognize and value the role of carers and the work they do to enable households to cope in crisis/disaster situations and with everyday environmental stresses. Recognize and value the knowledge that comes from environmental care work to climate mitigation, adaptation, and resilience.
Reduce care work	Provide labour-saving domestic and agricultural technologies that simultaneously mitigate/adapt to climate change and reduce the time and effort required to carry out daily care work tasks. Increase access to climate information services that make it easier for carers to anticipate and plan for climate events in order to minimize negative effects on households.
Redistribute care work	Embed state-provided care services (e.g., childcare, elder care) in national and international climate policies. Promote and facilitate equal responsibility for and hands-on delivery of care work among men/boys and women/girls.
Represent carers	Include carers in debates and decision-making processes regarding climate action (e.g., through voluntary organizations and unions). Ensure that the participation of carers in debates and decisions about climate action is not restricted by their caring responsibilities (e.g., provide childcare services).
Reward carers	Include funding for training and job creation in formal care sectors in climate finance programs. Include a care income and living wages for care workers in comprehensive packages for a just transition (e.g., Green New Deal).

Care jobs are also fundamentally low-carbon jobs so can be prioritized as low-carbon investments in carbon mitigation strategies ([Novello, 2021](#)). Analysis from the Women’s Budget Group points out that a care job produces, on average, 26 times less greenhouse gases than a manufacturing job, 200 times less than an agricultural job, and nearly 1,500 times less than a job in the fossil fuel sector ([UK Feminist Green New Deal, 2022](#)).

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Options for donor agency support

Funders looking to work in the nexus of care, climate change and private sector development can support caregivers and care systems to build resilience and adapt to climate change. They could do so by:

- > **Commissioning further research into this nexus** to increase the evidence base for focussing on these topics together, as literature is still relatively scarce. Such research could consider advancing the theory on how care systems are affected by climate change, and on what the role of the private sector is in finding solutions and building resilience.
- > **Collecting data and evidence of climate change increasing care work and damaging care systems**, and the effects on economic development (particularly WEE). This could be focussed on a particular country or regional context, for information of developing country policymakers, and of funders working with such countries or regions.
- > **Requiring consideration of care when supporting new climate-related investments, commissioning new programmes, or retrofitting existing programmes.** The 4 or 5R's framework can be used as a starting point for thinking about practically integrating care; other guides for implementation staff also exist covering questions that could be asked during various parts of the programme cycle to ensure care and climate considerations are being centred. An example is featured in the box below (from [IIED, 2022](#)).
- > **Integrating principles of climate resilience in investments in care systems.** For example, climate-related language can be included in investments in public health, insurance and social security.

Questions to be asked in programme design on valuing and making visible unpaid care work and identifying women's interests for just low-carbon transitions ([IIED, 2022](#))

- > What formal and informal roles do women undertake within the sector? What roles are envisaged for them in the transition?
- > What roles are envisaged for care work and community responsibilities within the shift to a green economy or the just transition?
- > Who participates and has power and agency in the household and community and in democratic decisions that allow such shifts to take place?
- > What roles are valued and paid for?
- > Who takes on the care work shifted and redistributed as a result of some women doing less?

Annex 1: Climate-related definitions

Climate change: a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability ([United Nations, 1992](#)).

Climate adaptation: adjustments in ecological, social, or economic systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli and their effects or impacts to moderate potential damages or to benefit from opportunities to do with climate change ([UNFCCC, 2021](#)).

Climate change mitigation: efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and enhance carbon sinks (e.g. increasing forest areas) ([UNFCCC, 2021](#)).

Climate resilience: the ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management ([UNDRR, 2021](#)).

Just transition: greening the economy in a way that is fair and inclusive to all, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind. It involves maximizing the social and economic benefits of climate action while minimizing risks, including through effective social dialogue and respect for fundamental labour principles and rights ([ILO, 2024](#)).

Annex 2: Further reading

- > Anderson, S., Fisher, S. 2022. [Gender equality and informality in low-carbon transitions: a review of evidence to identify transformative outcomes](#). IIED, London.
- > Arora-Jonsson, S., Cohen, M. and MacGregor, S. 2022. [Caring in a changing climate: Centering care work in climate action](#). Oxfam Policy & Practice.
- > The Asia Foundation & Fundación Avina. 2025. [Climate Change and Care Work](#).
- > Babugura, A. 2019. [Gender equality in combating climate change: The African context](#). South African Institute of International Affairs.
- > Butt, Myrah Nerine, Saleha Kamal Shah, and Fareeha Ali Yahya. 2020. "Caregivers at the Frontline of Addressing the Climate Crisis." *Gender & Development* 28 (3): 479–98.
- > Diski, R. 2022. [A Green and Caring Economy](#). UK Feminist Green New Deal Coalition, Women's Budget Group.
- > Novello, A. 2021. [Building Narratives for a Caring Green Economy: A Feminist Green New Deal Coalition Report](#). UK Feminist Green New Deal Coalition.
- > Robino, C., Mbiekop, F. and Grantham, K. 2023. [The link between clean energy and women's labour](#).
- > Southern Centre for Inequality Studies. 2024. [The Climate-Care-Nexus – A Conceptual Framework](#).
- > UNCDD. 2022. [Study on differentiated impacts of desertification, land degradation and drought on women and men: Summary for decision makers](#).
- > UN Women. 2023. [The climate-care nexus: Addressing the linkages between climate change and women's and girls' unpaid care, domestic, and communal work](#).
- > Wang, S., Ghani, M. and Kaur, G. 2023. [Care-full climate communication. A guide to communicating about care-centred, low-carbon societies](#). Oxford: Climate Outreach.
- > World Bank. 2023. [Atlas of Sustainable Development Goals 2023: Realizing gender equality: A greater challenge with climate change](#).

For links to more resources on this topic see the DCED's [Women's Economic Empowerment Knowledge Page](#) and [Green Growth Knowledge Page](#).

This synthesis note was written by Ella Duffy of the DCED Secretariat. Please provide feedback to admin@enterprise-development.org

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