



Catalysing Care's Potential: A G20 Fiscal, Economic and Social Strategy for Equality

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Solidarity for the
Achievement
of the SDGs



Abstract

Care is a strategic investment, fundamental to resilient economies, inclusive societies, and sustainable development. Yet despite unpaid care work representing 9% of global GDP, care remains undervalued, underpaid, and underfunded. Amid widening inequalities, geopolitical tensions, climate crises, conflict, and displacement – challenges that threaten social investments and development progress – embedding care into G20 fiscal, economic, and social strategies is more urgent than ever.

Investments in care can generate substantial economic returns, potentially creating millions of jobs, boosting global GDP and tax revenues, all while reducing poverty, strengthening resilience, and improving livelihoods. Thus, care can be both a powerful social equaliser and a driver of inclusive, sustainable growth. However, while the care economy is gaining recognition in international discussions, progress remains limited due to persistent gaps in investment, coordination, and implementation.

The G20 has acknowledged care's importance but has not yet delivered the decisive, coordinated action and financing needed to realise its full transformative potential. Crucially, commitments have not been matched by adequate funding or meaningful improvements in services, infrastructure, or data collection.

Strong care and support systems are essential to accelerating recovery and transformation. South Africa's G20 presidency provides a timely opportunity to position care as a cross-cutting priority within public policies globally. This brief builds on prior G20 commitments and proposes concrete policy actions anchored in gender equality, disability inclusion, human rights, and sustainability principles. By integrating care strategically into fiscal, economic and social frameworks, the G20 can harness its potential to drive solidarity, equality, and sustainability – core principles of South Africa's presidency – and effectively respond to today's intersecting global crises.

Keywords: care economy; sustainable development; care work; gender; intersectionality.

DISCLAIMER

This policy brief, authored independently and subjected to peer review, presents the views and opinions of its writers. These do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the authors' organisations or the T20 South Africa Secretariat.

Diagnosis

Care is a strategic investment that underpins resilient economies, inclusive societies, and sustainable development. At a time when geopolitical tensions, economic uncertainty, widening inequalities, climate emergencies, conflict and displacement are threatening social investments and human development, embedding care into G20 fiscal, economic and social strategies is crucial. By doing so, the G20 can reinforce commitments to solidarity, equality, and sustainability – foundational values of South Africa's G20 presidency – and position care as a priority to achieving inclusive, resilient, and lasting growth.

Care investments have far-reaching economic benefits. Care underpins all economic activity, yet remains undervalued, underpaid, and underfunded – despite unpaid care work accounting for 9% of global GDP¹. Every dollar invested in childcare could yield USD 3.76 in global GDP gains, making it a high-return public investment². Expanding universal childcare and long-term care services could generate up to 299 million full-time jobs by 2035³, while also enhancing livelihoods for those requiring care. Care investments reduce poverty, strengthen resilience, and boost productivity through better health and education outcomes, serving as a social equaliser and inclusive, sustainable growth engine.

Care intersects with multiple dimensions of inequality — gender, age, migration status, disability, and socioeconomic position – shaping life chances from early childhood to old age. Nurturing care, such as quality childcare, builds human capital, improves wellbeing, and reduces inequalities⁴. Yet access to quality care remains uneven, while women shoulder most unpaid and underpaid care work, limiting their opportunities and reinforcing cycles of poverty. Underinvestment in care services compounds these disparities, particularly for low-income families. Both climate change⁵ and humanitarian crises intensify inequalities in care work, disproportionately affecting women and girls. Climate emergencies⁶ and conflict disrupt livelihoods and care systems just as needs increase. Despite these parallel impacts, care remains neglected in policy responses.

[1] International Labour Organization, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2018), https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms_633166.pdf

[2] International Labour Organization, *The Benefits of Investing in Transformative Childcare Policy Packages Towards Gender Equality and Social Justice*, ILO Brief (Geneva: ILO, October 2023), https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@40dgreports/@40gender/documents/briefingnote/wcms_900115.pdf

[3] Laura Addati, Umberto Cattaneo, and Emanuela Pozzan, *Care at Work: Investing in Care Leave and Services for a More Gender Equal World of Work* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2022), https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_838653.pdf

[4] M. M. Black et al., "The Principles of Nurturing Care Promote Human Capital and Mitigate Adversities from Preconception Through Adolescence," *BMJ Global Health* 6, no. 4 (2021): e004436, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2020-004436>

[5] Anna Eknor Ackzell et al., *The Climate-Care Nexus. Input to the Study on Care and Support, Pursuant to HRC Resolution 54/6* (Geneva: UNRISD, forthcoming 2025).

[6] Sonia Phalatshe, Julia Taylor, and Imraan Valodia, *The Climate-Care Nexus: A Conceptual Framework* (Johannesburg: Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, October 2024).

Integrating care considerations into gender-responsive climate policies and resilient infrastructure is essential to ease the compounded pressures of mitigation, loss, and damage. Likewise, incorporating care systems into conflict prevention, crisis response, recovery and peacebuilding efforts creates pathways to long-term stability, resilience, gender equality, and human development. Addressing these disparities requires a structural, intersectional approach that better values and positions care as a lever for equality, social justice and inclusive development.

The care economy in the G20

The care economy is gaining traction in multilateral discussions. The 2030 Agenda acknowledges care across several SDGs, where it remains vital for systemic change. Recently, care has featured in the Pact for the Future and declarations by the G20, G7, ECOSOC, the Human Rights Council, and COP29. However, progress is constrained by persistent gaps in investments, coordination, and implementation. The G20 has acknowledged care's importance, but has not yet delivered the bold, coordinated action and financing needed to realise its full potential. Brisbane's 2014 commitment to reducing women's labour force participation gap by 25% by 2025 spurred care-related acknowledgements in successive Leaders' Declarations, focused on labour force participation and quality jobs⁷. In 2024, Brazil's Leaders' Declaration featured a commitment to promote gender equality in paid and unpaid care work and encouraging a more co-responsible model involving men and boys. Leaders also pledged to implement the G20 Roadmap Towards and Beyond Brisbane and called for new commitments beyond the 25 by 25 goal⁸. Yet, as of 2023, only ten G20 countries had made sufficient progress towards the target⁹. Critically, G20 recognition of care has not been accompanied by financing pledges or action to address services, infrastructure, or data gaps.

With five years remaining until the SDGs' deadline – and setbacks in gender equality, poverty reduction, and employment – prioritising care is urgent. Strong care and support systems are essential to recovery and transformation, acting as multipliers for inclusive growth, gender equality and sustainable development.

[7] Kelsey Harris, "Who Cares? A 10-Year Analysis of G20 Care Commitments," Center for Global Development, May 9, 2024, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/who-cares-10-year-analysis-g20-care-commitments>.

[8] G20 Brazil. "G20 Rio de Janeiro Leaders' Declaration." November 18–19, 2024. <https://g20.gov.br/en/documents/g20-rio-de-janeiro-leaders-declaration>.

[9] International Labour Organization (ILO) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Women at Work in G20 Countries: Progress and Policy Action in 2023 (Geneva: ILO, August 8, 2024), <https://www.ilo.org/publications/women-work-g20-countries-progress-and-policy-action-2023>.

South Africa's G20 presidency offers a unique moment to champion this shift, along with the upcoming World Summit for Social Development, the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, and post-2030 agenda negotiations. Together, these present critical opportunities for G20 countries, as well as the whole global community, to consolidate care as a foundation for sustainable and inclusive progress.

Recommendations

Building on prior G20 commitments, we propose concrete policy actions to position care as a cross-cutting priority, advancing quality care and support systems through a whole-of-government approach. These systems – including services, programmes, and infrastructure – should involve strong inter-institutional coordination, social dialogue, and civil society participation, anchored in gender equality, disability inclusion, human rights, and sustainable development¹⁰. In alignment with South Africa's G20 priorities, care offers a transformative pathway to accelerate progress across the SDGs and address today's intersecting crises. By placing care at the heart of economic and social strategies, the G20 can promote solidarity, advance equality, and guarantee sustainability.

Solidarity

Solidarity must be established as a foundational principle guiding public policies. Care is a shared responsibility across sectors, generations and communities, and must be recognised and resourced as a collective public good. This begins with committing to increased public investment in care and support systems – acknowledging that care underpins not only social wellbeing but also economic growth and climate sustainability¹¹. Gender-responsive budgeting and progressive tax systems must reflect the value of unpaid care work and ensure the equitable redistribution of public resources. Additionally, innovative mechanisms such as debt-for-care or debt-for-climate swaps can help governments finance care systems without exacerbating fiscal constraints. In contexts of crisis, conflict, and recovery, care is a pillar of social development and a driver of just, inclusive reconstruction.

[10] Florencia Caro Sachetti et al., Pathways to Comprehensive Care and Support Systems: Translating G20 Commitments into Action, T20 Policy Brief (Brasília: T20 Brasil, 2024), https://www.t20brasil.org/media/documentos/arquivos/TF01_ST06_Pathways_To_Comprehensive_Care_and_Support_Systems.pdf.

[11] Kelsey Harris et al., Global Roadmap for Action on the Care Economy (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2024), <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/global-roadmap-action-care-economy>.

The G20 should promote the integration of care into humanitarian and peacebuilding responses, recognising its critical role in restoring social cohesion, rebuilding livelihoods, and enabling women's meaningful participation in post-conflict governance and economic recovery. Reconstruction plans should embed care infrastructure – across health, education, housing, and basic services – with a focus on gender-responsive resilience and the continuity of care provision in crisis-affected contexts.

Equality

Addressing structural disparities in the care economy is essential to ensuring that everyone-particularly women and marginalised groups-can participate fully in socio-economic and political life. Advancing gender equality requires a co-responsible model of care that recognises, reduces, and redistributes care work, engaging boys and men in caregiving roles. Paid parental and paternity leave, and quality, accessible and high-quality care services, are critical to this transformation. With a feminised care workforce, it also becomes vital for the G20 to commit to ensuring decent work in the sector through adequate reward and representation, including for migrants and informal workers, by ratifying and enforcing ILO Conventions 190 (violence in the workplace) and 189 (decent work for domestic workers)¹².

At the foundation of reducing inequalities lies human development. Universal access to inclusive and quality early childhood care and education services for all children, prioritising the most vulnerable, should be delivered through at least two years of free, play-led services, rooted in nurturing care principles. Similarly, inclusive long-term care and support services should be expanded to meet the needs of ageing populations and persons with disabilities. These services should be person-centred, home- and community-based, structured to promote dignity, autonomy and participation. Policies should be co-designed with care recipients, families and caregivers to ensure inclusive access to healthcare, education, social protection, assistive technologies, transport, and housing.

[12] Caro Sachetti et al., Pathways to Comprehensive Care and Support Systems.

Sustainability

Sustainable care and support systems are essential to building societies that are resilient to economic, social and environmental shocks. Integrating a care lens into climate action means recognising the gendered impacts of climate change and ensuring that adaptation, mitigation, and loss and damage strategies are gender-sensitive and inclusive of caregiving needs.

Investments in climate-resilient care infrastructure – including clean energy, sustainable food systems, affordable housing, clean cooking fuels, public health services, and transport – are critical to ensure the continuity and accessibility of care during environmental shocks. Following commitments by the Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty, such investments must also address the interlinked challenges of care, food insecurity, and poverty, which are often intensified by climate-related crises. Additionally, robust and adaptable social protection systems can mitigate the effects of climate stressors on care work. Care must also be recognised as a driver of inclusive and sustainable economic growth. National accounts and time-use data should capture the economic value of unpaid care work, informing inclusive, care-sensitive policies. Integrating care into employment, industrial, and macroeconomic strategies is key to generating jobs, raising productivity, and reducing poverty

A call to action for G20

It is time for the G20 to formally acknowledge comprehensive care and support systems as essential to human rights and sustainable development.

The G20 should adopt a five-year action plan – with clear goals, strategies, milestones and metrics – that builds on existing commitments, including the G20 Roadmap Towards and Beyond the Brisbane Goal and the Initiative for Early Childhood Development¹³. Enhanced cooperation with international and regional organisations will be key to developing adaptable care frameworks that respond to diverse national contexts and priorities. This plan must foster cross-country coordination and peer exchange on care, moving beyond siloed discussions and towards holistic frameworks. By doing so, the G20 can fully harness care's transformative potential as a driver of social progress, economic growth, gender equality and resilient, inclusive societies.

[13] Caro Sachetti et al., Pathways to Comprehensive Care and Support Systems.

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