

Driving Sustainable Growth Through Care

Seven Specific Measures to Guide the Profile of Investment in Caregiving

Policy brief

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CIPPEC (Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth) is a non-profit, non-partisan independent organization that produces knowledge and offers recommendations to design and implement better public policies that anticipate future dilemmas through applied research, open dialogues and supporting governance. CIPPEC envisions a developed Argentina, with an equitable distribution of income, equal opportunities, solid and efficient public institutions.

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Caregiving is the activity that societies allocate to the development, maintenance, and repair of human capabilities. Everyone requires care, but at certain stages of life—such as childhood, advanced age, when suffering from illnesses, or living with disabilities—it becomes indispensable. Indeed, from the individuals' perspectives, the capability to build meaningful lives and make decisions freely is closely tied to the care they receive at each stage of the life cycle. Therefore, the integration of caregiving into economic frameworks is imperative. In fact, capabilities are increasingly central to the market economy. Currently, 75% of companies' profits come from human capital, with only the remaining 25% directly attributed to financial capital (Gasparini, 2022). However, the link between caregiving, capabilities, and sustainable development remains largely invisible.

Critically, the Human Development Report 2021/22 unveiled a troubling trend: for the first time since its inception in 1990, the Human Development Index saw a decline over two consecutive years. The root cause of this global civilizational crisis lies in the indiscriminate exploitation of the planet's resources, the ongoing undervaluation of caregiving, and the systemic neglect of policies supporting families and caregivers (UNDP, 2022).

In November 2022, the member states of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, which participated in the XV Regional Conference on Women, responded to this crisis with a powerful and guiding concept: the care society. A society that recognizes fragility

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and dependence as inherent aspects of life rather than merely as unintended outcomes of human activity. The care society, where life's sustainability and the essential factors that enable its reproduction to serve as guiding principles of the development model, represents a significant milestone in a debate that feminists have actively engaged in over the past five decades. This paradigm shift acknowledges the vital role of caregiving in shaping societal structures and highlights the need for policies that prioritize the well-being of people and the planet (Tronto, 2020).

The lion's share of caregiving duties within societies falls on women, mainly from within their households, which remains unpaid. The persistent lack of care support services that would help caregiving families cope with the scarcity of time and financial resources constraints, coupled with the disproportionate burden of unpaid caregiving work on women, are among the primary causes contributing to the crisis of social reproduction in contemporary societies.

Faced with this challenge, how can governments harness the potential of caregiving to drive sustainable development? In this article, we present seven specific measures to guide the profile

of investment in caregiving. Collectively, these guidelines aim to strengthen the care society and foster a more equitable and sustainable future. Put simply, they are measures for governments to influence the redistribution of unpaid caregiving work, to narrow the gaps of inequality among social strata, genders, and generations, and to contribute to energizing the economy while recognizing the crucial contribution of caregiving to the development of human capabilities.

Care Support Services.

The institutional provision of childcare, education, and long-term support services for individuals with functional dependencies has proven beneficial for the development, maintenance, and repair of the capabilities of populations with higher dependency. Concurrently, it enables households to transfer part of the caregiving work to the paid sector. Thus, it helps women in caregiving households regain time to continue their education, engage in paid work, and/or take on leisure activities. However, access to these

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services falls short of what is needed. A recent UNICEF study confirms this trend regarding childcare services: only 66% of children aged 3 to 4 in Latin America, less than 50% in Asia, and 25% in Africa have access to this institutional offer (UNICEF, 2023).

Investing in care services has significant potential to stimulate the economy and leverage women's labor force participation. Indeed, a recent study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) indicates that this investment generates three times more employment than investment in construction. Moreover, since they are labor-intensive and historically feminized, expanding the network of such services would positively impact women's participation in the labor market (ILO, 2022).

In summary, enhancing access to care support services can foster economic growth, and promote gender equality, and social inclusion. Governments can address the systemic barriers that hinder women's full participation in the workforce by investing in care services.

Time.

Parental leaves contribute to the emotional and physical well-being of caregivers and children alike. Indeed, parental leaves allow families with young children to have sufficient time to establish lasting and meaningful caregiving bonds without sacrificing income. Consequently, parental leaves create a conducive environment for shared responsibility in caregiving between men and women, as well as between companies, the government, and families.

There is significant room for improvement in this regard. Currently, 64 coun-

tries provide less than the minimum 14 weeks established by the International Labour Organization's Maternity Protection Convention No. 183. Additionally, only 4 out of 10 fathers have access to any form of paternity leave, which varies from two days to several months (ILO, 2022).

Moreover, expanding parental leave policies can have broader societal benefits, including greater gender equality in the workforce and improved child development outcomes. Research suggests that countries with more generous parental leave policies experience higher rates of women's labor force participation and greater parental involvement in childcare. Thus, enhancing access to parental leave can contribute to building more equitable and supportive societies.

Money.

The majority of goods and services needed by caregiving families—such as food, shelter, household equipment, transportation, etc.—are purchased using income earned from the labor market. Money is an essential resource for families to provide quality care. However, the number of households with dependents lacking sufficient income to cover basic food costs is staggering. Currently, almost 700 million people worldwide live in extreme poverty, and children are twice as likely as adults to live in poor households. Indeed, while they represent only 31% of the global population, children constitute more than half of those living in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2023).

Expanding the non-contributory pillar of Social Protection Systems can significantly mitigate income poverty. In Latin America, for example, conditional cash

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transfer programs have been a crucial part of the strategy to alleviate hunger and poverty in recent decades. However, for this policy tool to impact caregiving dynamics within families without reinforcing the gender division of labor, it is essential to coordinate it with the expansion of caregiving support services.

Furthermore, addressing income poverty among caregiving families requires comprehensive social protection measures that go beyond cash transfers. Access to affordable healthcare, housing, and education are also critical components. Coordinating these efforts with initiatives aimed at improving caregiving support services can create a more holistic approach to addressing poverty and inequality within communities.

Care Workers.

Paid caregiving is heavily feminized and remains one of the lowest-paid and most precarious sectors of the economy. Improving working conditions and providing training for care workers are essential pillars towards the consolidation of a systemic caregiving policy. Indeed, investing in training, competency certification, and

professionalization of these workers is key to revitalizing the paid caregiving sector.

Additionally, governments must actively engage in protecting the labor rights of care workers. Incorporating the International Labour Organization's Domestic Workers Convention (C189) into domestic legislation and regulating and promoting digital platforms that connect workers with potential employers are two concrete measures to improve their working conditions.

Moreover, recognizing the contributions of care workers to society is essential for building a more equitable and just society. Governments should prioritize policies that ensure fair wages, access to benefits, and job security for care workers. Strengthening labor protections and promoting collective bargaining rights are vital steps toward creating dignified and sustainable work environments in the caregiving sector.

Systemic Approach.

The caregiving perspective enhances the scope and effectiveness of the aforementioned policies. The paid caregiving sector, childcare services, long-term support services, leaves, and non-contributory financial transfers transform the social organization of caregiving when aligned towards the same purpose and bespoke to the real demands of families. However, authorities leading the consolidation of caregiving policies often struggle to set a common framework that encourages communication and coordination among actors accustomed to working independently.

Technical and financial assistance for mainstreaming the caregiving perspective in social policy is crucial to consolidating an institutional architecture and regula-

tory framework that articulates scattered initiatives, avoids overlap, and fills critical gaps. The District Care System in Bogotá at the local level and the National Care System in Uruguay at the national level are encouraging experiences in this regard.

Additionally, promoting public awareness and understanding of the caregiving perspective is vital for garnering support and fostering collaboration among stakeholders. By prioritizing education and advocacy efforts, governments can foster a culture that values caregiving and recognizes its pivotal role in sustaining healthy communities.

Furthermore, establishing mechanisms for ongoing evaluation and feedback is essential for ensuring the effectiveness and responsiveness of caregiving policies. By regularly assessing outcomes and soliciting input from stakeholders, policymakers can refine strategies and address emerging needs more effectively.

Social Representations.

The disproportionate burden of unpaid caregiving work in households on women, along with the underestimation of the goods and services families need to provide care, is rooted in gender representations that legitimize these practices. Particularly those that conceive of caregiving as an inherent capability of the female condition.

From this perspective, the consolidation of social representations promoting gender equality is a necessary condition to prioritize and make visible the contribution of caregiving to sustainable development. In this sense, mass awareness campaigns are an effective strategy to combat gender stereotypes, promote shared responsibility

between men and women, and foster cooperation among government, businesses, civil society, and families.

In summary, fostering a culture of gender equality requires challenging traditional gender norms and promoting inclusive representations of caregiving as a shared responsibility. Through targeted awareness campaigns and educational initiatives, societies can dismantle stereotypes and empower individuals to participate equitably in caregiving roles.

Evidence.

The evidence provided by data and applied research contributes to positioning caregiving on the public agenda and legitimizing investment in policies aimed at harnessing the potential of caregiving to drive sustainable development. Regular compilation of intersectoral data at the individual and household levels, along with policy analysis, is crucial to identifying best practices and guiding the consolidation of caregiving policies. Moreover, ongoing evaluation and monitoring of caregiving policies ensures their effectiveness and responsiveness to evolving societal needs and challenges.

From this angle, the Basic Care Basket (BCB), a synthetic indicator to estimate the costs of families' caregiving production developed by CIPPEC and Southern Voice with the support of IDRC, is a powerful tool to build evidence and guide policy implementation based on information.

Preliminary results of the BCB for Argentina (2018-2021) indicated that around 60% of households with young children do not have sufficient resources to provide care. Only approximately 40% of households with children and adoles-

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cents demonstrated successful caregiving dynamics. That is, households where all children and adolescents are enrolled in school and do not exhibit developmental difficulties, while also having no individuals engaging in more than seven hours of unpaid work per day. The minimum resources invested by households with successful caregiving dynamics were equivalent to 2.2 poverty lines. One-third of these resources constituted unpaid work. Additionally, 70% of these households received free health and education services from the state. On average, these resources represented 18% of their total investment.

The care society is an alternative to a development model based on the exploitation of natural resources and caregiving that jeopardizes the continuity of life. Recognizing the link between caregiving, capabilities, and sustainable development is key to overcoming the crisis of social reproduction in which our societies are immersed. The seven measures presented in this article aim to guide the necessary investment to consolidate a systemic

caregiving policy that strengthens the paid caregiving sector, provides households with the resources they need to care, and reverses the reproduction of social and gender inequalities. Ultimately, we want to move towards a society committed to sustainable development and prioritizing people and the planet. In essence, transitioning towards a care society prioritizes sustainability and acknowledges the intrinsic value of caregiving in shaping societal progress and well-being for all.

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