A Care Approach to Achieving Gender Justice in Southern African Food Systems in the Context of Climate Change

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AGRA	Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa
AIP	Affordable Input Programme
ARHE	Agrarian Rural Household Economy
CAADP	Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CFS	World Committee on Food Security
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FEE	Feminist Ecological Economics
FISP	Farm Input Subsidy Programmes
FPE	Feminist Political Ecology
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
HLPE	High Level Panel of Experts
IEJ	Institute for Economic Justice
NGO	Non Government Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PMBEJD	Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity
RWA	Rural Women's Assembly
SAFTU	South African Federation of Trade Unions
SAHRC	South African Human Rights Commission
SCIS	Southern Centre for Inequality Studies
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UNDROP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFC	World Future Council

Executive Summary

Care and the care economy is a critical element of climate adaptation and the just transition. Care work, both paid and unpaid, plays a significant role in sustaining food systems, communities, and ecosystems. It includes growing, preparing, and distributing food, collecting water and fuel, caring for children and the ill, and preserving seed and biodiversity. Despite its centrality, care work remains structurally devalued and unsupported in dominant policy and economic systems. The burden of care work in the food system falls disproportionately on rural and working-class women, who are most affected by the compounded crises of food insecurity, climate change, and social inequality. This paper proposes a care-centred approach to transforming food systems in southern Africa that advances gender justice, strengthens climate resilience, and supports ecological sustainability.

Drawing theoretically from Feminist Ecological Economics (FEE) and Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), the paper proceeds from the position that care is both an economic necessity and a political site shaped by power, gender, and class. FPE provides a lens to understand how care labour is distributed and devalued under capitalist and patriarchal systems, affecting particularly black working-class and rural households, where women disproportionately shoulder the unpaid and informal work of growing, preparing, and distributing food. FEE complements this by showing how ecological degradation and climate shocks deepen these care burdens, especially in communities already excluded from land, infrastructure, and income. Together, these perspectives converge on the centrality of care and challenge dominant economic and climate policy logics that treat care as external to "the economy," despite it being essential to sustaining people and ecosystems.

Climate and care in food systems

Climate change is already amplifying gendered care burdens, especially in food provisioning, agricultural labour, and water collection. At the same time, rising costs, unreliable public services, and underinvestment in social infrastructure are pushing more responsibility onto households and informal systems, spaces where women already bear the brunt of labour. Dominant responses around climate, gender and food systems tend to insufficiently address these structural pressures and overlook the centrality of care or treat it as a private issue. This deepens inequalities while limiting the potential for transformative adaptation.

Through ecological pressures, such as the climate crisis, there will be an intensification of care work that can contribute to increasing “time poverty” for women, limiting their ability to access income opportunities, and compromising their health. Nutritional sacrifices within households often fall on women and children, exacerbating gendered health disparities. Informal food traders, most of whom are women, face precarious working conditions, especially as heatwaves, infrastructure collapse, or food safety regulations disrupt their livelihoods. These stresses are also linked to rising gender-based

violence, with women becoming more vulnerable to abuse as economic dependence, displacement, and social instability increase.

These dynamics are shaped through a context where historically colonial and post-colonial development models subordinated agriculture to industrialisation, built economies on racialised accumulation models, and drove labour migration away from rural areas. As men left to seek work in mines or cities, women became the primary providers of food, care, and subsistence farming, often with minimal support. Neoliberal reforms and austerity policies further eroded public care infrastructure, shifting the burden of social reproduction onto families, especially women, without addressing structural inequalities in land access, wages, and services.

Most food and climate policies in the region remain technocratic, productivity-focused, and gender-blind. Industrial agricultural models such as AGRA and national input subsidy schemes often reinforce private sector control, weaken resilience in smallholder systems, and insufficiently address inequalities in the gendered burdens of paid and unpaid labour. Despite women's central role in food provision and aspects like seed sovereignty, policy and law tend to prioritise commodified approaches, seen in the marginalisation of farmer-managed systems. Climate-smart and adaptation strategies also rarely account for how care work is impacted.

Advancing a care approach

A care approach reorients food systems around meeting human needs, fostering ecological regeneration, and distributing care work more fairly. It emphasises investment in public services and community infrastructure, support for agroecological practices, and the redistribution of labour and power. Recognising care as both economic and ecological work challenges the separation between production and reproduction, and centres the knowledge, labour, and priorities of those who sustain food systems and communities. The paper calls for a shift in how food systems are imagined and governed: away from siloed, efficiency-driven models, and toward approaches that recognise and support care as both a social and ecological act. Supporting care work in food systems means reducing its intensity, redistributing its burden, and resourcing it adequately. The following principles are suggested as key areas of policy intervention to strengthen care in southern African food systems in conditions of climate change:

1. Reduce and redistribute care work between institutions and genders, including through public investment, accessible services, and clean energy.
2. Recognise and support food-related care work in policy and law, including care embedded in seed saving, provisioning, and agroecological practices.
3. Ensure stronger support for agroecology, guided by principles of social justice and ecological regeneration, while avoiding increased burdens on already-marginalised women.
4. Promote meaningful political participation of carers, food producers, and grassroots women, not just as consultees but as co-designers of policy.
5. Ensure supportive economic and fiscal policy for care in food systems, including rejecting austerity and investing in care infrastructure to ensure climate and gender justice in southern African food systems.

A care-centred food system is not a peripheral concern, but is essential to sustaining life, rebuilding ecological relationships, and confronting intersecting crises of inequality and climate change. Building it requires revaluing the labour that feeds and nurtures communities, and ensuring that those who perform it are not left to carry the weight alone.

1. Introduction: Just transition, care, and the food system

Care and the care economy is a critical element of climate adaptation and the just transition. Care work concerns the labour (paid and unpaid) of caregiving, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, the elderly, and the ill. Care is also a *value* that seeks to fulfil needs and strengthen social connections (Kasan, 2023). The care economy refers to the paid and unpaid activities involved in providing care, but is also a mode of analysis that recognises the economic contribution made by care work, where the economic significance of such work is routinely under-recognised or under-valued (*ibid*). Care and the care economy are both impacted by climate change and will shape climate outcomes. The food system and the provision of adequate nutrition is underpinned by much care work, and is severely exposed to by climate impacts.

Southern Africa is a climate change hotspot, meaning it is more exposed to climate change than the global average, is likely to heat at double the global average rate, and natural and human systems have less ability to cope with the intensity of these changes (Scholes et al. 2020). This has drastic consequences for food security in the region. However, as Tansey (2024: 3) has noted, "the link between care work, climate change, and environmental sustainability remains invisible to many policy makers". This largely holds true in relation to food systems in southern Africa as well, where a predominant policy concern tends to be raising productivity through improved technology and external inputs, from which other benefits are expected to flow. Strengthening care in these food systems has gendered implications, but both gender and care are neglected policy areas.

In this paper, we argue that current and anticipated climate change impacts on food systems in southern Africa will intensify the burden of care in affected working class and poor communities, in particular affecting the paid and unpaid labour of rural and urban working class women. A gendered and climate just approach to food systems policy making in southern Africa is necessary, and we propose that strengthening care and the care economy in food systems can make a critical contribution to community resilience and a just transition. A just transition refers to shifting economic sectors to sustainable practices in ways that are socially inclusive and equitable. Because southern African food systems are highly vulnerable to climate change impacts, adaptation to strengthen resilience in food systems forms a core component of the just transition. However, adaptation requires not only technical but social changes to achieve human resilience, key to which is gender justice (Baloyi et al., 2022). We therefore propose key policy elements to support a care economy approach to realising the right to food and nutrition in conditions of climate change, which encompasses interventions in the food system linked with those in related sectors like health and fiscal policy.

Part of the importance of a care approach to food systems policy in the context of climate change is that it helps us move beyond individualising women in understanding climate impacts (MacGregor et al., 2022). Such an individualised approach is reflected in mainstream and neoliberal agricultural development approaches, which consequently focus on individual solutions to gender inequality, such as increasing women farmers' productivity through providing them with increased technology and 'improved' inputs. A care approach points us to social relations within communities (including patriarchy), to their position in the wider class and power structure, and to systems and infrastructures of care as key to shaping the distribution of food system vulnerabilities to climate change.

This working paper is structured as follows. The second section outlines the theoretical framework that we use to consider gender justice in the food system under climate change, informed by Feminist Ecological Economics, Feminist Political Ecology, and care, which are linked to a food systems approach. The third section considers how climate change impacts on the paid and unpaid care work of working people in southern Africa, and women in particular; and we briefly consider to what degree policy across southern Africa adequately addresses these impacts from a gender justice perspective. In light of this, the fourth section suggests key elements to advance a care approach to food systems policy making in southern Africa, that position supporting and enhancing care work as a key lever of gender-just climate adaptation in southern African food systems. The final section offers some concluding thoughts.

2. Theoretical framework: Feminist political ecology, care, and the food system

This section outlines the theory and conceptual framework guiding the study of climate change, gender, and food systems in southern Africa. It discusses feminist theories of climate and environment, drawn from Feminist Ecological Economics (FEE) and Feminist Political Ecology (FPE). FEE contributes an emphasis on the critical role of social reproduction and care work in sustaining communities and the environment. Feminist Political Ecology emphasises the power dynamics related to patriarchy, class, race, politics, and gender in climate and environmental sustainability work and discourses. We suggest that insights from these approaches point to the importance of a care approach regarding both people and nature in food system policy making to advance climate and gender justice. A care approach is not only about women, but given structural and gender inequalities, is an important component of gender justice. Furthermore, transforming food systems has been highlighted as a critical intervention to secure the right to food and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of zero hunger. A care approach to food system policy making can contribute to this transformation by encouraging the development of caring economies to ensure equity and justice in the face of climate change.

2.1. Feminist Ecological Economics, Feminist Political Ecology, and care

Feminist Ecological Economics (FEE) is a branch of ecological economics, which grew out of attempts to achieve a greater incorporation of ecological issues into economics through wider disciplinary integration. Both ecological economics and FEE approaches were developed from the late 1980s as ecologists grew increasingly concerned that the pace of economic growth, and particularly the expansion of neoliberalism, was accelerating ecological collapse (IEJ, 2022). Ecological economics is defined as a "transdisciplinary field of study that addresses the relationships between ecosystems and economic systems in the broadest sense" that "differs from both conventional economics and conventional ecology in terms of breadth of its perceptions of the problem, and the importance it attaches to environment-economy connections" (Costanza, 1991:5-6). Ecological economics thus sought to integrate insights from ecology into economics, and to infuse ecology with stronger economic dimensions, given the integral relation between the two. Within this school, socio-ecological economics sought to integrate theories and knowledge from the social sciences and ecology into an inter-disciplinary approach, which resulted in redefining the objective of the economy, and the focus of the economics discipline, away from a singular focus on growth to a more concerted focus on sustained human wellbeing on the basis of maintaining the health and functioning of the earth's ecosystems (IEJ, 2022).

Feminist Ecological Economics (FEE) deepens socio-ecological economics approaches and perspectives by drawing on feminist schools of thought such as feminist economics, Feminist Political Ecology, and ecofeminism (IEJ, 2022). These foreground how care work, and social reproduction work more broadly, is an essential underpinning of the economy. FEE links these insights on gender with economics through the concept of 'biophysical reproduction', which locates social reproduction activities within ecological systems, such as by considering the implications of patterns of natural resource access and ecological change for forms of care work often undertaken by women (Perkins, 2021). FEE also critiques market valuation methods (grounded in neoclassical economics), for reducing the complex and ongoing contributions of care work and ecosystems to narrow economic terms. Market valuation methods attempt to 'price in' the environmental and social costs of capitalism, but in doing so, they often distort or undervalue the essential, life-sustaining roles that care and nature play in both society and the economy. Instead, FEE foregrounds the importance of the household and community as important centres for the provision of basic needs, rather than through profit-driven, market-based exchange. These spaces embody social and ecological values such as solidarity, sustainability, and stewardship of resources, which are often overlooked in conventional economic models focused on competition, growth, and monetary value. FEE centres community provisioning systems as able to not only protect communities from market fluctuations but also transform economies, reduce wastage of resources and food, minimise the overexploitation of resources, and advance local solutions that are responsive to their context. We will return to this point of community-centred focus in relation to care, the state, and the market below.

Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) complements the approach of FEE by bringing political economy more strongly into the study of environmental change (IEJ, 2022). FEE expands the economic conception of environmental change and gender through wider disciplinary integration, while FPE understands gender in relation to a deeper analysis of class, race, culture, and national and ethnic identity, and the possibilities of deeper social, political, and economic transformations (Rocheleau et al., 1996). An important basis of the field of political ecology was research in peasant studies and Marxist theories of development which flourished in the era of decolonisation in the Third World. It therefore emerged from concerns with power, the role of the state, peasant and class relations in the countryside, social mobilisation, and how distribution of and access to natural resources is shaped by power and inequality (Bryant, 1992). In short, political ecology is the study of nature and power relationships, viewing nature and society as dialectically constituted: social and economic relations are central to shaping ecological systems.

FPE has also responded to some essentialist aspects of ecofeminism that tended to position women and nature as homogenous victims of patriarchy and Western culture, depicting women as close to nature in contrast to men (Gonda, 2019). FPE focuses on patriarchy and gendered power relations that are shaped in inseparable conjunction with wider race, class, and ecological relations. Like FEE, FPE includes attention on the local level, but lays a stronger emphasis on power relations in communities and households, such as in terms of gender, accumulation, and relationships to the state. It also holds a commitment to feminist epistemology and questions dominant practices of knowledge and authority. It dissects dominant processes of policy development and practices in relation to climate change from a gendered perspective and shows how they can exacerbate existing inequalities. In turn, it values local practices and knowledge related to ecology, care, economic organisation, and

farming, and advances more empowering and participatory research processes (Elmherst, 2015). Overall, FPE argues that the current economic system is unjust and unsustainable, and advances a transformational agenda to shift the economic system.

In this vein, Nancy Fraser (2022) unpacks the contradictions of capitalism in Cannibal Capitalism, a FPE analysis that enables us to 'expand our conception' of global capitalism as a social rather than only an economic system. That is, it does not only structure relationships of production, but also the wider social relations of society, including the activities and conditions on which it depends – but which purportedly lie outside capitalism's realm. One of Fraser's core concepts is that capitalism is cannibalistic, referring to capitalism's tendency to deprive nature and human labourers of what they need to function, so that it can sustain and grow itself. The major contradiction here is that, what capitalism cannibalises, it also depends on to reproduce itself - the care work necessary for humans to be made available as wage labour, ecosystems that supply raw materials, and the wealth it grabs through expropriation from various categories of working people. Whereas exploitation refers to the extraction of surplus value (the source of profit) from workers through the capital-labour relationship in production, expropriation refers to the forcible seizure of the wealth of subjugated peoples - land, water, seed, minerals, energy and, indeed, public services through privatisation (Fraser, 2022; Shivji, 2017).

Furthermore, Fraser (2022) suggests that rather than capitalism simply spreading one of its core logics - commodification - to these areas, it depends on a degree of non-commodification, such as relying on unpaid care labour in households and communities to secure cheap wages. This non-commodification can also take place through public provision, such as social welfare, public services, and environmental protection. In this sense then, the capitalist system is structurally dependent on dividing commodity production from social reproduction. Social reproduction is a key contribution of care work, which is also "absolutely necessary... to the functioning of capitalism" (Fraser 2022: 9). By treating nature and care as infinite resources for accumulation, capitalism has caused an ecological crisis and a crisis of care. Yet as critical bases of human and planetary life, the logic of non-commodification in these realms also makes them important arenas to expand and protect in the face of capitalism, such as the care economy.

In this paper we bring the insights of FEE and FPE together around their convergence on care. From within the economics discipline, FEE's important contribution is to challenge the prioritisation of economic growth as the driver of development and wellbeing and assert the need to more directly achieve sustainability and wellbeing of humans and the rest of nature through a host of policy interventions related to welfare, the future of work, state economic policy, the care economy, and linking health and ecology. FEE frames a sustainable economy as one that neither destroys its ecological foundations nor its capacity for social and physical reproduction into the future. This implies supporting social agency and policy in the arenas that capitalism tends to cannibalise, to strengthen them in their own right and to amplify their contribution to human wellbeing, decent work conditions, healthy ecologies, and democracy. While FPE adopts a deeper political critique of capitalism, gender, race, and class relations, it converges with FEE in its promotion of care as a critical site to confront the destructive logics of dominant economic systems. It promotes the significance of care as a key pillar around which to locate transformed economic and social relations, for human wellbeing and to address the ecological crisis.

Care can broadly be understood as the provision of support and assistance that ensure the social reproduction of individuals, households, and communities (Kasan, 2023). Kasan (2024) identifies three principal aspects defining care. Firstly, it encompasses the physical practices of providing the care humans need at specific stages of life (such as children and the elderly) or specific to particular physical or mental conditions. It thus includes activities like childcare, cooking, caring for the elderly, and teaching. Secondly, it encompasses the social relationships between people, households and institutions through which care takes place. Thirdly, care can also be considered as an ethical or moral imperative, and so is a value that guides human interaction. In this sense, it can also be seen as an ethic to potentially apply to shaping economic activity, human-nature interactions, and the structuring of institutions and systems.

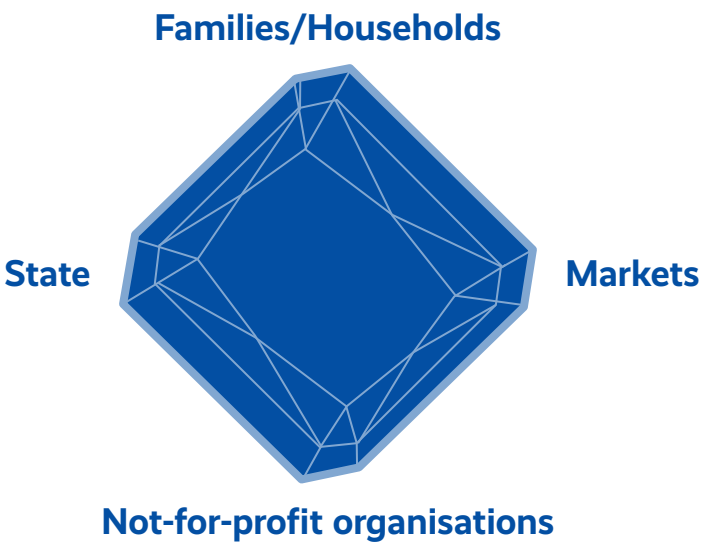
Furthermore, it is important to conceptualise care from an ecological standpoint. Fisher and Tronto thus describe care as a "species activity" to maintain ourselves and our world, including the environment, as a livable space and so is life-sustaining in this broad sense (in Phalatse et al., 2024: 11). At the same time, climate change impacts have the potential to negatively impact care work and so add to the 'crisis of care'. However, Phalatse et al. (2024) also position care, and strengthening policy and financial support for care work, as critical for climate adaptation, both in terms of its contribution to human health and resilience and to sustainable economies and healthy ecosystems. In this sense, strengthening care economies is a critical lever of adaptation to climate change.

However, under capitalism, care activities are often made invisible and relegated to the 'non-productive' or 'non-economic realm', so undervaluing the contribution of care work to the economy, society, and ecosystems, and further contributing to the crisis of care. As such, the notion of the care economy highlights the centrality of care work, and refers to "a complex ecosystem that encompasses activities, labour, and social relations aimed at supporting and maintaining the physical, social, mental, and emotional well-being of all people" (Kasan, 2024: 2). A distinction often made is that between paid and unpaid care work. Paid care work can take the form of paid services within or external to the household, such as nannies paid to look after children in the household, or nurses performing paid care work in the public or private health sectors. Unpaid care labour occurs predominantly within the home, and includes tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for family members. However, Kasan (2024) also emphasises that the often simplistic distinction between paid and unpaid care work is limited in capturing the scope and complexity of the care economy. Rather, such work should be situated in the broader political economy that has shaped the manifestation of care in a particular context, including its relationship to broader economic histories and structures, and evolving gender relations and norms.

The distribution, nature, and quality of care work is thus context-specific. To analyse the distribution of care work, Razavi (2007) has conceptualised the care diamond (Figure 1). The care diamond maps out the distribution of care work among key actors and institutions within the macro political space (Peng, 2019), and therefore how society arranges and finances care. The care diamond comprises households, the state, private sector, and non-government institutions, (such as community-based organisations, local collectives, and NGOs). Each contributes to the care economy in "distinct yet interconnected ways, collectively forming a complex web of relations that sustain the well-being of individuals and communities" (Kasan, 2023: 4). Within the care diamond, there is significant overlap

in care responsibilities; for example, the provision of state welfare and care facilities alongside a role played by NGOs and the private sector.

Figure 1: The care diamond



Source: Kasan (2023)

The arrangement of these institutions in providing care is shaped by history, power, and economic structures in at least two senses. Firstly, according to Peng (2019), the care diamond also shows the institutional and policy configurations in society across various political regimes. It can, for example, show a political dispensation that relies more on market solutions by reducing funding to state provided care. In southern Africa, the arrangement of care has been shaped integrally by dynamics of race and accumulation, manifested in multiple ways, including racially unequal access to state- and market-provided care, strong racial patterns in who constitutes the care labour force and for whom they labour, and the extent to which the unpaid care is shifted onto the household and Black women in particular. Secondly, it is important to note that the role of the state differs from the role of families or the market. Through its policies, the state shapes caregiving by either adequate provisioning for state-supported care or shifting the burden onto families, communities, and the NGO sector, for example through austerity (Kasan, 2024).

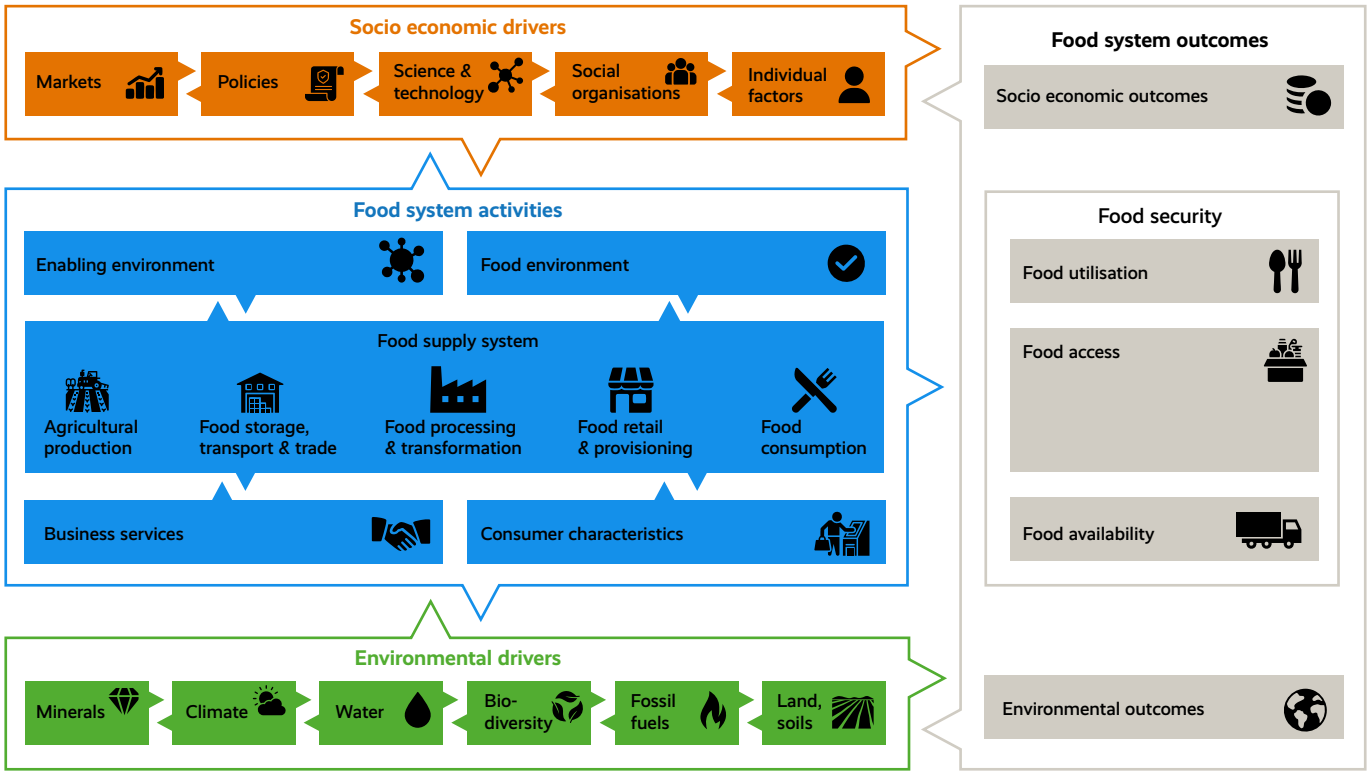
We therefore adopt the perspective that care work involves the labour humans perform to reproduce human beings and social relations as well as ecological conditions. Thus, supporting and enhancing care in food systems is potentially an important element of achieving gender just and climate resilient food systems, but requires contending with the roles of, and the dynamics within and between, the state, households, and the market.

2.2. Care and food systems

The food system refers to the range of actors and their interlinked activities in the production, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal of food products originating from agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, as depicted in Figure 2. It also involves the economic, societal and natural environments in

which they are embedded (FAO, 2018). A food systems approach thus means considering not only the activities in the food system, but the elements that shape what any particular food system looks like, how it functions, the nature of activities, and the impact the food system has on those elements. The food system thus has a significant impact on the environment (such as through waste, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and land use practices), but it is also shaped by environmental factors, such as soil conditions, rainfall, climate change, and the kinds of ecological conditions that humans recreate through the systems of agriculture they use.

Figure 2: Graphic depiction of the food system



Source: Van Berkum et al 2018

Figure 2 provides a broad schema of a food system structure and processes. From a political ecology perspective, the character of these elements is shaped by power, interests, and contestations linked to local, national, and global dynamics. Food systems include the actors shaping how the system functions, such as farmer organisations or large corporate actors. It is therefore also shaped by class interests and power, often linked to broader economic dynamics. The nature of a food system and, importantly, its outcomes, are shaped by policy as well: policies and standards of influential private actors like corporate retailers that shape conditions in their supply chains, and especially government policy, both those specific to the food system (like agricultural and food system policy) and those intersecting with aspects of the food system (such as wider economic and social policy). In turn, policy is shaped through power relations. Particular actors (often aligned with certain class interests), have greater ability to influence policy in favour of their material and/or ideological interests than others. Environmental dynamics of the food system also depend on factors like whether the system is characterised by industrial agriculture or more agroecological practices, which in turn is partly an outcome of power, both in production and in terms of policy influence. These all shape how a food system functions, and what the experiences of various actors in and around it are. In combination

they shape the food security and nutrition, socio-economic, and environmental outcomes of food systems.

Care and the care economy already permeate food systems in southern Africa in a number of ways. First, food provisioning at the household level, which implicates the 'food consumption' and 'food system outcomes' parts of the food system diagram above, is an important aspect of care work. Depending on context, this can involve producing food, collecting water for irrigation and cooking, collecting firewood for cooking, purchasing food, and the act of cooking, all predominantly performed by women in southern Africa. Other aspects of care work, such as childcare and caring for the sick, also impact on the care work of food provisioning (see Bezner Kerr, 2005). Similarly in non-farming working class communities, women tend to be predominantly responsible for accessing and preparing food at the household level (PMBEJD, 2025), and at community level (such as in the form of community kitchens and urban gardening, underpinned by ethics of care) (Paganini et al., 2025).

Second, in southern Africa outside of South Africa, most food production still happens on smallholder farms, which are typically oriented towards household subsistence and/or more localised markets. This positions such farming as important care work, in that it is work oriented towards reproducing human beings, is embedded in and reproduces social connections and relations, and is often informed by an ethics of care, for both people and the natural elements in which farming takes place (Olivier and Heinecken, 2016; Vibert, 2016). Third, then, farming labour often involves care work that reproduces the natural conditions for farming to take place, such as the ethic and labour of care that goes into selecting, saving, and replanting seed, which prominently involves women, is closely embedded in social connections, and is crucial for human nutrition, agricultural biodiversity, and climate resilience (Graddy-Lovelace, 2020; Greenberg, 2019).

Fourth, existing care-related policy, such as health, education, and social policy, indirectly shape food systems and their outcomes. For example, public health policy may seek to encourage certain dietary behaviours. Or in terms of social policy, social transfers in South Africa have influenced food system outcomes in terms of food security. While the level of social grants is insufficient to solve the country's far-reaching food insecurity levels and economic inequality, they have helped to stave off economic and nutritional devastation for millions of recipient households (Marais, 2011; IEJ, 2024).

The challenge, therefore, is to strengthen the transformative thrust of care in food systems for a just transition. As both a practice and a value, applying care to the food system speaks to fairness in the work of food provision but also the values that define our food system. In line with our approach to care (Kasan, 2023), care defines a food system as one that more directly fulfills human needs, through which social relationships are strengthened, supports social bonds, and is oriented to achieving the right to food and ecological integrity. From a policy perspective, this allows us to assess whether state policies and practices on food systems sufficiently exhibit care, for both people and the rest of nature.

Food systems are a key interface between human activity and the rest of nature. They are embedded in ecosystems, shape ecosystems (often for the worse), but are also a site through which ecological care is enacted. However, in the last century the industrialisation and globalisation of food systems have advanced as a dominant trend. As a practice, the industrialisation of food systems has enabled spectacular productivity increases and allowed for the mass provision of 'cheap' food, but these

apparent gains have come at significant ecological, social, and human health costs: the depletion of soil health, the loss of (agricultural) biodiversity, the pollution of soils, waterways and air with fertiliser and pesticide run-off and by-products, climate change, and rising non-communicable diseases (Montgomery and Biklé 2022). This industrialisation of food systems is also underpinned by a particular ethic: separation, control, simplification, standardisation, and technology fetishism (Food Systems Primer, no date).

A care approach to food systems thus entails moving beyond a growth and productivity paradigm to achieving the right to food, to informing policy with a care ethic for humans and nature, ensuring just burdens of labour in the food system, and so supporting practices that care for nature and directly meet human needs for nutrition as well as social connections. This ethic and its contribution to food systems transition is reflected in the 13 principles of agroecology developed by the World Committee for Food Security's (CFS) High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE, 2019). These principles (reflected in Box 1) include social values and diets, fairness, connectivity, participation, land and natural resource governance, soil health, and biodiversity, all of which are aligned with a care approach for people and the rest of nature.

Box 1: World Committee for Food Security's (CFS) High Level Panel of Experts 13 principles of agroecology in light of its contribution to food systems transition (HLPE, 2019: 41)

1. **Recycling:** Preferentially use local renewable resources and close as far as possible resource cycles.
2. **Input reduction:** Reduce or eliminate dependency on external inputs.
3. **Soil health:** Secure and enhance soil health and functioning for improved plant growth
4. **Animal health:** Ensure animal health and welfare.
5. **Biodiversity:** Maintain and enhance diversity of species and functional biodiversity.
6. **Synergies:** Enhance positive ecological interactions, productivity, and resilience.
7. **Economic diversification:** Diversify on-farm incomes for improved resilience and sustainable livelihoods.
8. **Co-creation of knowledge:** Foster co-creation and horizontal sharing of knowledge including local and scientific innovation.
9. **Social values and diets:** Build food systems based on the culture, identity, tradition, social and gender equity of local communities.
10. **Fairness:** Support dignified and fair livelihoods for all actors in the food system.
11. **Connectivity:** Ensure proximity and trust between producers and consumers.
12. **Land and natural resource governance:** Strengthen institutional arrangements to secure equitable access and tenure.
13. **Participation:** Encourage broad and inclusive participation in decision-making processes.

Similarly, strengthening the care economy in relation to food systems also requires a systemic view from production to consumption through which to address hunger and malnutrition in ecologically sustainable ways. This means coordinating institutions of care, such as in the care diamond, with the objective of zero hunger. For example, this was achieved by the city of Belo Horizonte in Brazil, which achieved zero hunger through a public policy-driven approach that coordinated actors in the local food system (including relevant private sector actors) in line with the programme and its objectives (zero hunger, rather than simple commodity growth). The city procured food from smallholder farmers that were supported to employ ecological production methods, coordinated existing institutions such as public health into a role in the programme (such as through free health assessments, food supplements, or full daily feeding made available to children, nursing or expecting mothers, and the elderly), and created new institutions of care to structure the local food system, such as people's restaurants (with universal access to avoid stigmatisation of hunger and usage of the restaurants), support for caring environmental practices in food production, subsidised food selling in existing fresh produce markets, and street corner kiosks to sell low-cost nutritious food close to homes (WFC, 2009; Lappé, 2019). The programme eased the care burden on households, and women in particular, by shifting greater responsibility to a particular relationship between the state and market, to help secure the critical element of nutrition in the social reproduction of households.

Care and the care economy therefore potentially provide an approach through which to address the conditions of paid and unpaid labour in production and in the household, to shift away from ecologically harmful practices in existing food systems, to generate and support more ecologically regenerative practices, and arrange institutions and political processes around the food system to shape elements of its functioning and outcomes. Key to this is to ensure better conditions of paid and unpaid care work in the food system. The next section, therefore, considers some of the key climate change impacts on rural and urban working-class women in food systems in southern Africa, as a basis for discussing key points of care-oriented interventions for gender justice in food systems.

3. Climate change impacts: Paid and unpaid care work in the food system

This section briefly outlines the impacts of climate change on food systems in southern Africa. It then considers some of the historical and structural factors that have shaped the context of care work and the care economy in southern Africa, and through which the gendered experiences of climate change impacts will be shaped. It then unpacks some of the key climate change impacts on largely gendered burdens of care work.

3.1. Climate change and food systems in southern Africa

Southern Africa is a climate change hotspot, and will heat at roughly double the global average. This has significant ramifications for food systems, food security, and nutrition. Southern Africa has already been contending with climate change impacts, and these patterns will continue to intensify into the future. A prominent pattern associated with climate change in the region is increased heating and droughts. Outside of South Africa, about 90% of agriculture in southern Africa is rain-fed, and there will be a decrease in mean annual rainfall of 10-20%, but with variability in the region. There may be slight increases in rainfall in the south-east, particularly in central and northern Mozambique, together with higher overall rainfall variability. The overall trend is that the interior of the region has become drier, and this will persist. However, there will also be increased heat waves, drought, and floods (Vincent et al., 2013; Ayanlade, 2022; Archer et al., 2018). Climate change will also lead to greater occurrence of extreme weather, such as cyclones. For example, the eastern region of southern Africa increasingly contends with marine heat waves resulting from rapid surface-temperature increases in the Indian Ocean. These lead to extreme weather events such as Tropical Cyclones Idai and Kenneth in 2019, which affected around 3 million people in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, and around 800 000 hectares of crops were destroyed (Refugees International, 2019).

Agriculture and food systems in southern Africa will be notably impacted by these changing weather patterns as a result of climate change, where on average 60% of the population works primarily in agriculture (Clapp et al., 2018), and hunger is already highest amongst these groups. A key impact is lower production. Already the production of staple crops like maize, wheat, and sorghum has decreased because of climate change (Mbow et al., 2018). Even at 1.5°C heating above pre-industrial levels, a large decrease in maize cropping area is projected (Ayanlade et al., 2022). Changed weather and habitat conditions also create grounds for increased crop pests and diseases, which will affect yield and output (Hoegh-Guldberg, 2018). Increased heating can also reduce the nutritional and caloric quality of many crops (Cloete, 2023; Ayanlade et al., 2022). Combined with other geopolitical and supply shocks, climate impacts also increase food prices due to reduced supply. The severity of

climate impacts was illustrated by the recent drought that struck Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Malawi. In Zambia, in the 2023/24 season, crops failed on one million hectares of the 2.2 million hectares planted. Zimbabwe lost 60% of its maize crop and Zambia's was down by 50% from the previous year (Sihlobo, 2025). This left 6.6 million people in need by June 2024, and 1.4 million households requiring food assistance (WFP, 2024). It also led to rising white maize prices in South Africa, a key staple food, due to reduced local supply as a result of increased exports to Zambia and Zimbabwe (Sihlobo, 2025).

3.2. Economic and historical context to care, food systems and women's labour in southern Africa

The human experiences of these climate impacts on the food system in southern Africa are mediated through prevailing socioeconomic conditions, state policies, and social relations such as gender relations. While dominant agricultural development strategies explicitly or implicitly assume a static conception of gender inequality between women and men in the target context, it is important to adopt a more dynamic, systemic view. As mentioned above, key to this is understanding some of the historical mechanisms that shaped the context and conditions of women's labour, and deepened the exploitation of women, particularly in the context of food systems.

First, post-colonial, state-led development strategies deepened commodification in many aspects of life (Harris and Scully, 2015), and subordinated agriculture to industrialisation. In many postcolonial contexts then, overall, agriculture was 'disarticulated' with national development: the cash crop for export sector was prioritised, while the rest of smallholder agriculture was largely subordinated to the imperative of industrialisation and so not developed sufficiently to significantly raise rural living standards through agriculture (Makina and moyo, 2016). At the same time, often with only a very small number of better-off rural producers benefitting from existing rural development strategies, rural class formation and polarisation heightened, with the majority of producers experiencing marginalisation and impoverishment (see Cliffe and Moorsom, 1979; Mamdani, 1987).

Second, in much of southern Africa, this helped form a 'push' factor to labour migration to the South African mines as well as to the urban centres within countries. The diversion of men's labour away from household agriculture towards earning wages mostly insufficient to fully reproduce themselves as well as their rural households, raised Black rural women's unpaid care labour burden for housework, agriculture, and caring for children, the elderly, and the sick (Bezner Kerr, 2005; Cliffe and Moorsom, 1979). The combination of rural agricultural marginalisation and the migrant labour system/urbanisation thus underpinned an important historical shift: the loading of reproductive labour onto rural women and the withdrawal of 'productive' labour from agricultural production (Cliffe and Moorsom, 1979). The migrant labour system thus significantly re-shaped the gendered distribution of productive and reproductive labour in agrarian households, underpinned by a racial model of accumulation.

Third, internal and external limits on the post-colonial, state-led development project tended to increase peasants' and workers' dependence on markets for social reproduction through commodification processes, while failing to generate the conditions for full incorporation into formal wage labour or sufficient incomes through smallholder agricultural development. This supported the trend towards

fragmented, multiple, and informal livelihoods by rural and urban working people to secure social reproduction (Harris and Scully, 2015). By deregulating markets and removing social protections, neoliberal structural adjustment policies worsened trends like inadequate state provision of care and welfare into crises, including by hollowing out public resources available for care (Phalatse et al., 2024) - that is, capital's cannibalisation of care and ecologies.

Therefore, fourth, food production and consumption issues amongst working people must be situated in the context of this livelihood fragmentation. The forms of national development shaped through 'disarticulation' and integration into the global economy mean that most southern African economies cannot provide for the full reproductive needs of populations through wage or self-employment, and so retain prevalent agrarian structures where agriculture and access to natural resources remain a critical source of livelihoods for working people's households (Ossome, 2021). To some extent the migrant labour system may have increased women's control over the productive process, but under highly marginalised conditions, and so were also forced to rely on a number of sources of resources to survive (Cliffe and Moorsom, 1979), as discussed in the point above. As Ossome (2021) argues, these multiple livelihood strategies are underpinned by gendered labour to ensure the social reproduction of the household. Rural agricultural production and urban food provisioning, and particularly women's labour, must thus be seen in terms of its linkages to these wider processes and the overall strategies of reproduction undertaken by households.

Fifth, is the question of industrialisation in food systems. The South African food system is predominantly industrialised and large-scale. In the rest of southern Africa, most food produced still comes from smallholder farmers, but development policies tend to be biased towards industrialising agriculture in order to raise productivity as the main means to address food security, often framed by the notion of the green revolution (Swanepoel, 2016). This is typified by Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA),[1] which operates in 15 African countries. AGRA emphasises the private sector provision of technologies and inputs such as artificial fertiliser and 'improved' and genetically modified seed to raise productivity. In addition, it promotes the reform of policy frameworks in the interests of greater private sector control and the commercialised growth of African food systems (Karas, 2025). This reflects what we have previously called the 'market-centred' approach to food system transition (Bennie et al. 2023), which emphasises raising women farmers' productivity through provision of private sector inputs as a key plank of addressing gender inequality.

The significance of industrialisation in food systems extends to the urban front as well. Urbanisation is often associated with the 'nutrition transition': easier availability and higher incomes allow for greater consumption of processed, high salt, fat and sugar, and animal protein foods (Spires et al., 2016). However, the conditions of urbanisation in much of southern Africa are seldom characterised by high incomes for the majority of working people. Low incomes and rising cost pressures for factors like energy and transport, paired with the kinds of foods provided relatively cheaply by the industrial food system, often lead working class women, who tend to be most responsible for grocery purchasing, to prioritise bulky, starchy foods before more nutrient dense foods like vegetables and fruits (PMBEJD,

[1] AGRA used to be the acronym for Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, but AGRA is now its name after the green revolution part was dropped in response to criticisms of the damages caused by the green revolution (Karas, 2025; see Kindi et al, 2020).

2025). The comparative affordability and ease of preparation of processed and ultra-processed foods provided by industrial food systems, together with targeted marketing, also enhances their over-consumption by low-income households, with significant health consequences (Frank et al., 2024; Igumbor et al., 2012).

Factors like these tend to combine to reproduce, first, the increased burden of care work on women in the food system; and second, a more individualising approach of economic empowerment of women, such as through increasing their agricultural productivity, which fail to transform the relations and distribution of care work (MacGregor et al., 2022). In this context, in the next section we turn to briefly unpacking some of the climate change impacts on care work and the conditions affecting working women in the food system in southern Africa.

3.3. Gendered dimensions of climate change and food systems in southern Africa

Climate change is potentially deepening existing inequalities in southern African food systems, where women already carry a disproportionate share of both paid and unpaid care work. These systems, shaped by historical processes of colonial dispossession, the migrant labour regime, and industrialised agricultural development, have long rendered women's contributions invisible. Yet, in the face of mounting climate disruptions, women, especially those in rural and working-class communities, are bearing the compounded burdens of managing care responsibilities, sustaining household nutrition, coping with food price volatility, and negotiating limited access to productive resources. In this section, we briefly unpack some of the gendered impacts of climate change on working women in the food system, with a particular focus on how climate-induced pressures manifest through care work, access to and control over resources, food security and health outcomes, and exposure to gender-based violence (GBV).

The intensification of unpaid care work is one of the most immediate impacts of climate-related disruption. In many parts of southern Africa, climate change will make water, energy, and arable land more difficult to access, pushing women to spend longer hours on routine tasks like water and fuelwood collection, food preparation, and caregiving. During the 2016 drought in Mozambique, women who previously spent two hours a day collecting water were forced to spend up to six hours on this task due to the drying up of local sources (CARE, 2016). As climate variability leads to lower crop yields and ecological degradation, the labour required to maintain smallholder plots, typically managed by women, also increases. This includes more time spent on irrigation, pest control, and soil maintenance (Bezner Kerr, 2005). Simultaneously, falling agricultural productivity and rising input costs can further drive women into insecure off-farm work to supplement household incomes. However, because of the generally low quality of work available outside the household, such responses generally increase the triple burden of care work, subsistence production, and income generation (see Ossome, 2021).

Gendered norms, patriarchy, and structural inequalities mean that women are often expected to absorb these growing burdens with little recognition or support. The crisis of care in this context is not simply a matter of individual hardship but reflects a systemic failure to support the social reproduction of households and communities (MacGregor et al., 2025). This failure stems from both the state's neglect

in enacting comprehensive care policies as well as private sector labour practices, which can limit the time and conditions necessary for care work to be sustained. Women in subsistence and informal economies undertake essential care labour, from cooking to childcare to environmental stewardship, that subsidises both household survival and broader economic activity. As climate change erodes the material foundations of care (water, energy, food), this labour becomes more intense and less sustainable, while continuing to be undervalued and unsupported. The result is a widening gender gap in time poverty, economic inequality, physical exhaustion, and health risk, particularly in contexts where state and market actors have withdrawn or failed to provide adequate care infrastructure (Care Collective, 2020). This includes services such as healthcare, childcare, and water and energy systems that underpin everyday care work but are often absent or crumbling.

A second major impact of climate change on gendered labour in food systems is through women's unequal access to, and control over, land, agricultural inputs, technology, and credit. Despite producing the majority of subsistence food in the region, women control a fraction of agricultural land, often less than 15% globally (FAO, 2018). Differing forms of tenure make it challenging to produce clear statistics around rights to and use of land in southern Africa. However, some aspects can be presented. In southern Africa, women consistently hold less land than men. In Mozambique, women hold just 20% of land titles compared to 80% for men (UN Women, 2021). In Zimbabwe, while women are overrepresented in smallholder and subsistence crop production, they hold only a slightly smaller share of land rights than men (44.9% vs 45.9%) (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2019). In South Africa, just under 35% of women own land while about 50% of men own land (Commission for Gender Equality, 2024). Although land can also be accessed through informal or customary means, control typically remains with men. Women's land access is therefore typically mediated through male relatives, and even where access is granted, decision-making power over land use can remain predominantly with men (Ngcoya and Kumarakulasingam, 2016). These inequalities are reinforced by discriminatory inheritance systems, insecure tenure, and the feminisation of poverty. As climate shocks render agriculture more precarious, women without secure access to productive assets are increasingly vulnerable to displacement, food insecurity, and economic exclusion.

Efforts to address these inequalities have often focused on individual empowerment, such as microloans or entrepreneurship training. While well-meaning, such strategies frequently place the burden of adaptation on women themselves, without addressing the structural roots of their dispossession (Prügl and Joshi, 2021). In some cases, participation in market-based adaptation schemes has increased women's indebtedness or tied them into volatile input and output markets. Meanwhile, broader development policies continue to favour larger-scale commercial agriculture, diverting resources away from smallholder systems where women are most active (Tsikata, 2009).

Climate change has also contributed to significant volatility in food prices and availability, with sharp gendered consequences. In South Africa, the convergence of extreme weather, global commodity shocks, and local crises like load-shedding and avian flu has led to dramatic increases in food costs (Competition Commission, 2024). Despite declines in some input costs by 2024, food prices have remained high, suggesting retailers are extracting super-profits (SAFTU, 2024). These increases disproportionately affect women, who are primarily responsible for food provisioning within households and often absorb the costs of nutritional sacrifice - skipping meals or cutting back on their own nutrition to feed others (Green, 2020). Low-income households shift to starchy staples and

ultra-processed foods at the expense of dietary diversity, a coping mechanism that leads to 'hidden hunger' and long-term health impacts, especially for children and women (PMBEJD, 2025; Essop and Engelbrecht, 2025).

The cumulative effect is a gendered nutrition crisis. Many poor women experience malnutrition during pregnancy and lactation with harsh consequences for their own and their child's health (Essop and Engelbrecht, 2025), and girls are more likely than boys to suffer long-term cognitive and physical development challenges due to early nutritional deprivation (SADC, 2022). Price shocks also deepen the time poverty of women, particularly those involved in the informal food trade, who must work longer hours under increasingly precarious conditions. For example, women selling fresh produce or prepared foods from informal stalls often lack shelter or cooling infrastructure, making them more vulnerable to heatwaves, floods, and the loss of stock. In extreme cases, food safety concerns in informal retail – such as those documented in South Africa – have led to increased surveillance or closures, disrupting income and access to food for entire communities (Wegerif, 2023).

Health outcomes are similarly shaped by intersecting environmental, economic, and social stressors. As climate change drives disease proliferation, respiratory problems, and waterborne illnesses, women face heightened risks due to both their reproductive roles and their concentration in low-wage, manual labour. Heat stress and exposure to agricultural toxins have been linked to complications during pregnancy, including miscarriage, premature birth and increased birth defects. One meta-analysis study concluded that preterm and stillbirths increased by 5% for each 1°C increase in temperature and birth and odds of still birth were 3.4 times higher with sustained high temperatures through the full pregnancy (Chersich et al. 2020). In urban and peri-urban areas, poor women are often unable to access preventative care, leading to late diagnosis and chronic conditions. These health burdens, in turn, intensify care responsibilities within households, reinforcing the cycle of unpaid reproductive labour (Sutton et al., 2011; Piazza and Urbanetz, 2019). Furthermore, as has been documented in places like Malawi, because women often shoulder much of the work of caring for the ill, time is taken away from farming, which can further reduce household production and so food security and nutrition (Bezner Kerr, 2005). Climate change, by increasing health problems resulting from malnutrition, can thus exacerbate this pattern.

The final gendered impact to consider is the rise in gender-based violence (GBV) under conditions of environmental stress. As livelihoods collapse, women often become more economically dependent on male partners or community gatekeepers, reducing their bargaining power and increasing vulnerability to abuse (Jewkes, 2002; MacGregor et al., 2022; Paganini et. al 2025). Resource scarcity and displacement also expose women and girls to new forms of violence, including sexual exploitation in exchange for food or shelter. Market spaces, where women increasingly sell goods, are male-dominated and poorly regulated, often requiring women to travel long distances or remain in vulnerable areas after dark. These threats to safety further constrain women's mobility and economic participation while increasing the emotional and physical labour of caregiving for survivors of violence (Kasan, 2024).

Taken together, these dynamics reflect the compounded and mutually reinforcing impacts of climate change on women's labour in the food system. The intensification of care responsibilities, restricted access to productive resources, volatility in food and health systems, and the growing risk of GBV

all signal the need for systemic interventions. These must move beyond individualised approaches to women's empowerment and instead centre care as a public good, requiring redistribution of responsibilities across households, markets, and states. In the following section, we briefly assess to what extent food system policy in southern Africa responds to this care imperative in the context of climate change, before exploring how a care-centred approach to food system policy can support this shift, advancing gender justice as a core pillar of climate adaptation in southern Africa.

3.4. Gender justice and food system policy in southern Africa

Despite the growing recognition of the interlinked crises of climate change, food insecurity, and gender inequality, policies across southern Africa remain largely inadequate in addressing these dimensions in an integrated and intersectional manner. Existing agricultural and climate frameworks often fail to incorporate a gender-just approach that centres care, social reproduction, and structural inequalities, thereby missing a crucial opportunity to build equitable and climate-resilient food systems.

A key weakness lies in the ongoing influence of neoliberal and technocratic paradigms in agriculture and climate policy. As the Rural Women's Assembly (RWA) highlights in its submission to the African Union Commission, the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) reinforces these trends. Introduced in 2003, CAADP was designed to guide agricultural investment and improve food security across the continent. In practice, however, it has largely promoted industrial agriculture and Green Revolution approaches (RWA, 2024). One of the most prominent of these is AGRA, launched in 2006 with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation. AGRA's stated goal is to increase agricultural productivity and food security by promoting the use of high-yield seeds, synthetic fertilisers, and improved technologies among smallholder farmers. However, evaluations of AGRA suggest it has failed to meet its objectives, with limited improvements in yields and food security, and even less success in improving the livelihoods of women farmers. Its model often marginalises local knowledge and farmer-managed seed systems, while reinforcing dependence on corporate inputs. As a result, women, who produce a majority of food in the region, are frequently excluded or negatively affected (Bezner Kerr and Wynberg, 2024).

In Malawi, for example, Farm Input Subsidy Programmes (FISPs), and the more recent iteration, the Affordable Input Programme (AIP), were initially introduced to increase national maize yields and reduce rural poverty by subsidising access to hybrid seed and synthetic fertilisers. However, despite heavy financial investment, these programmes have failed to significantly improve national food security or household nutrition. Evidence suggests that while FISP and AIP officially targeted vulnerable groups, including female-headed households, in practice these programmes often failed to reach them effectively. The programmes have been plagued by elite capture, poor targeting, and corruption, diverting resources away from the most vulnerable. Moreover, by promoting input-intensive monocultures like maize, they discourage agroecological practices and undermine women's roles as seed custodians and stewards of biodiversity (ACB, 2024). The policy emphasis on input access overlooks deeper structural issues, such as unequal land rights and the heavy burden of unpaid care work that limits women's ability to engage with these schemes on equal footing.

The CAADP, while attempting to track progress, includes indicators that frame empowerment primarily

through market integration, equating women's empowerment with participation in agribusiness. This framing side steps critical questions of unpaid labour, access to communal land, and the increasing care burdens exacerbated by climate-induced stress (RWA, 2024). According to the Africa Care Economy Index (Valiani, 2022), nearly all African states neglect to support or redistribute care work, with women absorbing the majority of domestic and subsistence labour even in crisis contexts.

Southern African countries consistently rank low in metrics related to both care and food provisioning. For example, countries like Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe score poorly on state investment in care infrastructure and social protection, with minimal public provisioning of childcare or elder care, and weak protections for informal care workers. Moreover, government spending on agriculture and public health in these countries remains far below international targets, further eroding care capacity in the face of climate shocks (Valiani, 2022). This is particularly troubling given the deep interdependence between care, food systems, and public health. As the conceptual framing in Section 2 makes clear, public health policy not only responds to food-related disease burdens, but also has a role to play in shaping dietary practices, access to nutrition, and the infrastructure of care. Social policy, like South Africa's system of social grants, further mediates food security, providing a lifeline that, while insufficient, has staved off widespread nutritional collapse. This failure to integrate care and public health into agricultural and environmental planning represents a missed opportunity to build cross-sectoral resilience, one that recognises care as essential infrastructure for both human and ecological survival.

Climate policies, such as those related to food systems, also exhibit a significant gap in acknowledging and addressing the care economy. As MacGregor et al. (2022) argue, most climate adaptation and mitigation strategies remain gender-neutral or narrowly responsive, failing to engage the 'care-climate nexus'. Care work, both human and environmental, is not recognised as a central pillar of climate resilience. Climate-smart agriculture, carbon markets, and energy transitions often ignore how their design exacerbates unpaid labour, excludes women from land tenure, or reinforces existing inequalities (MacGregor et al., 2022; SCIS, 2024). Additionally, most gender-climate-food policies conflate gender with women, thereby individualising vulnerability and masking the systemic roots of inequality. This oversimplification risks reinforcing stereotypes and designing policies that are ultimately ineffective or even harmful (Okali and Naess, 2013). In the next section, we outline some key possible elements of a care approach to food system policy making in southern Africa, as an important component of realising gender justice under climate change.

4. Advancing a care approach to food system policy making: Some key elements

A care-centred approach to food systems recognises that gender justice is not achieved through targeting women alone, nor through a binary conception of gender. Rather, it requires addressing the underlying structures and relations that shape the burden, distribution, and recognition of care work in both its paid and unpaid forms. Research on the climate–care–food nexus is still emerging (Phalatse et al., 2024). However, drawing from the analysis in this paper, alongside literature on care work and relevant international instruments, this section outlines key elements for advancing a care approach to food system policymaking in pursuit of gender justice. These instruments include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), and the gender guidelines of the World Committee on Food Security (CFS). These span interventions directly within the food system and those indirectly related to the food system (such as strengthened public sector healthcare) but which closely affect food system outcomes. They will be further refined and elaborated through the development of a toolkit to accompany this working paper.

We present five key areas of intervention to serve as an initial set of guidelines for strengthening care in southern African food systems: recognise, reward, and represent care work; reduce and redistribute care work; ensure stronger policy, practical, and financial support for agroecology guided by the HLPE's 13 principles; support women's agency and political participation; and fiscal policy that supports care in the food system. A prominent feminist framework for addressing care work inequalities, and especially gendered ones, is the 5R framework. Following MacGregor et al. (2022), we discuss the 5R in two groups: firstly, recognise, reward, and represent; and secondly, reduce and redistribute. We link these to the food system, and they are also intertwined with the other elements of the framework presented in this section.

4.1. Recognise, reward, and represent

CEDAW's Recommendation No. 34 (CEDAW, 2016) on the rights of rural women and the CFS's guidelines on gender equality (CFS, 2024) emphasise the importance of redressing women's burden of unpaid care and agricultural work (Martignoni and Claeys, 2021). A first important step in the 5R framework, is to recognise, make visible, and value the contributions of unpaid care work in agriculture and food provision and preparation, as well as climate resilience (CFS, 2024; MacGregor et al., 2022). This can include counting such work in national economic statistics to guide further policy interventions (MacGregor et al., 2022). Recognition of such work is important in itself and for associated actions to support and represent, but it is also important to recognise in relation to planned

climate interventions in the food system, to assess whether they may inadvertently increase care inequalities by requiring additional responsibility, time, and work by carers (ibid).

Recognition should also lead to greater *reward* and support for such care work, such as strengthening state and donor support for community-instigated initiatives like community food kitchens, which are grounded in an ethic of care and contribute to reducing the burden (see below) of food provisioning that often falls on women of poor households (Paganini et al., 2021; 2025). Such kitchens are often instigated and run by women, and can provide an important site for strengthening care as a structuring logic of organising local food systems. They can also be further elaborated into entities such as People's Restaurants as in Belo Horizonte, Brazil (discussed in Section 2.2). At the same time, because it is women from the poorest households who disproportionately work in community kitchens (Paganini et al., 2021; 2025), support should ensure that such initiatives can ensure decent work for those who work in them.

It is therefore important to recognise and better reward/support care work in legislation and policy in the food system. However, this recognition must not be imposed in abstract or top-down ways. It should be grounded in the autonomous, place-based processes through which women define care work themselves, based on their lived experiences, ecological knowledge, and territorial ties. Legal and policy mechanisms must therefore support, rather than substitute, collective organising by women around care work.[2]

This speaks also to a broader point about recognising environmental care work, as well as the knowledge that those who undertake it have from doing so. For example, seed saving and reproduction activities are central to food security, agricultural biodiversity, and ecological resilience, and therefore reflect care for both humans and the rest of nature. Women also play a leading role in such activities (RWA, 2019). However, they are routinely not only under-recognised in policy and support, but legislation is and has been advanced across the region that seeks to grow corporate-centred seed systems, emphasising the market and narrower economic logic in seed systems (and bolstering corporate power in the food system), rather than local human activity and care. Farmer managed seed systems are, therefore, not only left under-supported and under-recognised, but legislation and policies often actively undermine them. An important intervention to support the care work that farmers and communities undertake with seed would thus be to protect and strengthen farmer managed seed systems, on the basis of farmers' rights (Greenberg et al., 2021). The UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP) offers a valuable normative framework for advancing recognition of and support for farmer seed systems, and can be linked to gender just demands for women's rights to natural resources that are affirmed by international instruments like CEDAW's Recommendation No. 34 (Martignoni and Claeys, 2021), such as seed.

Achieving greater recognition and rewards for such care work will also arise from greater representation of carers in social dialogue and political processes. This is addressed in more detail below, in section 5.4, in terms of participation.

[2] Thank you to a reference group member for providing this point.

4.2. Reduce and redistribute

As discussed in Section 3, climate change impacts are likely to increase unpaid care labour in various aspects of the food system. This calls for *reducing and redistributing* care work so that it is not disproportionately carried by women and girls. This means reducing the amount of time required for care work (such as by making it more convenient and less physically demanding) as well as a greater sharing of care work. The latter can take place between genders in households, between households through local sharing and cooperative arrangements (such as community-based organisations and women collectives), and between the household and the state (recall the care diamond discussed in Section 2). MacGregor et al. (2022) identify three important mechanisms to reduce and redistribute care work, and which are significantly relevant for care in the food system.

First, introducing 'labour-saving and environmentally sound technology' (CEDAW, 2016: 20)in both domestic and agricultural settings can serve as strategies for climate mitigation and adaptation, while also easing the time and physical burden of care work. Such technical interventions could include fuel-efficient stoves, solar cookers, and systems that reduce the burden of collecting water (such as well drilling, appropriate irrigation, and water harvesting) and fuel wood for cooking, and are also important intervention areas for climate adaptation (MacGregor et al., 2022). Certain agroecological practices such as intercropping, mulching, composting, and cover cropping, combined with appropriate technology such as hand-held weeders, small-scale compost turners, or no-till planters, can also help reduce 'drudgery' in agriculture. However, even with such labour-saving technologies, agroecology can remain labour-intensive overall. This makes it important to consider how labour is redistributed, not only across gender lines, but also through collective or cooperative approaches that move beyond an individualised model of farming. In addition, the promotion of labour saving technologies should be considered and undertaken in context, and in conjunction with the elements of the framework in this section, to avoid slipping into productivism and techno-centrism. Given the critiques and dangers of technology and digitalisation in food systems in current patterns of power and control (ETC Group, 2021), key questions should be asked like who controls the technology and whose needs it primarily serves, and they should be introduced in participatory ways.

Second, the provision of social infrastructure through the state and community-based initiatives is central to ease the burden of care in food systems by households and communities, which is disproportionately borne by women (CEDAW, 2016). Such social infrastructure refers to the services and support mechanisms that meet human needs and contribute to quality of life (MacGregor et al., 2022). It includes aspects like social protection, as well as physical and social infrastructure like hospitals and provision of childcare (by the state and through community-based services), food marketplaces, and energy provision. Given that food (including fruit and vegetables) can often be accessed more conveniently or cheaply through local and informal trading (Wegerif, 2023), supporting these systems through adequate infrastructure could be one way of reducing the care burden resulting from rising food prices (Paganini et. al. 2025).

Social infrastructure is an important way in which a care approach to food systems is interconnected with other sectors of the economy or society. For example, in South Africa, poor and working class women tend to prioritise household spending on food only after spending on electricity, transport,

and debt repayments (PMBEJD, 2025). Furthermore, bulky and more starchy foods tend to be prioritised with a limited budget before other foods like meat, vegetables, and fruits (Ibid). In this case, there are three interconnected aspects of reducing the care burden. First, access to (clean) energy is important in reducing food-related care work in the household, such as cooking time. Second, ensuring electricity is affordable is key for reducing the care burden in food systems, both in terms of cooking and to free up resources for accessing nutritious foods. Third, the current trends in South Africa are of consistently rising domestic electricity costs and privatisation in the energy sector, which impacts on care broadly and in food systems. Reducing the care burden related to food consumption is therefore closely connected to the terms of provision of wider social infrastructure.

Third, in many working class and poor communities in the Global South, especially rural ones, care is predominantly provided within households and communities, with less reliance on the state (Kasan, 2023). It is important therefore to strengthen community-based care services and the role of the state in assuming and better supporting care work. However, care work is also an integral and unavoidable part of household and community life. As such, in addition to redistributing care institutionally, addressing the gendered burden of care can also involve redistributing it within households and communities, prominently between genders. This can relate to acts like preparing and cooking food, but can also require addressing deeper issues like patriarchy and gender norms as preconditions for such shifts (MacGregor et al., 2022). This is work relevant to state policy and civil society action. Valuing and redistributing care work at local scale is therefore potentially an important component to climate adaptation in the food system to temper its potential to enhance inequalities, such as in care work.

4.3. Ensure stronger policy, practical, and financial support for agroecology guided by the HLPE's 13 principles

Agroecology is about producing, distributing, and consuming food in ways that work with and protect nature, that are ecologically regenerative and sustainable. Furthermore, in its political origins and elaboration today, it also embodies a deeper ethic of care in human relationships and between humans and the rest of nature (Lacayo, 2024; Seymour and Connelly, 2023). This ethic is reflected in the FAO Committee for Food Security's 13 principles of agroecology proposed by the High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE, 2019 - reflected in Box 1), which include principles for social equity such as fairness, connectivity, and participation, and principles related to ecological health like soil health, biodiversity, synergy, and animal health. Agroecology in this comprehensive sense therefore advances practices and logics that resist capitalism's tendency to fragment and undermine ecology, care labour, and social connections.

As discussed in Section 2, care is not just important to the wider economy, or separate from the economy, but is a core part of the economy and society. The 13 principles not only reify care in the food system, but encompass interventions that might typically be understood to apply distinctly to either the 'care' realm or the 'economic' realm. Instead, as a framework it advances them holistically, overcoming the artificial division. It therefore reconciles care and broader economic interventions, advancing the care economy in food systems.

However, there are still possible trade-offs and tensions that may need to be reconciled. For example, more resilient food systems (which agroecology seeks to achieve) may reduce the work that has to be undertaken because of climate impacts, often affecting women disproportionately. On the other hand, agroecology at the farm level can be more labour intensive (depending also on the stage of development) (Bezner Kerr et al., 2019), which raises questions about the gendered distribution of this required labour. It is thus important that support for agroecology is aligned with other policy areas to advance care in the food system, such as reducing and redistributing the care burden overall.

Furthermore, agroecology also provides a compass point for transition, for both smallholder and larger industrial systems (IPES-Food, 2016). Care is an important ethic and practice to guide this transition. For example, the use of pesticides in both large-scale and smallholder systems has negative consequences for soils, biodiversity, and human health (FIAN, 2021). Their usage is particularly intense in large-scale industrial systems, which has dire consequences for the health of farm workers who apply them, and who work in and live near fields in which they are sprayed. The unpaid burden of care for workers sickened by years of exposure falls disproportionately on women, alongside their continued farm work in often informal and low-paid conditions (Joala, 2025). Progressively introducing new practices informed by care for humans and nature, like shifting away from pesticides, can cumulatively contribute to a transition path away from industrial agriculture and towards regenerative[3] systems.

4.4. Participation

Important in supporting care in food systems is to ensure space is created for relevant populations to shape the decisions, programmes, and policies that affect them. Top-down approaches, in policy-making, research, and programme development, tend to reproduce existing power relations, including those around gender. Enhanced local control, women's agency, and the right to participate is critical for political processes to achieve gender justice and support care work. Participation is also a means through which to ensure that the local knowledge accumulated through care work is valued, recognised, and shapes policy (MacGregor et al., 2022).

Effective participation should be sustained, locally grounded, and adequately resourced, ensuring it is not a tokenistic but a transformative process that centres those most affected. It should go beyond consultation to include co-design of programmes and shared decision-making power (CFS, 2024). Participation should ensure that populations, and women in particular, are involved in food system policy making not only from the angle of productivity, but from the lens of care as well. This must ensure that care work in food is integrated into health systems policy making, and that care work is taken into food system policy making. This also means treating rural women in agrarian contexts, for example, not only as farmers, but as carers. This also implies that food system carers are actively included in policy processes directly and indirectly related to food systems, such as health policy, environmental policy, and fiscal policy. However, the latter policy area points to the fact that participation alone is not sufficient, and must be linked to confronting inequalities in resources and power (UNDP, 2023). This is relevant to food systems, as in Section 2.2 where we discussed how

[3] Regenerative agriculture has become a controversial term because of its appropriation by corporate actors to preserve their interests and resist deeper change. We use it here in the sense of systems that are truly regenerative of life and ecosystems.

elements of the food system, like how food is produced, who controls it, and food system policy, reflect class interests and power. It is therefore also a matter of class and political organisation to achieve a care-oriented approach to food systems for gender and climate justice. This makes coalition and movement building necessary to achieve participatory spaces as well as ensure that participation translates into material and policy change.

To enable this translation, policy processes must also institutionalise accountability mechanisms that track whether care-centred participation leads to substantive shifts in power, recognition, and redistribution. This could include the development of indicators that measure the visibility and integration of care work in food system and health policy, the inclusion of women food system carers in policy-making bodies, and the allocation of public resources to support care infrastructure. Such indicators can support governments and civil society actors to evaluate progress toward gender-just and care-oriented food systems, and to hold institutions accountable for addressing inequalities in both voice and material conditions.[4]

4.5. Link fiscal policy to care in food systems

As discussed in Section 2.2, policy and markets play an important role in structuring food systems. Policy includes food system policy as well as wider economic policy. The quality of health care provision, early childhood development (ECD) programmes, school feeding schemes, and gender-responsive nutritional programmes play an important role in food systems outcomes, indirectly through how they influence the distribution of care labour and directly in terms of nutritional outcomes. The state plays a decisive role in practices and administration of care through its macroeconomic and social policies (Kasan, 2024). How much budget the state allocates to state institutions (like hospitals and clinics), to supporting community-based services (like ECD centres), and to supporting agroecology and building resilience in food systems thus has an important impact on nutrition and food security. Broader macroeconomic strategy and fiscal policy that strengthens the care economy is therefore a critical component of public policy that supports resilient, equitable food systems.

Strengthening the care economy requires significant budgetary allocation, against the grain of fiscal consolidation. Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) is a potentially important tool to push for fiscal policy that supports the care economy. GRB involves analysing government budgets by asking how public spending and revenue policies affect people differently based on gendered roles and social positions. National budgets are not neutral but reflect ideological adherence, political negotiation, and the power of certain institutions (Khalifa and Scarparo, 2017). GRB challenges the assumption of budget neutrality by exposing how existing allocations often overlook or undervalue unpaid care work, land access, and essential services such as water, healthcare, and social protection, all of which are vital to women's roles in food systems. By using gender-disaggregated data and linking fiscal allocations to equity goals, GRB enables the reallocation of public spending to areas that build women's resilience (ibid). For example, investments in secure land tenure, agroecological extension services, and infrastructure for water, energy, and care can strengthen the foundations of a care-centred food system. GRB also holds governments accountable to gender equality commitments,

[4] Thank you to a reference group member for advancing the point made in this paragraph.

pushing beyond symbolic commitments to practical redistributions of power and resources. In addition Gender Responsive Climate Budgeting (GRCB) integrates both gender and climate considerations into fiscal planning (CABRI, 2021). This approach is particularly relevant in climate-affected food systems, where adaptation needs and gendered vulnerabilities intersect.

Furthermore, fiscal policy needs to strengthen the capacity of social policy to better achieve a caring economy. Under neoliberal macroeconomic frameworks, including austerity and fiscal consolidation, social policy is frequently subordinated to market efficiency. This has led to cuts in public services and the privatisation of basic needs. This intensifies women's time poverty, reduces their capacity to engage in sustainable livelihoods, and undermines community resilience in the face of climate shocks. In Zambia, the introduction of user fees for water and sanitation has disproportionately affected low-income women farmers who rely on these services for both household and agricultural needs (Action Aid 2025) . In Zimbabwe, wage bill freezes and public hiring restrictions contributed to severe shortages of frontline workers in healthcare and education, reinforcing the gendered burden of unpaid care. To counteract this, fiscal policy must shift from macroeconomic orthodoxy toward redistributive public investment that centres care as both a public good and a climate strategy. This includes expanding public employment in care sectors, subsidising essential services such as water and early childhood care, and embedding gender-responsive climate budgeting across agricultural and infrastructure portfolios (ibid)

While fiscal policy has been elaborated on here, we can extend this to other forms of economic policy. For example, fiscal policy can be coordinated with regulating food prices with attention to their effects on unpaid care labour, nutrition, and environmental sustainability, to ensure alignment of economic policy with the goals of a just and caring food system. A care approach challenges food system policy that narrowly prioritises growth in output and GDP, and points to the need for more coherent food system policy that links multiple criteria and objectives for the food system, strengthens care in the food system, and links strongly to wider care policy.

5. Conclusion

A care approach to food systems offers a potentially transformative pathway toward gender and climate justice in southern Africa. In the face of intensifying climate impacts and structural inequalities, a care approach is important as a set of activities as well as a guiding ethic for policy and practice. This working paper has suggested that current food system policies across the region fail to meaningfully account for the gendered nature of care work in food systems or to address how unpaid and under-supported care responsibilities are deepening under climate stress. Without systemic interventions, these dynamics risk reinforcing cycles of poverty, gender inequality, ecological degradation, and food insecurity.

By advancing a care approach grounded in Feminist Political Ecology, Feminist Ecological Economics, and food system thinking, we approach the food system as a site not only of production, but of social reproduction, ecological care, and human well-being. The framework proposed here – recognising, rewarding, representing care work; redistributing and reducing care work; supporting agroecology; enabling inclusive participation; and aligning fiscal policy with care - offers a practical and political agenda through which to strengthen and support care work for gender justice in southern African food systems.

A gender-just food system must not only include women, but transform the structures that marginalise their labour and knowledge. Positioning care as central to food system transformation suggests a redefinition of value, sustainability, and equity - grounding climate adaptation in everyday practices and relationships that sustain life. As climate change accelerates, care must move from the margins of food systems policy to its centre, guiding a holistic response that can nourish both people and the planet.

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