



POLICY BRIEF

# CARE WORK IN THE JUST TRANSITION

## Providing for People and Planet



**Just Transition (JT) is a policy framework promoted by labour and environmental justice organizations to design climate and ecological transition policies from the perspective of those most affected by social inequalities. The framework indicates how to compensate for job loss due to the mandated phasing-out of carbon-intensive and other industries while also responding to the most urgent and vital needs of frontline communities by creating decent and stable jobs in clean chemistry, energy and infrastructure. Over the past decade, the JT concept has been incorporated in International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), European Union (EU) and various governments' policy processes.**

**So far, JT strategies and policies have paid limited attention to the social and environmental dimensions of care work and to its centrality for satisfying human needs while also protecting the biophysical environment. This policy brief represents the experiences, perspectives and demands emerging from work in domestic and community caregiving, subsistence food provisioning, health care, environmental care and education. Produced by a network of actors, this brief demands a shift of focus in JT strategies toward a new vision in which care work, in its multiple forms, is properly valued and adequately funded. Based on our experience in practice, advocacy and research, we claim that JT policies must properly recognize care workers and their rights to protect people and the planet.**

## Dimensions of care work

We understand care work as the ensemble of paid and unpaid activities that produce, sustain and provide for human life and the environment. Often invisible and unrecognized as work, caring takes place in both private and the public spheres, in urban and rural environments, on the land and in many earth-systems where people meet subsistence needs.

While the state is the main duty bearer for ensuring adequate care, the provision of care is accomplished by a variety of subjects, including families/households, markets and the not-for-profit sector. Working-class people, peasants and Indigenous peoples perform different forms of caring and subsistence work, including environmental care, often combining it with paid work. Most unpaid care work globally is performed by women, starting with mothers and girls. Inequalities of sex, gender, class, ethnicity, ability, immigration status, global North and South, and other attributes heavily condition the distribution of and access to care services and the ways carers are treated and compensated, often resulting in unsustainable burdens or life-threatening working conditions.

### Box 1. Care work in the time of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the many forms of care work (paid and unpaid) needed to (re)produce societies and ecosystems, most of which go either unrecognized or are undervalued and undermined. COVID-19 is only the latest manifestation of a global crisis of reproduction based on long-term processes related to the depreciation of care and degradation of the environment affecting both human and nonhuman health. The pandemic toll has been gravely worsened by generalized and decades-long processes of the contraction of public health care and welfare services, and its distribution has followed pre-existing patterns of social inequality, hitting most heavily the people with the least access to healthy living conditions.

One lesson to be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is that a more sustainable economic model must be centred on care to provide for the needs of both people and of nonhuman nature.

## The JTC network

Just Transition and Care (JTC) is an international network of stakeholders and scholars with a shared interest in highlighting the relevance of caring work

in the politics of JT by listening to the voices of carers and their perspectives on climate and environmental change and on social and community needs. The network involves union representatives, women's organizations, environmental and climate justice activists, and community economy actors involved with domestic and community care, subsistence food provisioning, health care, environmental care and education. The network also includes researchers from social science and sustainability studies.

### Box 2. JTC methodology

This brief elaborates upon a series of five online conversations held between June 2021 and June 2023 where we explored opportunities and challenges for JT to include care workers. Each webinar focused on a different sector (domestic and community caregiving, subsistence food provisioning, health care, environmental care, and education) and featured up to four care-work representatives who were invited to answer questions regarding their experiences of the COVID-19 crisis, the ecological/climate crisis, and their perspective on governmental and union policies. The proceedings were shared with an international scientific board of academics specializing in each of the five care sectors who were convened to discuss findings in light of their respective expertise.

## Guidelines for a care-centred Just Transition

We demand that the JT strategy include the following recommendations for public policies at the governmental and inter-governmental levels:

- **Recognize that care work in all its forms is key to individual, social and environmental survival and well-being** but also severely under-appreciated and under-funded. **Expand societal awareness of the value and relevance of care work.**
- Make caring a central component of JT strategies and planning by **ensuring that an adequate share of JT funding, employment and income creation is devoted to it**, including in households, community centres, food provision, environmental conservation, health care and education.
- **Support all carers**, particularly those not paid or working informally, by ensuring that their needs are provided for via i) living income; ii) social security; iii) legal recognition; iv) immigration papers; v) accessible services and good working conditions; and vi) enhanced carers' capacities for self-realization.

- Support everyone's right to care, whether in childhood or later in life, ill-health or disability, and a say in how that care should be provided, by whom and where so that it promotes respectful relationships and independent living.
- **Create attractive job opportunities for public employment or income generation in all areas of care work**, granting proper compensation, job security, safe working conditions, respect for labour rights, income stability, and proper representation and participation in social and environmental decision-making.
- **Restore, retrofit and adapt care infrastructures** to make them resilient to climate-related risk, energy-efficient, safe, and sustainable in food provision and waste management.
- **Provide adequate access to care services and infrastructures to all**, levelling existing social and spatial inequalities, and preparing for the increase in care needs associated with climate-related events and epidemics.
- Divest from extractive industries, military expenditures, carbon-intensive and high-impact projects, and **invest in caring** by significantly expanding public expenditure in care-related employment, social security, services and infrastructure.

## Domestic and community care

- **Grant adequate income to family and other unpaid carers**, starting with mothers in low-income and rural households, so that all care needs are properly met, the care burden is more equally distributed and carers' needs are fulfilled while providing for the needs of others.
- **Grant full equality of rights to domestic workers** (for example, a written contract, living wage, stability, social security, occupational safety, and protection from violence, abuse and deprivation) and provide them with access to adequate transport, health care and educational services, free childcare, and eldercare services.
- **Recognize community care activism and activities** developed in self-managed spaces and the urban commons, including when resulting from the occupation and restoration of abandoned infrastructures; recognize the right to community self-care, **support and enhance its capacity to respond to unmet needs**, and provide for social well-being and cultural revitalization in marginalized areas.

## Food provisioning

- Recognize natural farming/agroecology and food security and sovereignty as key components of

JT and grant them proper valuation by **reversing priorities in current agricultural policies**, from corporate to peasant, Indigenous and urban farming.

- Respect, recover and support Indigenous and collective farming knowledge, practices and techniques.
- **Sustain life in rural areas** by securing access to land, providing public services and sustainable transport infrastructures, and granting a living income to non-industrial farmers, fishers and local food producers.
- Grant **access to healthy food** from peasant and Indigenous farming to urban low-income populations.

## Health care

- **Invest in the social determinants of health**, including support for the unpaid work of everyday caring and provisioning, as a precondition to prosperity (health before wealth); invest adequate resources in addressing inequalities in health care access; and grant access to appropriate and affordable medicine to all.
- **Grant full access to quality primary care** in rural and low-income areas and provide adequate follow-up and home-based health care services to support and alleviate the burden of health care at the household level.
- Create an adequate number of decent, secure and unionized **new health care jobs in hospitals and in home and community care**; invest in the safety of working conditions in hospitals, such as proper ventilation and safe and non-toxic supplies and devices; and design specific measures to tackle the double burden of care for health care workers.
- **Invest in adequate emergency response** to the likely increase in health care needs consequent to climate-related disasters and epidemics; renew health care infrastructure and make them resilient, energy efficient and toxic-free; invest in adequate safety and protection measures for health care workers in cases of emergency; and invest consistent resources in tackling the unequal impact of climate-related hazards in countries in the global South.

## Environmental care

- Invest in the year-long prevention of forest fires, landslides and other environmental hazards by **granting adequately funded, permanent and safe jobs to firefighters**; eliminate temporary/seasonal hiring practices in environmental care and include it as a key element of JT policies; and grant workers proper representation and access to decision-

- making in environmental protection policies.
- Abandon exclusionary conservation approaches and **recover and support community-based agroforestry practices** and sustainable forest uses (for example, shepherding and the gathering of resins, nuts or fruits) to prevent rural abandonment, the accumulation of fire-prone biomass and land degradation; recognize and support local organizations for territorial care and promote their active inclusion in territorial management; and create job opportunities for rural youth in environmental care services.
- Recognize Indigenous and other traditional populations as guardians of nature** and implement measures that grant them full territorial rights, effective decision-making and funding for environmental care; and protect land and human rights defenders from violence, prevent the extraction of their knowledge and services, and value their work by providing them equal access to services and technologies and a living income.
- Abandon extractivist development models and **invest in food and energy sovereignty** via community-centred fossil-free and non-exploitative economies; and invest in **community-led restoration of environmental damage** from fossil infrastructures and territorial de-contamination, which is the necessary premise for developing regenerative economies.

## Education

- Recognize and value educators as key actors in the post-carbon transition**, for example in training for greener jobs, educating communities on how to shift to low-carbon economies, developing non-individualistic, systemic climate action, and marshalling social awareness, preparedness and/or mobilization; and make education a more appealing profession in terms of benefits and resilience to climate threats.

- Invest in climate-safe and energy-efficient education infrastructures**, including urgently needed adaptation; **revert school curricula from individualistic and competitive to care-centred** and solidarity ethics; develop climate and intergenerational justice through decolonized curricula, attentive to equality and human rights; invest in the retraining of educators toward climate justice goals; and revert quality education from a positional good to a public good accessible to all.

## Conclusion

JT must be about **shifting from a care-less to a care-full economic system**, expanding human rights toward the inclusion of a right to adequate care, to safety from the risks associated with ongoing climate and environmental changes, and to a healthy environment for working class, peasant and Indigenous populations. This requires a fair articulation and assignment of roles, responsibilities and means for caring work, but also acknowledging and rectifying the ecological and climate debt owed by the global North to the global South.

This shift is incompatible with neoliberal policies and requires a decisive step away from the capitalist system and culture. **Putting caring before profit is imperative** to achieving the above goals in all sectors of care work, and the only way to achieve a care centred JT. Resources for this shift should be gathered by redirecting public funding from fossil fuels, monocultures, war and high-impact megaprojects and by introducing progressive taxation and monetary policies, including the abolition of tax havens.

Governments must play a key role in this shift by providing adequate funding and **creating the space for appropriate political representation and participation of care workers in the design of JT policies.**

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