A care approach to achieving gender justice in southern African food systems in the context of climate change

CLIMATE AMBITION TO ACCOUNTABILITY PROJECT

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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
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 Institution
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
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFC	World Future Council

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 -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 hampered 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 the food system in southern Africa as well, where a predominant policy concern tends to be raising productivity through improved technology and external inputs, and from which other benefits are expected to flow. Strengthening care in the food system, together with its gendered implications, is therefore a neglected policy area.

In this paper, we argue that climate change impacts on food systems in southern Africa will intensify the burden of care in affected working class and poor communities, and in particular the paid and unpaid labour of rural and urban working class women. A gendered and climate just approach to food system policy making in southern Africa is thus needed, and strengthening care and the care economy in food systems can be a critical contribution to achieving this. We therefore propose key policy elements to support a care economy approach to realising the right to food and nutrition under climate change, which encompasses interventions in the food system linked with those in other 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, 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, 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 concludes.

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 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 both 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 how 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… differ[ing] 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 et al., 1991). 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 simply growth to a more concerted focus on sustained human wellbeing on the basis of maintaining the health and functioning of the earth's ecosystems.

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. These 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. It centres community provisioning systems as able to not only protect communities from market fluctuations but also transform economies, reduce wastage of resources and food, minimises the overexploitation of resources, and result in 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 economics discipline's conception of environmental change and gender through wider disciplinary integration, while FPE seeks to understand 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., 1992). An important source 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, and therefore as the saviours because of their universal closeness to nature (Gonda, 2019). FPE focuses more on gendered power relations that are shaped in inseparable conjunction with wider class, race, 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 questioning of dominant practices of knowledge and authority, such as dissecting dominant processes of policy development and practices in relation to climate change from a gendered perspective and showing how they can exacerbate existing inequalities. In turn, it values local practices and knowledge related to elements such as 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 so 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 production relations, but also the wider social relations of society, including the activities and conditions on which it depends and purportedly lie outside its realm. A core concept that Fraser uses to describe one of the ways capitalism shapes these elements and activities is 'cannabalisation', which refers to capitalism's tendency to deprive these other elements of what they need to function in order to sustain and grow itself. The major contradiction here is that, what capitalism cannabalises, it also depends on to reproduce itself - the care work necessary for humans to be 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. It 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 in order to strengthen them in their own right and 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, in relation to human wellbeing as well as to addressing 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.

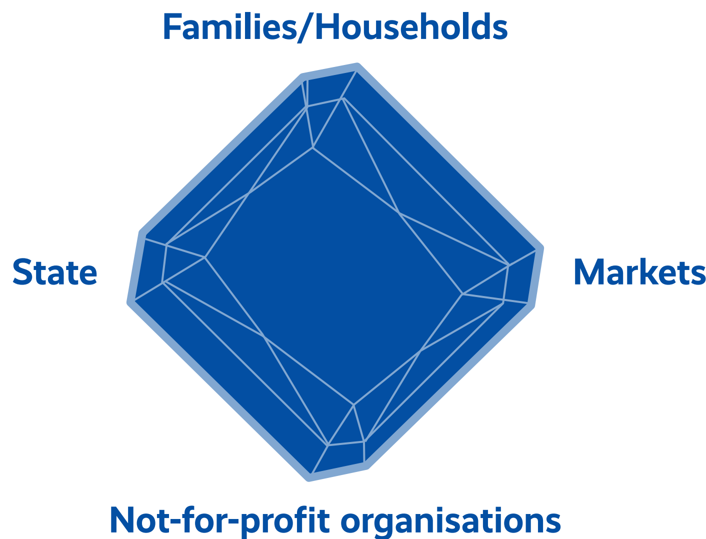
Furthermore, it is important to conceptualise care from an ecological standpoint as well. Fisher and Tronto describe care as a 'species activity' to maintain ourselves and our world, including the environment, as a livable space and so is life-sustaining in this broad sense (in Phalatse et al., 2024: 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 resilience, 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 invisibilised 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 (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. 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-support 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 the food system 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 1. 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 agriculture.

Figure 2: Graphic depiction of the food system

Source: Van Berkum et al 2018

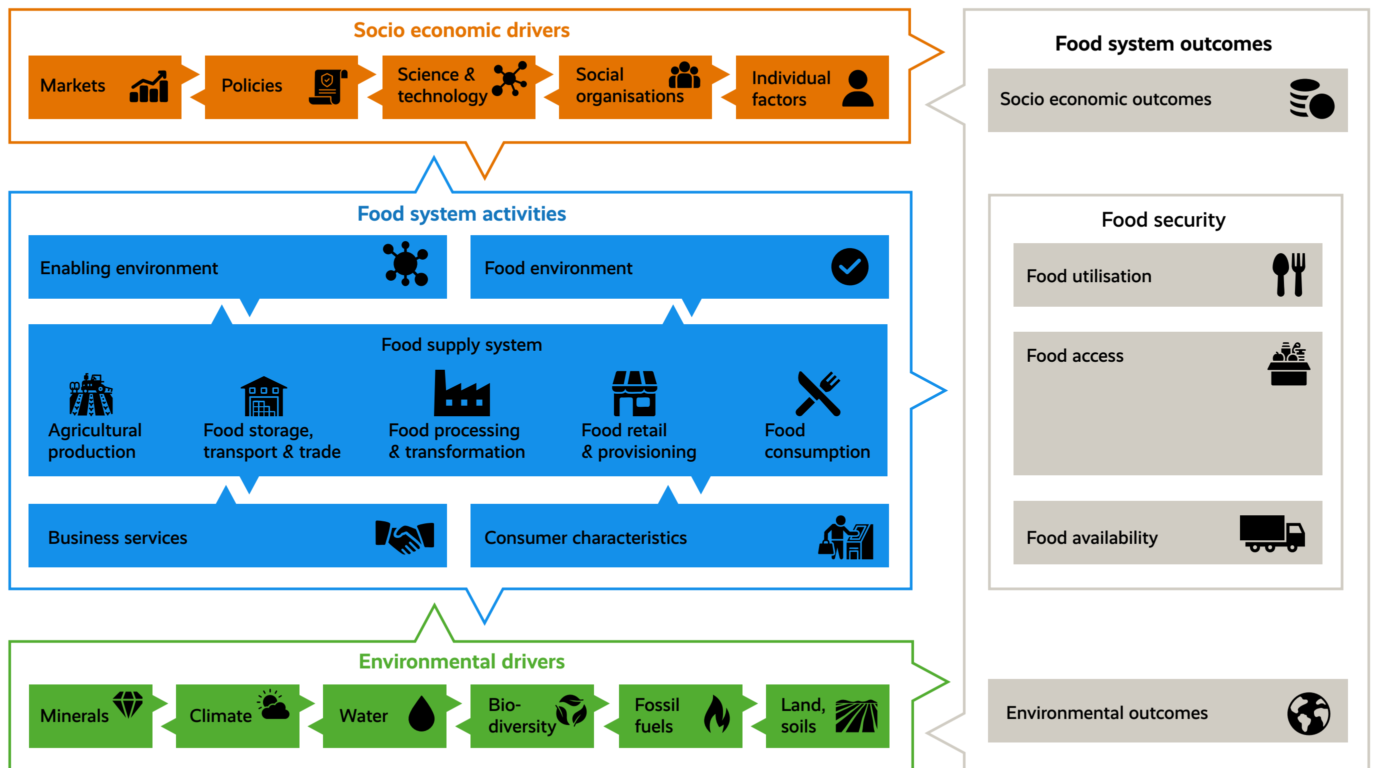


Figure 2 provides a broad schema of a food system structure and processes. From a political ecology perspective, the character of these elements are shaped by power, interests, and contestations linked to local, national, and global dynamics. The food system includes the actors shaping how it functions, 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 - certain 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 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 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., 2021).

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 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. 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 is reflected in the

13 principles of agroecology in light of its contribution to food systems transition, 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 aligned with a care approach for people and the rest of nature. Similarly, strengthening the care economy in relation to food systems also requires a systemic view from production to consumption in order to address hunger and malnutrition and hunger 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 therefore, 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.

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)

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.

Care and the care economy therefore potentially provides 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 in 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 the food system in southern Africa, as a basis for considering 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 already has 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 will be 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 (Moyo, 2015). 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 rural women's unpaid care labour burden for housework, agriculture, and caring for children, the elderly, and the sick (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.

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 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. The 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 regions like 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 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, 2025). The

[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).

comparative affordability 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 increase 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 unpack 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 (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 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 (Oxfam, 2025). 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). 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, only 2% of documented landowners are women versus 3.8% men (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2019). In South Africa, women own under 35% of land while men hold just over 50% (Commission for Gender Equality, 2024). Although land can also be accessed through informal or customary means, control typically remains with men. Land access is 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. 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).

The cumulative effect is a gendered nutrition crisis. Women are more likely to experience malnutrition during pregnancy and lactation, 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 pesticide exposure have been linked to complications during pregnancy, including miscarriage and premature birth (Roba et al., 2015). 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 (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; Oxfam, 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 & 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 & 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 (African Centre for Biodiversity, 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, 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 shapes dietary practices, access to nutrition, and the infrastructure of care, from school feeding schemes to maternal health support. 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. Okali and Naess (2013) critique the dominant policy narratives for portraying women as inherently vulnerable and passive, rather than as part of complex social relations that shape adaptation and resilience. This oversimplification risks reinforcing stereotypes and designing policies that are ultimately ineffective or even harmful. In the next section, we therefore 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. While research on the climate–care–food nexus is still emerging (Phalatse et al., 2024), this paper has drawn together sufficient evidence to propose initial policy elements and begin to present some elements to guide interventions to address care inequalities, as well as advance, protect, and bolster care in food systems as a critical gender just climate adaptation approach for a just transition. 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 subsequent to 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; advance agroecology as an important lever of food system transformation that orients a care-centred food system; ensure stronger policy, practical, and financial support for agroecology guided by the HLPE's 13 principles; and linking macroeconomic policy for the food system to care. A prominent feminist framework for addressing care work inequalities, and especially gendered ones, is the 5R framework and which, following MacGregor et al. (2022), we discuss 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

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 to climate resilience (CFS, 2024; MacGregor et al., 2022). This can include counting such work in national economic statistics to guide further policy interventions (ibid). 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 (MacGregor et al., 2022).

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). 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, and can 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 also disproportionately work in community kitchens (Paganini et al., 2021), 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. 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 therefore 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 such 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).

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.

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, such as between genders in households and communities, 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, labour-saving technologies in both domestic and agricultural spaces can help as both mitigation and adaptation mechanisms while also reducing the time and effort needed for care work tasks. Such technical interventions could include fuel-efficient stoves, solar cookers, or rainwater harvesting systems that reduce the burden of collecting water 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, 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 public provision of social infrastructure is central to ease the burden of care in food systems by households and communities, disproportionately borne by women. 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 infrastructure like hospitals, food marketplaces, or for 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.

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, it is found that 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 of consistently rising domestic electricity costs and privatisation in the energy sector, and their impact on care broadly and in the food system. 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 advocate for a greater role of the state in assuming 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 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, and so advances 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 as a result 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) (Kerr, 2018), 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 related to reducing and redistributing the care burden overall.

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 and decision-making power. 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 material shifts in resources and power. This is relevant to the food system, where in Section 2.2 we discussed how 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.

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 macroeconomic 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 policy to its centre, guiding a holistic response that can nourish both people and the planet.

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