

## **Care work in a sustainability perspective**

Sylvia Lorek

Sustainable Europe Research Institute, Germany

### **Care as a promising cure for various crises**

Multiple crises – political, security, environmental and social – are forcing an epochal shift (Spangenberg & Kurz 2023). Resources are becoming more expensive. In Europe – as part of the rich minority world (Oppong & Dombroski 2024) – disposable incomes and thus private household consumption spending are expected to decline, except for powerful groups that are able to defend their privileges. Under current political-economic arrangements, stagnating economic growth and development will have major implications for social justice policies, including the welfare state and state-funded provisioning for care. Poverty levels in the Global South – the majority world – are linked with increased vulnerability to environmental disasters and a related risk of social instability – particularly if a shift away from growth policies is not accompanied by social compensation for vulnerable groups and the provision of essential services for all (Lorek et al. 2023).

In the strive for solutions the development of more caring societies comes up as a promising opportunity (van Osch 2013, Winker 2015, Chatzidakis 2020, Diski 2022, Charveriat 2024,). Care is, and has always been, essential for the survival of individuals and societies. Care for humans and the non-human environment is at the heart of sustainability research focussing on ‘a good life for all’ where everyone can live well within limits (Millwards-Hopkins et al. 2020).

### **Care – the need for a wide definition**

To achieve this requires a broad definition of care.

*‘To care involves a deep empathy for humans, non-humans and nature. It encompasses at least three dimensions: ethical, emotional and relational. It also entails a wide range of activities that contribute to human well-being and quality of life, from improving one’s own living conditions through the well-being of a particular group or its members, to caring for the local, regional, national or international community. In addition to human well-being, care activities contribute to the well-being of non-humans and the natural world and to the quality of materials and the built environment. ‘*

(Lorek et al. 2023, p. 8)

This definition, based on literature review and intensive exchanges with practitioners, politicians and scholars working on care around the world, reaches far beyond a Eurocentric approach. Even more, a deep search within global perspectives on care reveals a quite broad spectrum.

### **Perspectives on global problems and the care solution**

Not less than six different perspectives can be identified how different communities of scholars and practitioners recognise various crises – and how to find solutions through a caring approach.

The ***care work perspective*** is coping with the problems that care work (1) is under pressure within the current capitalist system to become “more efficient”, (2) often provides informal and precarious care jobs and (3) still is mainly carried out by the unpaid carers and domestic workers invisible in national statistics and societal debates (Chatzidakis et al. 2020; Dowling 2022).

The ***gender inequality perspective*** is struggling to overcome the socially constructed assumption that care work is primarily in the responsibility, if not duty, of women - leaving the care givers in social and economic dependence (Praetorius 2005; Folbre 2006; ILO 2018). The ***ecological perspective*** is concerned with humanity crossing planetary boundaries mainly due to overconsumption by a global minority (Rockström et al. 2009; Steffen et al. 2015; IPBES 2019; Lee et al. 2024)

The ***social and environmental justice perspective*** is insisting that poverty increases vulnerability to environmental disasters and that people who contributed the least to ecological destruction face the worst consequences from the damage it causes (Chancel 2020; Lawson 2020; Olivera et al 2021; Romanello et al. 2021).

The ***post-colonial perspective*** is of specific importance when considering polycrisis in a global context. It is linking the previous perspectives as social and environmental injustice not least occur between the Global North and the Global South through resource extraction, burden-shifting and the consequences of the global care chain, which brings (mostly female) care workers from poorer to richer countries leading to a deficit of care in poorer countries (Sovacool & Scarpaci 2016; Hickel et al. 2022; Sultana 2022).

The ***post-anthropocentric perspective***, finally, is raising attention that the ecosystem changes positively related to human wellbeing are made at the expense of other species in their ecosystems or livestock (Brevik et al. 2020).

### **Approaches to better value care**

In nearly all languages the respective word for *to care* on first sight relates to caring for children and elderly as well as health care. The recognised work for these care activities can be limited to the paid work carried out in professional care system. This perspective, assuming that only what is paid for counts as work, is challenged by feminist approaches arguing that care for relatives and friend in a household context are work as well. They even enlarge the perspective and further include every day house work, social work and e.g., neighbourhood engagement as care work.

First political attention for the unpaid care work was provided with the establishment of time use accounting in the early 1970s in some forerunning countries like Norway leading to cross national comparison in the UN context since the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. By now national and UN statistic offices regularly count the time used for activities like paid and unpaid work, sleep and leisure recognising that in most countries the time for personal care, housework and shopping, volunteering and other care work outweighs the time for paid work. This way time-use statistics are explicitly looking beyond GDP and intend to reshape the way prosperity is measured (Waring 2003).

The 1970s as well saw first research on the explicit link between care for humans and care for the environment when eco-feminists engaged with the upcoming environmental movement. They provided evidence that nature and care work are both devalued, often ignored in policymaking and systematically ignored in economic analysis (Mies & Shiva 1993)

An ongoing controversy, mainly within the *care work* and *gender inequality* perspective, is whether so far unpaid or badly paid care work should be (better) paid or rewarded in other ways. Arguments to pay for care work include that it would provide caregivers greater economic choice and power, reduce the gender gap in care, and increase employment opportunities in care economies. Others argue that paying for care work does not challenge system's values and the distribution of care work. They are concerned that further commodifying care work may lead to further underpayment and exploitation, reinforce gender imbalances, and perpetuate neo-colonial power dynamics. Instead, the proponents of this strain suggest commonising care and recognising its value beyond monetary exchange.

While care and the question how to better share unpaid care seem to be a universal issue all around the globe the ecological perspective receives some more attention in the global north while environmental and social justice as well as specifically the post-colonial perspective is predominantly emphasised in the Global South. Altogether, however, they unite to a global and holistic approach of care: it calls for deep systemic change to overcome the exploitative, competitive capitalist system focused on GDP growth and the unequal distribution of resources between social groups.

### **Joining forces with existing concepts**

Joining forces for more caring societies can build on broad range of existing societal strains. Care is foundational in various approaches of change. Just to provide some examples: Buen Vivir and Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge are prominent practice ones originating from the Global South. Just Transition, Environmental Justice and Commoning are combining theoretical and practice elements and experiences. Degrowth and Eco-feminism are of similar prominence but operating mainly on a theoretical side.

The political requirement to arrive in societies where care is the leading target is first of all to establish sufficiency policies. This includes ensuring that the infrastructure promotes sustainable ways of living and a fair access to and redistribution of resources within sustainable limits to production and consumption both within safe planetary boundaries (Fuchs et al 2021).

On the social side building care and climate alliances is needed strengthening solidarity with those currently exploited by the system. This calls to increase participation in decision-making and organisation of societies and institutions through e.g., citizens assemblies or energy councils providing funded time to enable participation for everyone in creating change.

Regarding economic policies a shift is required where care grows while socially and environmentally harmful activities shrink. This includes a stop in the privatisation of care, energy, transport services etc. Instead move towards socialisation of care and essential services. Further on it requires to foster solidary support structures, (e.g. UBI, UBS); better wages and training for exploited care workers (Bärnthaler & Gough 2021).

All steps need to be informed by gender 'transformative' budgeting: assessing all policies for positive and transformative impact on gendered inequalities not least by redefining and redistributing unpaid care work (Diski 2022).

### Sources

Bärnthaler, R. & Gough, I. (2023). Provisioning for sufficiency: Envisaging production corridors. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 19(1): 2218690

Brevik, K., Adams, J., Dube, B., Barbieri, L., & Haage, G. Y. (2020). Wellbeing in the more-than-human world. In *Sustainable Wellbeing Futures* (pp. 151-166). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Diski, R. (2022). *A Green and Caring Society*. UK Feminist Green New Deal Report. Womens' Budget Group UK.

Chancel, L. (2020). *Unsustainable Inequalities: Social Justice and the Environment*. Harvard University Press.

Charveriat, C. & van Melkebeke, T. (2024). *A European Green Caring Society*. Green European Foundation. Political Brief.

Chatzidakis, A., Hakim, J., Litter, J. & Rottenberg, C. (2020). *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*. Verso Books.

Dowling (2022). *The Care Crisis: What Caused It and How Can We End It?* Verso Books;

Folbre, N. (2006). Measuring care: Gender, empowerment, and the care economy. *Journal of Human Development* 7(2): 183-99

Fuchs, D., Sahakian, M., Gumbert, T., Di Giulio, A., Maniates, M., Lorek, S., Graf, A. (2021) *Consumption Corridors - Living a Good Life within Sustainable Limits*. Routledge.

Hickel, J. et al. 2022. Imperialist appropriation in the world economy: Drain from the global South through unequal exchange, 1990-2015. *Global Environmental Change* 73: 102467.

ILO (2018). *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*. Geneva. International Labour Organization.

IPBES (2019). *The IPBES Global Assessment on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. Bonn: Secretariat of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services.

Lawson, M. et al. (2020). *Time to Care: Unpaid and Underpaid Care Work and the Global Inequality Crisis*. Oxfam.

Lee, H., Calvin, K., Dasgupta, D., Krinner, G., Mukherji, A., Thorne, P., ... & Ruane, A. C. (2024). *CLIMATE CHANGE 2023 Synthesis Report: Summary for Policymakers*. IPCC

Lorek, S., Power, K., & Parker, N. (2023). *Economies that Dare to Care - Achieving social justice and preventing ecological breakdown by putting care at the heart of our societies*. Hot or Cool Institute, Berlin.

Mies, M. & Shiva, V. 1993. *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books.

- Millwards-Hopkins, J.; Steinberger, J. K.; Rao, N.D. & Oswald, Y. (2020) Providing decent living with minimum energy: A global scenario. *Global Environmental Change* Vol 65, 102168
- Olivera, M. et al. 2021. *A dimensão de gênero no Big Push para a Sustentabilidade no Brasil: as mulheres no contexto da transformação social e ecológica da economia brasileira*. São Paulo: United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung;
- Oppong, N., & Dombroski, K. (2024). Majority and Minority Worlds. In: *Introducing Human Geographies* (pp. 115-128). Routledge.
- Praetorius, I. (2015). *Wirtschaft ist Care - oder: Die Wiederentdeckung des Selbstverständlichen*. Schriften zu Wirtschaft und Soziales (16). Berlin: Heinrich Böll Stiftung.
- Rockström, J. et al. (2009). Planetary boundaries: Exploring the safe operating space for humanity. *Ecology and Society* 14(2)
- Romanello, M. et al. (2022). The 2022 Report of the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change: Health at the Mercy of Fossil Fuels. *The Lancet* 400(10363): 1619-1654.
- Sovacool, B.K. & Scarpaci, J. (2016). Energy justice and the contested petroleum politics of stranded assets: Policy insights from the Yasuní-ITT Initiative in Ecuador. *Energy Policy* 95: 158-171.
- Spangenberg, J. H., & Kurz, R. (2023). Epochal turns: Uncomfortable insights, uncertain outlooks. *Sustainable Development*, 31(4), 2347-2362.
- Steffen, W. et al. (2015). Planetary boundaries: Guiding human development on a changing planet. *Science* 347(6223): 1259855.
- Sultana, F. (2022). The unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality. *Political Geography* 99: 102638
- van Osch, Thera. 2013. *Towards a Caring Economic Approach*.
- Waring, M. (2003). Counting for something! Recognising women's contribution to the global economy through alternative accounting systems. *Gender & Development*, 11(1), 35-43.
- Winker, Gabriele (2015). *Care Revolution*. Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag.

-----