



# ► ILO Care Economy Brief

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## Employment-intensive investments for advancing decent work in the care economy

### Key points

- ▶ **Leveraging employment-intensive investments to meet growing care needs.** Employment-intensive investments have traditionally focused on creating decent jobs through infrastructure development in various sectors. Expanding their scope to include the care economy allows these investments to contribute towards addressing urgent care deficits while creating employment opportunities, promoting gender equality, expanding care service provision, and contributing to crisis resilience and environmental sustainability.
- ▶ **The care economy matters to employment-intensive investments.** Infrastructure is an essential element in building a sustainable care economy and is central to human, social, economic and environmental well-being. Integrating care work and care services into employment-intensive investments will assist in meeting multiple objectives in line with the ILO [Resolution concerning decent work and the care economy \(2024\)](#):
  - **Decent job creation for care workers:** Care-related initiatives can create skilled and decent jobs with better working conditions for care workers.
  - **Improved outcomes for beneficiaries, workers and employers:** Addressing care needs allows more workers – particularly women – to participate in employment-intensive investments, enhancing inclusivity and productivity and boosting employment-intensive investment initiatives' efficiency and business outcomes.
  - **Broader societal impact:** Investing in care infrastructure and services reduces unpaid care responsibilities, closes gaps in quality care services, enhances gender equality, fosters social cohesion and strengthens communities' well-being.
- ▶ **Three promising intervention models for care integration in employment-intensive investments:**
  - **Supporting workers with care responsibilities in employment-intensive investment initiatives:** Providing care measures can ensure more equitable participation in employment-intensive investments, particularly for women, who largely shoulder unpaid care work.
  - **Developing care infrastructure:** Building and rehabilitating facilities like childcare and healthcare centres and youth or community spaces directly addresses care and support needs while creating jobs with decent work potential, especially health and care infrastructure in rural and remote areas, which is often non-existent.
  - **Including care as a sector of work:** Integrating care work as a key sector within employment-intensive investment initiatives enables the creation of skilled, decent jobs, benefiting workers and communities alike.

## Introduction

As global care needs continue to grow, there is an opportunity to improve both paid and unpaid care work by addressing decent work deficits faced by the care workforce and fostering more equitable and supportive conditions for workers with care responsibilities, while ensuring access to care for all. At the same time, according to the ILO, investing in closing care policy gaps in childcare-related leave (maternity, paternity and parental leave), breastfeeding breaks, early childhood care and education, and long-term care services in 82 economies could create 280 million jobs by 2030, with an additional 19 million by 2035, totalling 299 million jobs. Public employment initiatives should, therefore, address the care crisis by promoting investments and job creation in the care economy. These efforts should also respond to the needs of care recipients – for instance, by expanding support services for persons with disabilities to foster autonomy and independence – while advancing equitable and sustainable development. Employment-intensive investments that focus on poverty reduction, local economic and social development, and job creation are well positioned to play a transformative role in the care economy as part of the integrated and coherent care policies and systems for decent work and gender equality, as called for by the [ILO Resolution concerning decent work and the care economy](#) (ILO 2024a). The Resolution states that action is needed to ensure decent work in the care economy, as well as to more broadly promote decent work by ensuring access to care for all.

By addressing the care needs of workers in employment-intensive investments – through implementing measures such as care leave, including maternity and paternity leave – and by developing care-related infrastructure and integrating care sectors into employment-intensive investments, these investments can contribute to challenging restrictive social norms and gender stereotypes and providing equal opportunities and treatment for both women and men. In so doing, employment-intensive investment initiatives are very well placed to support the realization of the ILO 5R Framework for Decent Care Work, namely: recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care and reward and representation of care workers. Such initiatives can also create decent work in the care economy by channelling investments in care sectors and fostering inclusive growth. For businesses, such investments contribute to a more productive and engaged workforce by reducing absenteeism, improving retention rates and enhancing overall employee well-being. Additionally, care-responsive employment-intensive investments can stimulate local

economies by creating new jobs and expanding markets for care-related goods and services.

When these initiatives are well designed, they can contribute to building resilient communities by addressing social cohesion and the essential needs of groups in vulnerable situations during times of crisis. Integrating care-related infrastructure as part of employment-intensive investment interventions will also enhance crisis preparedness and resilience by ensuring communities have access to critical care services during emergencies. Environmental considerations, when aligned with care-related initiatives, further enhance the long-term sustainability of the benefits of these investments. For example, building care infrastructure with energy-efficient designs or eco-friendly materials not only reduces environmental impact but also lowers operational costs for employers and governments, creating a win-win scenario.

By integrating care-related initiatives and ensuring that public investments in infrastructure and services minimize environmental impact, rehabilitate and conserve natural resources and enhance social cohesion and community resilience, employment-intensive investments can simultaneously promote green and care economies while strengthening the capacity of individuals and communities to cope with crisis (Women's Budget Group 2022; UN Women 2023, World Economic Forum 2024; ILO 2024b). These measures align with the ILO's *Guidelines for a Just Transition towards Environmentally Sustainable Economies and Societies for All* (2015) and the ILO Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 (No. 205).

This brief explains the ILO's understanding of the care economy, highlights the importance of investing in it and outlines practical ways in which employment-intensive investments can contribute to advancing decent work in the care economy. The note also highlights examples of promising initiatives in this field. It aims to provide guidance to actors implementing employment-intensive investment initiatives – including national governments, employers' and workers' organizations, ILO officials, development agencies and banks – on how to maximize the potential of these initiatives for furthering decent work in the care economy. Above all, this brief provides a clear pathway to ensure that employment-intensive investments benefit men and women more equally, beyond simply setting targets. By providing concrete solutions that remove barriers to women's participation in sectors that are often considered more suited to men, employment-intensive investment initiatives can intentionally and by design encourage women's employment and create the conditions for workers to balance work and family responsibilities.

## What is the care economy and why invest in it?

Transformative changes in the world of work, driven by technological innovations, demographic shifts, and environmental and climate change, affect the demand for, supply of and access to care (box 1) (ILO 2024a). Care systems continue to depend heavily on unpaid care work – primarily carried out by women – as well as on poor quality care jobs, where workers often lack social protection, endure inadequate working conditions, and lack voice and representation.

In 2015, 2.1 billion people were in need of care, including 1.9 billion children under 15 years and 0.2 billion older persons. By 2030, this number is expected to rise to 2.3 billion, with an additional 100 million children aged 6–14 years and an additional 100 million older persons needing care (ILO 2018). Despite this, investments in the care economy remain insufficient, resulting in significant gaps in care services. Where care services exist, they often remain inaccessible, unaffordable, inadequate and low-quality (ILO 2022a; ILO 2023). The World Health Organization estimates a shortfall of 18 million health workers by 2030, mostly in low- and lower-middle-income countries (WHO 2016), given the projected increase in healthcare needs and demographic transformations. Consequently, unpaid carers have to fill these gaps, often choosing between decent employment opportunities and providing care for those who depend on them.

The vast majority of global care needs are met by unpaid care work, and the majority of unpaid carers are women (ILO 2018; ILO 2024c). The ILO estimates that, in 2023, 748 million people were outside of the labour force due to care responsibilities. Of these, 708 million were women, accounting for 45 per cent of women outside of the labour force globally, while 40 million were men, accounting for 5 per cent of inactive men (ILO 2024d). This highlights the magnitude of care responsibilities shouldered by women and its impact in preventing them from participating in the labour force (ILO 2024c). This substantial undertaking by unpaid carers often compensates for a lack of public expenditure on care services and infrastructure (ILO 2018; ILO 2024d).

The paid care sectors – including the education, health and social sectors – are often characterized by decent work deficits such as low pay, long hours and occupational risks, including violence and harassment (ILO 2024c). While the care workforce is highly heterogeneous – with workers who differ markedly in education level, skills and remuneration – 65 per cent of this global workforce is comprised of women, with even higher rates of

feminization in countries at lower income levels (ILO 2024a; ILO 2024c; ILO 2018).

### ► Box 1. Understanding the care economy

As established by the ILO Resolution concerning decent work and the care economy (ILO 2024a), the care economy comprises care work, including both paid and unpaid, as well as direct and indirect care, provided through the public and private sectors, including micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), non-profit organizations, the social and solidarity economy (such as cooperatives) and households. It includes the individuals who provide and receive care, as well as the employers and institutions that offer care services.

Care work consists of activities and relationships that sustain quality of life; nurture human capabilities; foster agency, autonomy and dignity; and develop the opportunities and resilience of both caregivers and care recipients. It addresses the diverse needs of individuals across different life stages, meeting physical, psychological, cognitive, mental health and developmental needs for care and support of people including children, adolescents, youth, adults, older persons, persons with disabilities and all caregivers.

Direct care work involves personal care activities requiring relational contact; while indirect care work includes activities that promote well-being without direct personal interaction, such as cleaning and cooking.

Paid care work comprises diverse occupations and sectors. The care economy, spanning between formality and informality, includes, but is not limited to, the activities of workers in education, early childhood care and education, the health and social sectors, domestic workers and individuals who perform unpaid care work. Unpaid care work, often provided by the family and by social networks of care recipients, is of great value for care recipients, care providers and society. This unpaid care, which should be more equally shared between men and women, complements and supplements – but cannot replace – paid care work.

The care economy also includes policies, regulatory frameworks, services, infrastructure, institutions, financing mechanisms and social norms that influence and govern the provision and receipt of care and support throughout the life course.

Source: ILO 2024a.

Crises, including conflict, displacement and disasters, exacerbate gender-related inequalities in the world of work, with women and girls often suffering the most (ILO 2022b). During crises, women often take on significantly

more unpaid care work resulting from the breakdown of family income sources, lack of and reduced access to social services, additional care needs, and damaged community and individual properties and workplaces (ILO 2022b). For instance, climate-related disasters and conflict situations often lead to a surge in care needs due to injuries, trauma and displacement and can cause long-term disabilities and illnesses, while simultaneously making care work more challenging, as damaged roads, care facilities and other infrastructure hinder access to essential services (ILO 2024c). Climate-induced water scarcity and fuel and food shortages place additional pressure on women, who are often the primary collectors of water and providers of food, further intensifying their unpaid care work to ensure their families' well-being (ILO 2024b). Likewise, with the disruption of care networks, support and services, refugee and displaced women and girls face increased unpaid care work.

Other changes in the world of work, such as the transition to environmentally sustainable economies, can inadvertently exacerbate care needs by intensifying existing inequalities. For instance, job losses in high-carbon industries, which predominantly employ men, can significantly reduce household income and economic security, particularly in lower-income families. This often leads women and girls to take on additional paid work, often informal or low-paid, to compensate for lost family income. This can also simultaneously intensify the time poverty experienced by women and girls, who commonly shoulder the largest share of unpaid care work, especially in contexts where affordable care services are limited or absent. Simultaneously, the transition to green economies requires new skills and jobs in emerging sectors, which may require retraining and relocation. If women's roles in the transition are overlooked, they risk exclusion from new employment opportunities, potentially pushing them back into unpaid care roles. Investing in the care economy, including through employment-intensive initiatives, can mitigate these challenges and support the transition by creating formal and decent care jobs and infrastructure that provide stability for affected families and address care needs while also supporting women's inclusion in the labour market, ensuring that they are not left behind during this economic transition.

In this landscape, and given the centrality of care for human, social, economic and environmental well-being and sustainable development, the call to invest in care has

been prominent on global development policy frameworks and agendas (ILO 2024a). In June 2024, the International Labour Conference adopted the Resolution concerning decent work and the care economy, stating that the State holds primary responsibility for care provision, funding, regulation and ensuring high standards of quality, safety and health for care workers and care recipients (ILO 2024a). This responsibility includes allocating the necessary resources, while adopting and maintaining robust policy and regulatory frameworks, which should contribute to a rights-based approach to care and be grounded in international labour standards and social dialogue. These investments in comprehensive care policy packages – aligned with the aforementioned ILO 5R Framework for Decent Care Work – would benefit the labour market, individuals, families and society (ILO 2024a).

Investing in integrated and coherent care policy packages has strong employment generation potential. According to data from the ILO Care Policy Investment Simulator, by 2030, investments in childcare-related leave (maternity, paternity and parental leave), breastfeeding breaks, early childhood care and education, and long-term care services in 82 economies could create 280 million jobs, with an additional 19 million by 2035, totalling 299 million jobs. The job creation potential by 2035 includes 96 million jobs in childcare, 136 million jobs in long-term care and 67 million indirect jobs in non-care sectors. Of the potential total net employment creation in 2035, 78 per cent is expected to go to women and 84 per cent is expected to be formal employment (ILO 2022a).

Data from the ILO Care Policy Investment Simulator estimates that every US\$1 invested in closing the childcare policy gap<sup>1</sup> in these 82 economies could result in an average increase of US\$3.76 in global GDP by 2035. Furthermore, such investments could increase women's employment rate from a global average of 46.2 per cent in 2019 to 56.5 per cent in 2035, and reduce the global gender gap in monthly earnings from 20.1 per cent in 2019 to 8.0 per cent in 2035 (ILO 2023).

Investing in the care economy has many more dividends. Not only does it create decent jobs with a relatively low carbon footprint, when green practices and infrastructure are integrated,<sup>2</sup> but it also contributes to enhancing individuals' health, well-being and capabilities, particularly among the most vulnerable (Global Accelerator 2023; ILO

<sup>1</sup> The childcare policy gap refers to the period between the end of statutory childcare-related leave and the starting age for free, universal early childhood care and education or primary education. Currently, the childcare policy gap averages approximately 4.2 years globally.

<sup>2</sup> A just transition to a low-carbon economy is an opportunity to recognize the value of unpaid care work and to invest in public care infrastructure and services that, from one side, support the reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work, and from the other side, generate jobs in the care sector, which is characterized by low carbon emissions (ILO 2024b).



2024a). For unpaid carers, investments in the care economy facilitate their labour force participation and access to income, and due to the gender distribution of unpaid care work, such investments advance gender equality and women's empowerment (Ilkkaracan and Kim 2019). For businesses, care-responsive policies support enterprises, foster productivity, reduce absenteeism and promote better business performance (ILO 2024b). Overall, a robust care economy is critical for building resilience to crises, achieving gender equality, addressing inequalities, and promoting economic and social development (ILO 2024a).

## How can employment-intensive investments contribute to advancing decent work in the care economy?

### The ILO Employment-Intensive Investment Programme (EIIP)

The ILO Employment-Intensive Investment Programme (EIIP) aims at creating more and better jobs through public investments in inclusive economic, social and environmental infrastructure. The EIIP promotes, develops, demonstrates and implements local resource-based (and labour-based) technologies to create these jobs and to develop, rehabilitate or maintain infrastructure assets in a range of areas such as road construction and maintenance, building construction and rehabilitation, irrigation infrastructure development, reforestation and soil conservation. The EIIP supports a human-centred approach and promotes inclusivity throughout the infrastructure development cycle, that is, in planning, design, implementation (construction), maintenance and evaluation. The EIIP approach is an important mechanism for addressing current challenges: for example, in crisis and post-crisis settings, the EIIP supports countries through the reconstruction and rehabilitation of infrastructure. Similarly, the EIIP also supports climate change adaptation and mitigation through green and resilient infrastructure assets.

#### ► Box 2. Types of initiatives supported by the EIIP

**Public employment programmes (PEPs):** PEPs encompass a broad range of government-led direct employment initiatives, including traditional public works programmes and employment guarantee schemes. PEPs play a crucial role in stimulating labour demand in situations where the market fails to generate sufficient productive employment. The EIIP has

collaborated extensively with national PEPs, such as India's [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act \(MGNREGA\)](#) and [South Africa's Expanded Public Works Programme \(EPWP\)](#). The EIIP provides technical support for infrastructure design, advises on targeting improvements and assists in monitoring and evaluating these programme interventions.

**Green works:** Green works refer to employment-intensive development, restoration and maintenance of public infrastructure, community assets, natural areas and landscapes to contribute to environmental goals such as adaptation to climate change and natural disasters, environmental rehabilitation, ecosystem restoration and nature conservation. Common examples include soil and water conservation, afforestation and reforestation, irrigation, and flood protection. The EIIP assists with and guides the identification, design and implementation of interventions that promote climate change adaptation and mitigation.

**Crisis response and prevention:** The EIIP helps governments create job opportunities in response to crises by combining emergency employment with long-term development goals. It provides immediate income to vulnerable communities through infrastructure-related work, promoting decent work conditions and supporting local recovery. Over time, these efforts transition into sustainable development and disaster resilience, helping rebuild infrastructure, strengthen livelihoods and prevent future crises through a community-based, employment-driven approach.

Source: Authors' consultations with ILO EIIP.

Women's participation in infrastructure works has traditionally been, and in many cases continues to be, limited due to generic gender inequalities in access to opportunities, assets and resources, as well as in decision-making. This is compounded by factors specific to the infrastructure sector, such as concerns about health and safety in the sector, as well as stereotypes relating to the appropriateness or capacity of women to carry out what is traditionally considered "men's work". For women who do work in the sector, decent work deficits, such as inadequate accommodation of life-cycle needs (such as maternity protection), pay inequities, violence and harassment, and a lack of access to water and separate sanitary facilities at the worksite sometimes overshadow the promise of the sector.

The ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) has underscored the importance of ensuring that men and women engaged in all aspects of public investment works

have equal opportunities in employment and career progression, free from discrimination based on care responsibilities.<sup>3</sup> In its work, the EIIP therefore applies a gender-responsive approach, striving to achieve equitable outcomes for men and women through measures that promote women’s participation and empowerment in and through its programmes. Examples of measures introduced by the EIIP in different regions include targets for the recruitment of women, pay equity policies and mechanisms to provide protection from violence and harassment (Tanzarn and Gutierrez 2016).

While this brief primarily highlights the ILO’s EIIP as an example, given that it is a long-standing programme that has acquired a wealth of experience since its inception in the 1970s, it is hoped that the insights provided will also help inform employment-intensive investment initiatives managed by national actors (such as public works programmes) or by other partners.

### The three dimensions of the contributions of employment-intensive investments to decent work in the care economy

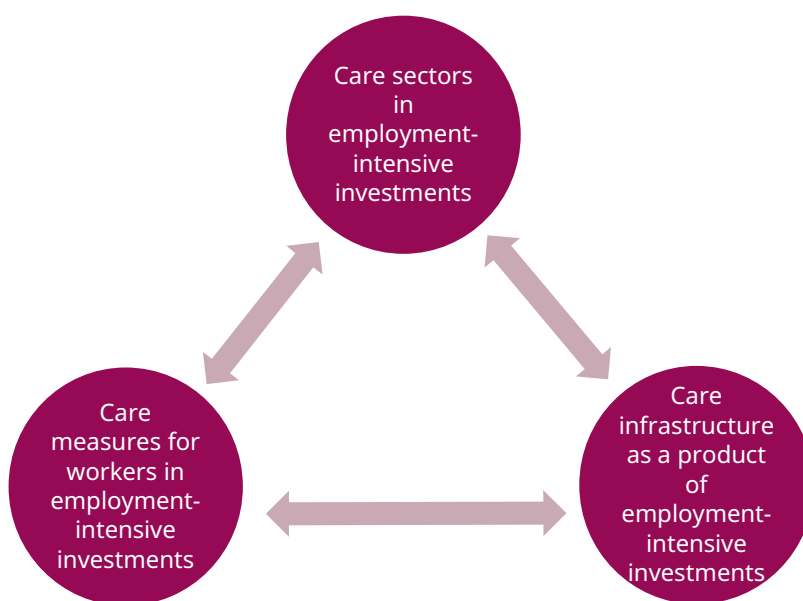
In relation to care, employment-intensive investments provide an opportunity for:

1. supporting workers with care responsibilities in employment-intensive investment initiatives;
2. infrastructure development for the care economy; and
3. integrating care as a sector of work in employment-intensive investments.

Each of these dimensions will be covered by the three sections that follow. It should also be noted that when provisions supporting workers with family responsibilities are entrenched in law, employment-intensive investments should always implement these legal provisions and, where possible, go beyond them by providing multi-faceted and more comprehensive interventions to advance decent work in the care economy.

When done through a nexus approach and lens that considers peace-responsiveness, gender equality, disability inclusion, disaster risk and environmental concerns, efforts to provide decent work in the care economy through employment-intensive investments can also help with building peaceful, resilient and sustainable economies. When designed and implemented with the participation of social partners, employment-intensive investments have the potential to promote democratic governance, participation and sustainability, and to encourage peaceful and constructive workplaces.

► **Figure 1. Overview of the three dimensions of the contributions of employment-intensive investments to decent work in the care economy**



<sup>3</sup> CEACR, [Direct Request – Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 \(No. 156\) – Paraguay, 2018](#).

## 1. Supporting workers with care responsibilities in employment-intensive investment initiatives

One of the biggest challenges limiting women's participation in employment-intensive investments is the disproportionate share of care responsibilities that they shoulder.

It is therefore essential that all employment-intensive investments initiatives, regardless of whether they are related to construction, green works or social services provision (such as care work), put in place strategies and practices related to care-responsive workplaces.

This is also in line with CEACR recommendations, which emphasize the importance for public investment works to maximize their effectiveness in supporting workers with family responsibilities by including care measures in both the public and private sectors.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, these measures may include, for instance:

- ▶ care-related paid leave policies (such as maternity, paternity, and parental leave or emergency leave); this includes offering paid paternity leave and promoting more involvement of men in care responsibilities;
- ▶ labour protection policies when taking care-related leave or as a result of discrimination based on having family responsibilities (such as protection from dismissal during pregnancy and care-related leave, burden of proof lying on the employer to prove that a dismissal is not related to family responsibilities and prohibition of pregnancy tests in employment);
- ▶ occupational safety and health (OSH) for pregnant and nursing women and ensuring that they are not obliged to perform work that could be prejudicial to the health of the mother or child;
- ▶ provision of breastfeeding facilities and breaks;
- ▶ paid time-off for both parents for prenatal and postnatal healthcare visits;
- ▶ provision of worksite childcare services;
- ▶ flexible working arrangements, including flexible or reduced hours, enabling workers to combine family responsibilities with work in employment-intensive investment initiatives;
- ▶ awareness-raising and other mechanisms to prevent and address discrimination, gender-based violence

and harassment in the world of work, including against pregnant women and workers with care responsibilities.

In implementing measures such as the above, employment-intensive investments should follow national law and practice as well as established national minimum wage practices, collective bargaining agreements and other existing regulations, with the view to ensuring decent working conditions for all employment-intensive investment beneficiaries. For instance, maternity leave entitlements are usually specified in national law, and as such, should be taken into consideration in the design of employment-intensive investment interventions. In addition, employment-intensive interventions can go beyond minimum legal requirements through additional support measures, including, for instance, the provision of childcare. In low-income countries, financing such measures could be challenging. However, it should also be noted that some of these measures do not require significant investments. For instance, awareness campaigns on flexible work hours and nursing spaces are an easy-to-implement and low-cost measure (ILO 2014). Additionally, public-private partnerships that leverage the strengths of both the public and private sectors can also support the provision of quality care-related services and facilities (ILO 2024a).

Care measures have been introduced in a number of employment-intensive initiatives worldwide. Examples include national flagship public employment programmes in:

- **Ethiopia** – the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), which tackles food insecurity;
- **India** – the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which targets the rural poor, aiming to boost income equality and women's wages; and
- **South Africa** – the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), a multi-sectoral effort supporting infrastructure, environment and social services with a focus on women, youth and persons with disabilities.

While the three programmes all have slightly different approaches, they all three share a focus on job creation and gender equality. For instance, Ethiopia's PSNP has introduced flexibility in terms of working times so that women workers can better balance their paid work with unpaid care responsibilities. In addition, the PSNP's

<sup>4</sup> CEACR, [Direct Request – Convention No. 156 – Paraguay](#), 2018. See also the Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183) and Recommendation (No. 191), 2000, and the Workers with Family Responsibility Convention (No. 156) and Recommendation No. 165, 1981. Convention No. 183 applies to “all employed women, including those in atypical forms of dependent work” (Article 2). Convention No. 156 applies to men and women workers with responsibilities in relation to their dependent children and other members of their immediate family as well as to all branches of economic activity and all categories of workers (Articles 1 and 2).

provision of direct support during the late stages of pregnancy and during lactation, as well as the provision of community crèches better enable women with small children to be able to work. India's MGNREGA also supports women's participation through crèche facilities that are to be provided by the implementing agency when five or more children below the age of 6 are brought to the worksite. South Africa's EPWP introduced a code of good conduct that is incorporated in all projects and covers (among others) fair working conditions, OSH and facilitation of women's participation, including provisions on protecting the health of pregnant or breastfeeding women (Holmes and Jones 2011).

While these programmes have played an important role in introducing such measures, their experiences have also highlighted some challenges in this regard. For instance, in the cases of the PSNP and MGNREGA, the establishment of childcare facilities was not commonly practiced despite the policy commitment (an older study from India covering four states shows, for example, that by 2008 the provision of childcare facilities at worksites had varied from 17 per cent to just 1 per cent (Jandu 2008 as cited in Holmes and Jones 2011). In Ethiopia, the slow progress in establishing childcare facilities through the PSNP was partly attributed to inadequate attention to addressing the underlying reasons for weak demand for such services by programme participants, who had concerns about their children being cared for by people unknown to them as well as about the possible spread of disease if large numbers of children are being cared for together. In both programmes, local women were engaged to provide care, and the deployment of trained childcare personnel was not part of the programme. The facilities are also generally temporary, built for the duration of the project, so there are limits to their standard. The lack of good quality childcare facilities staffed with trained childcare personnel has led to negative impacts for the children of the workers: in the case of the PSNP, there were reports that women often took young children with them to work, risking adverse infant health consequences. In the case of the MGNREGA, some women were reportedly forced to leave their younger children with older daughters, pulling them out of school (Holmes and Jones 2011).

► **Box 3. EIIP projects with measures to support workers with family responsibilities**

EIIP projects have in many cases introduced measures to support workers with family responsibilities, including through the provision of childcare services for workers (for example, in EIIPs in the Philippines, Lebanon and Jordan) or the provision of light work for women who are pregnant or breastfeeding (for example, in the EIIP in Tanzania).

**Indonesia:** The Nias Islands Rural Access and Capacity Building Project (NIAS-RACBP) programme in Indonesia aimed to enhance gender equality and women's participation in public works. This initiative included setting up childcare facilities to support women and actively encouraging their participation in the young supervisor apprentice scheme. As a result of these efforts, women constituted 50 per cent of the 42 participants in the apprentice supervisor course. By addressing gender-specific needs and providing supportive facilities like childcare, the programme effectively increased women's involvement in roles traditionally dominated by men, thereby promoting gender equality and economic empowerment within the community. The success of the NIAS-RACBP programme underscores the importance of creating a conducive environment and operational practices that facilitate women's full participation in public works and capacity-building activities.

Sources: Tanzarn and Gutierrez 2016; ILO 2001.

It should be noted that most EIIPs have focused on facilitating the combination of unpaid care work with paid work for women. While this is essential for enabling women to benefit from these paid work opportunities, consideration should also be given to measures that can facilitate transformative change, including a reduction in the unpaid care responsibilities of women and a fairer distribution of such work between men and women, as well as between families and the State. For instance, simply offering flexible hours to women workers does not reduce their share of unpaid care work, and can even reinforce traditional roles; while also offering care leave to men working in such programmes can help to transform roles and the division of unpaid care work.

► **Box 4. Project cycle tips for supporting workers with family responsibilities in employment-intensive investment projects**

► **Assessment/planning:**

- Carry out assessment of the care needs of potential workers in the project.
- Plan required measures to support workers with family responsibilities.

► **Implementation:**

- Introduce/implement support measures for workers with family responsibilities, such as providing paid time off for care, facilitating access to childcare services, providing flexible hours or part-time work options, and factoring in the needs of pregnant or breastfeeding women.



- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Develop and use key performance indicators (KPIs) to monitor/evaluate the project's performance. Examples of KPIs include provision of:
  - maternity, paternity, parental and other forms of care leave;
  - childcare services;
  - flexible work hours or part-time work;
  - safe and appropriate work for pregnant and breastfeeding women;
  - breastfeeding breaks and spaces; and
  - pay equity measures.
- **Throughout:**
  - Involve employers' and workers' organizations at all stages to leverage their knowledge and expertise.
  - Give consideration to peace-responsiveness, disaster risk reduction and environmental sustainability.

Source: Authors' consultations with ILO EIIP and gender experts.

## 2. Infrastructure development for the care economy

### Supporting the development of infrastructure that reduces unpaid care work

Improved infrastructure can help reduce unpaid care work by making essential tasks like water or firewood collection and childcare more manageable through new facilities and improved mobility. For instance, investments in safe roads and transport reduce travel time to school, healthcare services and markets, thereby easing women's unpaid workloads as well as preventing violence and harassment when commuting to and from work.

Research confirms the direct link between physical infrastructure and the reduction of unpaid care work (OECD 2019; ADB 2015). For example, with regard to roads, studies have found that:

- In Sri Lanka, improved roads meant that bicycles can be used to help transport water, and other members of the family, including men, now help in the task.
- In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, a new road led to a reduction in the time spent by women on housework, thereby increasing their opportunity to participate more in market work (ADB 2015).

### ► Box 5. Tanzania: Factoring in unpaid care work under the EIIP component of the PSSN programme

The Productive Social Safety Net (PSSN) programme implemented by the Tanzania Social Action Fund was established in 2013 to contribute to the reduction of extreme poverty in Tanzania. The programme's public works component, which received technical support from the ILO, has implemented a number of sub-projects in the areas of watershed management, forestry, soil conservation, land use management and environmental management. The PSSN also supported households in building basic infrastructure, like fishponds, earth dams and irrigation schemes (among others), on which they can build sustainable income and livelihoods.

The PSSN ensures women are engaged in the planning of public works and that priority is given to works that reduce women's regular work burden. As a result, the selection of sub-projects has included, for instance, projects to ease their routine water fetching tasks.

Source: UNDP 2018; ILO 2019.

Gender-responsive investment in infrastructure is thus key to the reduction of unpaid care work – one of the 5 “Rs” of the ILO framework – a reality, particularly in relation to tasks that are a drudgery.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, employment-intensive investment interventions that involve infrastructure development should assess the potential impact of planned infrastructures on unpaid care work and factor these impacts into decision-making on infrastructure projects.

### Supporting development of care infrastructure

Investing in care-related infrastructure, such as childcare centres, recreational areas, long-term care facilities, communal care centres, healthcare infrastructure or infrastructure for persons with disabilities, is essential for meeting care needs and fostering inclusive growth.

Infrastructure planning processes that support local, inclusive planning and involve women and local communities in decision-making help to put care infrastructure on the agenda and improve their quality and accessibility, as well as their employment impacts.

By prioritizing care infrastructure alongside traditional projects such as roads, public investment can drive more equitable labour force participation, support resilient communities, provide more health-promoting spaces for

<sup>5</sup> See: UNOPS et al., *Guidelines for Developing Inclusive Transport Infrastructure*, 2023; and ILO, *Gender Equality and Inclusion for a Just Transition in Climate Action: A Policy Guide*, 2024.

care recipients, and enhance social and economic outcomes (box 6).

► **Box 6. Examples of care infrastructure developed by the EIIP**

- **Capacitating local governments in Jordan on care infrastructure (EIIP KfW Jordan):** Since 2024, the EIIP has partnered with 15 municipalities to implement the following projects: "Roads infrastructure and development of pedestrian safety"; "I belong to my school"; and "Children nursery and community parks space". These initiatives use labour-based and local resource-based technologies to create sustainable infrastructure aligned with municipal development plans while also creating decent jobs: 155,000 paid workdays for 1,500 beneficiaries, 34 per cent of whom are women and 5 per cent of whom are persons with disabilities.
- **Supporting reconstruction priorities in Sudan (under PROSPECTS):** In 2022, in consultation with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the EIIP rehabilitated existing structures and constructed new facilities in health centres in both the East Darfur and West Kordofan States of Sudan in response to COVID-19 to improve access to health services among refugees and in host communities.
- **Building partnerships and promoting synergies in Madagascar:** The ILO has been collaborating with several agencies to implement a rehabilitation and reconstruction programme in Madagascar since 1992. Haute Intensité de Main d'Œuvre (HIMO) projects have included the construction of schools, urban roads, toilets and irrigation canals. Under the "Education for All" programme with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), more than 1,500 school facilities have been constructed and maintained.

Source: Authors' consultations with ILO project colleagues.

In the design and implementation of employment-intensive investment interventions involving infrastructure development, programme managers should therefore consult local communities on their needs and engage them in care infrastructure development.

► **Box 7. Project cycle tips for employment-intensive investment projects working on infrastructure development to ensure that infrastructures meet care needs**

- **Assessment/planning:**
  - Involve women from diverse groups in participatory assessments on infrastructure needs, including care-related infrastructure as well as non-care infrastructure (such as roads) that can facilitate the reduction of unpaid care work.
  - Advocate for/direct investment to care-related infrastructures and non-care infrastructures that can facilitate the reduction of unpaid care work.
- **Implementation:**
  - Support/carry out construction/rehabilitation of accessible care-related infrastructure as well as non-care infrastructure that can facilitate the reduction of unpaid care work as per identified needs.
  - Ensure accessibility and inclusivity by including women with disabilities in the planning and implementation of both care-related and non-care infrastructure.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Develop and use KPIs to monitor/evaluate the project's performance. Examples of KPIs include:
  - number of infrastructures contributing indirectly to the reduction of unpaid care work constructed/rehabilitated;
  - number of care infrastructures constructed/rehabilitated;
  - amount of funds invested in infrastructures contributing indirectly to the reduction of unpaid care work; and
  - amount of funds invested in care infrastructures.
- **Throughout:**
  - Involve employers' and workers' organizations at all stages to leverage their knowledge and expertise.
  - Give consideration to peace-responsiveness, disaster risk reduction and environmental sustainability.

Source: Authors' consultations with ILO EIIP and gender and disability specialists.

### 3. Integrating care as a sector of work in employment-intensive investments

Employment-intensive investments have typically focused on infrastructure, and care has not been fully integrated in their operations. However, there are some exceptions, such as South Africa, which introduced care-focused public employment programmes (PEPs) early on, or Argentina and Rwanda, which have done so more recently, helping to bring about a model of employment-intensive investment that is increasingly focused on addressing needs as identified locally and becoming more gender-responsive.

Such initiatives have the potential to provide recognition of and remuneration for previously unpaid or informal care work. At the same time, these experiences have shown that the design and implementation of government-led PEPs need careful attention to ensure that they provide decent work for the PEP care workers and positive labour market outcomes for women. This includes living wages aligned with the principle of equal pay for work of equal value, freedom of association and collective bargaining, and other fundamental principles and rights at work, as well as access to social protection, among others.

Examples of care-focused PEPs include:

► **Argentina**<sup>6</sup>: The “Potenciar Trabajo” (2020–2023) programme aimed to improve employment and generate new productive development proposals to promote full social inclusion of persons in a state of social and economic vulnerability. The programme emphasized the development of community care projects, contributing to care redistribution and gender equality by strengthening the role of the State and community organizations in care provision. The care component of the programme included community kitchens and snack bars; community health promotion; childcare; care for older persons, educational and recreational support for youth, and care for persons with disabilities; and promotion of gender and diversity rights. For example, under the childcare component, the workers hired under the programme provided educational and recreational activities for children and offered support with schoolwork and detecting cases of family violence. The programme achieved notable scale, engaging

approximately 432,450 workers in the care component, representing 39 per cent of the total approximately 1,103,200 workers employed under the Potenciar Trabajo programme. Employers' organizations and trade unions played key roles in the programme's implementation, including by supporting job training and skills certification. For instance, gerontological care training was provided through the healthcare workers' federation “Sanidad”.

- **Rwanda**<sup>7</sup>: The expanded Public Works (ePW) programme in Rwanda, a key part of the Vision 2050 Umurenge Programme initiative, aims to provide flexible, part-time work opportunities for moderately labour-constrained households, especially those with care responsibilities. Initially centred on road maintenance, ePW introduced a new home-based early childhood development (HBECD) component in 2018–19 to address specific community needs. Under this new model, ePW beneficiaries are employed as care workers for children aged 3–5 from low-income families within their community, enabling parents to engage in paid work. Local households select a home to host the HBECD facility, with requirements for basic amenities like a clean area, toilets and space for meal preparation. The programme provides selected homes with essential refurbishment, equipment and supplies to meet these standards. The programme's results in 2022–23 included over 36,000 care workers employed (approximately 25,000 women and 11,000 men). The initiative includes a strong training and supervision component to ensure quality care.
- **South Africa**<sup>8</sup>: In the context of its Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), South Africa has had a pioneering role in introducing new approaches to PEPs that looked beyond traditional public works models to generate social value and extend social services to communities. Care-related programmes were first introduced in 2003, and the number of interventions included under the social sector has grown since then. Home community-based care, early childhood development, the National School Nutrition Programme and the Community Works Programme are the most prominent care-related interventions in the EPWP. The three components of the programme generated 254,000 full-time equivalent jobs (FTEs)<sup>9</sup> in

<sup>6</sup> This example is derived from Micha and Pereyra (2022).

<sup>7</sup> This example is derived from Rwanda, LODA (2023) and World Bank (2023).

<sup>8</sup> This example is derived from Shai (2021).

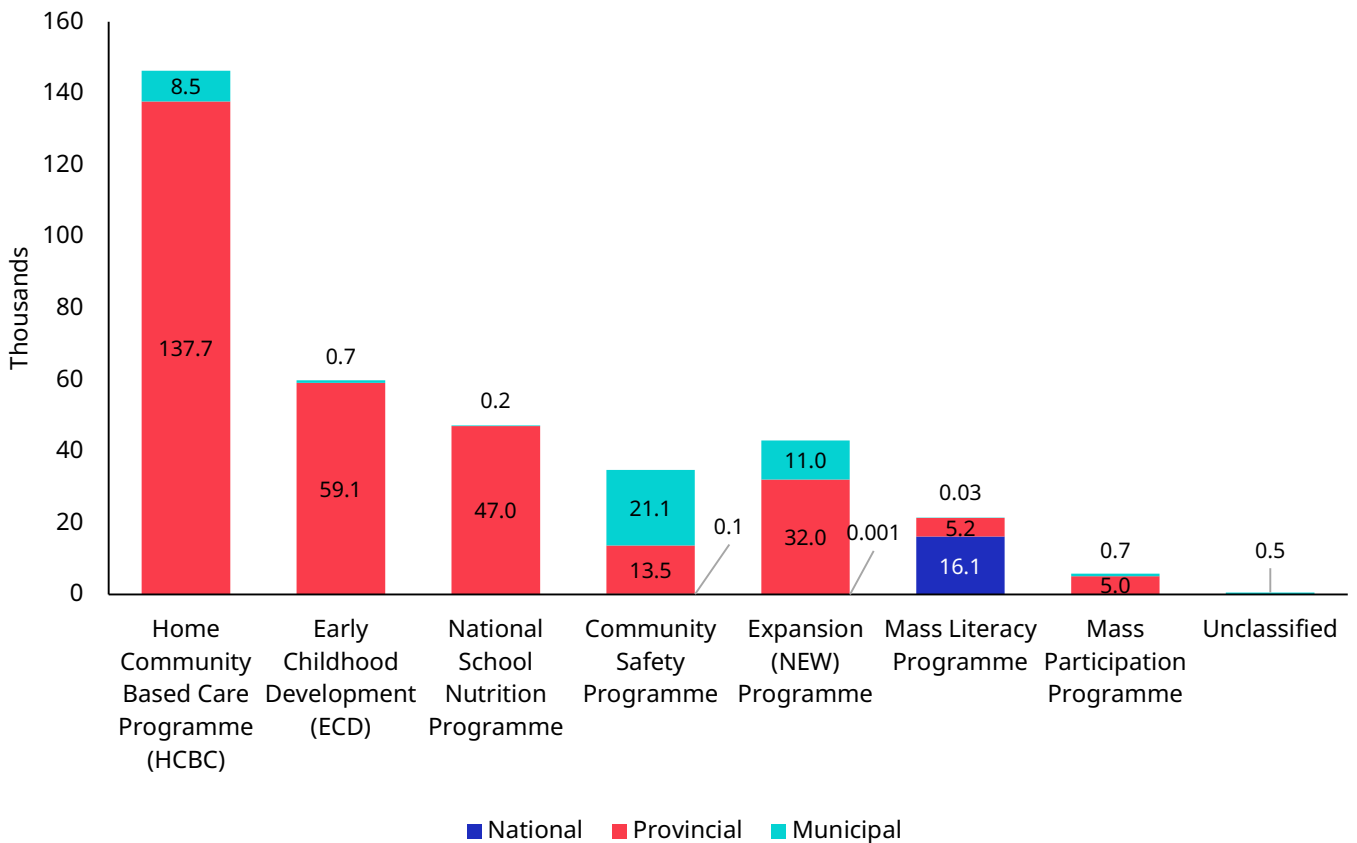
<sup>9</sup> “Full-time equivalent” (FTE) is a unit of measurement that indicates the workload of an employed person in a way that makes workloads comparable in different weekly working hour contexts.

the third phase of the EPWP, representing 72 per cent of the total FTEs in the social sector (figure 2).

The ILO carried out studies on the Argentina and South Africa cases (Micha and Pereya 2022; Shai 2021), revealing that the programmes:

- Created a new baseline for wages and working conditions for participants who had previously worked as volunteers in the sector, and helped to transform women’s unpaid care work into remunerated work.
- Expanded the pool of skilled workers in the areas of work by providing accredited training and upskilling existing practitioners.
- Demonstrated that PEPs can play a role in establishing minimum standards to support progressive shifts toward decent work and gender equality.
- Faced challenges concerning compliance with international labour standards. Examples include irregular hours, inadequate wages, a lack of access to social protection and a lack of alternative employment strategies beyond the temporary PEP.
- Highlighted that PEPs alone cannot fulfil the needs of the care economy and must align with broader plans for developing care sectors.

► **Figure 2. EPWP South Africa: FTEs in the social sector Phase 3 (2014–2018)**



Source: Shai 2021, 16.

Given these promising experiences, employment-intensive investments should further promote the inclusion of care as a sector of work while being cognisant of the challenges and ensuring that decent work conditions are met and that plans and measures are in place for progress outside the programme, either in the public service or through the private and community sectors. In such initiatives, it is important that the job opportunities

provided are decent and skilled, and that both men and women are encouraged to take them up.



► **Box 8. Project cycle tips for including care as a sector of work in employment-intensive investments**

► **Assessment/planning:**

- Assess the need for and feasibility of including care as a sector of work in the initiative through a community-based approach to ensure that local communities are part of the design of the programme.

► **Implementation:**

- Implement/support inclusion of care in the employment-intensive investment initiative, with due attention to freedom of association, collective bargaining, a safe and healthy working environment, wages, paid time off, social protection and other working conditions, as well as exit paths from the temporary programme.

► **Monitoring and evaluation:**

- Develop and use KPIs to monitor/evaluate the project's performance. Examples of KPIs include:
  - care is included as a sector of work in the initiative;
  - numbers of care workers (women and men) hired through the initiative;
  - number of workdays (for women and men) for care work; and
  - working conditions of care workers: pay equity, entitlements to paid time off, coverage by social protection, and so on.

► **Throughout:**

- Involve employers' and workers' organizations at all stages to leverage their knowledge and expertise.
- Give consideration to peace-responsiveness, disaster risk reduction and environmental sustainability.

Source: Authors' consultations with ILO EIIP and gender experts.

► **Box 9. The nexus between care, peace, resilience and environmental sustainability in employment-intensive investments**

Rather than choosing between different social and environmental objectives, significant gains can often be obtained from addressing them simultaneously through integrated interventions. For example, when well designed, employment-intensive investment initiatives with a focus on care have significant potential to

contribute to environmental sustainability, crisis resilience and sustaining peace:

**Peace-responsiveness:** Ensuring that work opportunities in employment-intensive investment initiatives are equitably distributed among different groups and that care services are equally accessible to all groups can help to prevent grievances. Increased contact through mixed-group service provision relationships and collaboration between care workers from different groups can help to foster trust and social cohesion. Engaging both men and women in caregiving roles and sensitizing communities about the shared responsibility of care can challenge traditional gender norms and enhance social cohesion in post-crisis recovery efforts.

**Crisis resilience:** Employment-intensive investments can create immediate employment in the care economy by hiring care workers such as community health and care workers, health workers, or educators, helping to provide critical services to vulnerable populations while generating local livelihoods, in particular for women. The re-construction of care facilities through employment-intensive investment initiatives in the aftermath of crises can help to secure communities' access to care services. These initiatives can also further resilience to future disasters by ensuring that the care facilities are constructed in a way that takes into account disaster risk and uses materials and techniques that provide resistance to hazards such as earthquakes and storms.

**Environmental sustainability:** The way in which care facilities are designed, constructed or rehabilitated through employment-intensive investment initiatives can positively contribute to environmental sustainability. For instance, thoughtful planning of care facilities' locations can minimize travel distances, reducing emissions from transportation while also alleviating drudgerous unpaid care work. Additionally, using eco-friendly materials or construction techniques and implementing energy- and water-efficiency measures help mitigate the environmental impacts of both the construction process and the buildings themselves.

Sources: ILO 2024c; ILO 2022b.

## Recommendations

To harness the potential of employment-intensive investments in supporting the care economy, providing decent work and promoting equal opportunities and treatment for both men and women, these investments need to integrate care considerations into their operations through the mechanisms identified in this brief, namely:

- **Provide care-related support for workers with care responsibilities in employment-intensive investments:** Develop policies and measures within employment-intensive investment initiatives to support workers who have care responsibilities. Support measures could include, for instance: flexible work hours; access to on-site and/or nearby childcare facilities, either free of charge or at a very low cost; breastfeeding breaks and facilities; and job-protected maternity, paternity and parental leave, as well as other care leaves. Such support can overcome the challenge of hiring women in employment-intensive investment initiatives beyond established targets. It can improve job and income opportunities, retention, productivity and work–life balance for workers with family responsibilities.
- **Expand employment-intensive investments to care infrastructure:** Allocate public investments to essential care facilities, including childcare centres, disability support centres, recreational areas and community care hubs, and also as a means of transitioning to low carbon emission jobs. For traditional infrastructures such as roads, ensure that these infrastructures contribute to reducing unpaid care work. This approach will create new employment opportunities in care sectors while relieving the drudgerous unpaid care work of workers with care responsibilities.
- **Consider integrating care sectors into employment-intensive investments:** Assess the need for and feasibility of including care work as a sector within employment-intensive investment initiatives. This can offer a way of creating formal, skilled, decent jobs in the care economy and help to promote fair wages, safe working conditions and secure jobs in care professions. However, such initiatives should not be used to replace public long-term care service provision, and measures need to be in place to ensure standards.

The above should be done with the involvement of employers' and workers' organizations at all stages of the employment-intensive investment project cycle to leverage their knowledge and expertise. Due consideration should also be given to peace-responsiveness, disaster risk reduction and environmental sustainability at all stages of the project cycle.

By leveraging its potential in these ways, employment-intensive investments can strengthen integrated and coherent care policies and systems for decent work and gender equality, as called for by the ILO Resolution concerning decent work and the care economy (ILO 2024a), and contribute to more resilient, inclusive and sustainable societies.

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