



Making Care Systems Visible: The Role of Civil Society in Accountability and Development

Strengthening Care Systems Through Civil Society Action

Care is fundamental to human well-being, social development, and economic prosperity. Yet a growing care challenge is emerging worldwide: demand for care is rising because of demographic, climate-related, and other social and economic changes, while the supply of unpaid care is expected to decline. This widening gap risks leaving more care needs unmet and placing greater pressure on households—particularly women, who continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid care responsibilities.

Urgent action is needed to close care gaps and ensure that growing care needs are met effectively and equitably.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are uniquely positioned to catalyze transformative changes by connecting evidence, lived experience, and advocacy in public and policymaking spaces. Many CSOs already contribute to the care agenda—directly through work on unpaid care, or indirectly through health, education, social protection, employment, gender equality, and local development. This brief aims to strengthen their capacity to use evidence, advocacy, mobilization, and accountability mechanisms to elevate care as a public and policy priority.

From Care Evidence to Better Services

How civil society helps turn care into a public and policy priority



Why Care Systems Matter

Care is a foundation of human well-being, economic productivity, and sustainable development. Every society depends on care to nurture children, support people who are ill and people living with disabilities, and ensure dignified aging. Through its contributions to health, education, nutrition, and well-being across the life course, care underpins the human capabilities that drive labor force participation, productivity, and long-term development.

Despite its importance, much of the care needed by people, families, and communities is still provided as unpaid labor, mostly by women and girls. While essential to social and economic well-being, this unequal distribution limits educational attainment, labor force participation, leadership opportunities, and income generation for women and girls—reinforcing gender inequalities and reducing the social and economic gains that care helps create.

Addressing these challenges requires more than isolated

programs or policies. Childcare, healthcare, eldercare, social protection, infrastructure, and family-friendly workplace policies are often designed and implemented separately, even though they respond to interconnected care needs across the life course. A care systems approach recognizes the need for coordinated policies, services, institutions, infrastructure, and financing mechanisms that work together to meet care needs effectively and equitably.

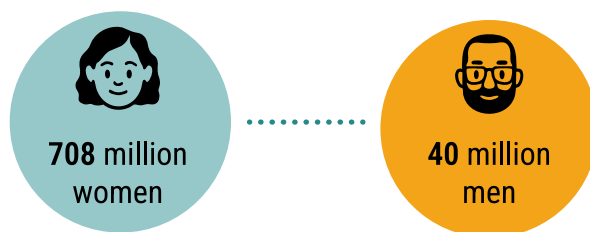
Adequately financed, accessible, and high-quality care systems strengthen human capital development, support healthy aging, and expand opportunities for employment and economic participation. By reducing unpaid care burdens and helping families balance caregiving and paid work, they help create the conditions needed to realize the demographic dividend while supporting inclusive growth and sustainable development. CSOs play a critical role in translating evidence on unpaid care work into policy action, public investment, and improved services.

Key Evidence Relevant to Civil Society Organizations

CSOs achieve impact through advocacy, accountability, and community-based initiatives that expand economic opportunities, improve educational outcomes, strengthen health systems, and promote social protection. However, analyses of these outcomes do not always account for unpaid care and domestic work, which shapes how people access opportunities and services. Care data makes these hidden constraints visible, strengthening evidence-based advocacy and policy engagement.

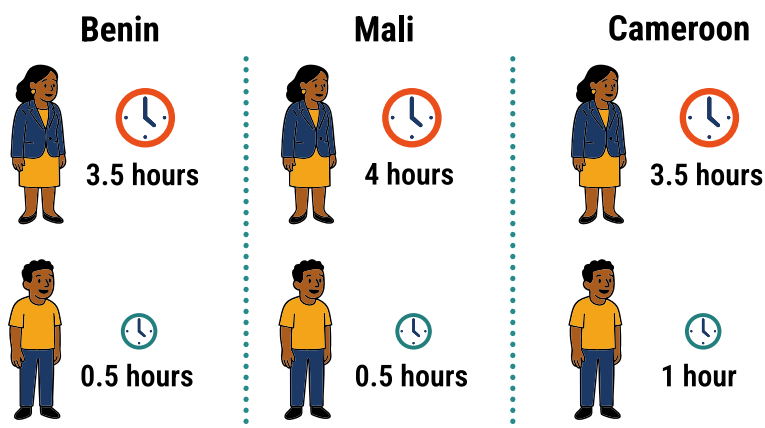
Globally, **748 million** people aged **15+** are out of the labor force due to care responsibilities.

Data shows that caregiving is a major barrier to labor force participation, particularly for women—even when they have the skills and opportunities to work—underscoring the need for policies that reduce unpaid care burdens.¹



Conventional Measures Underestimate Women's Contributions

by excluding the work that sustains households and communities.

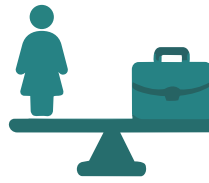


Across Francophone African countries, women spend substantially more time on unpaid care work than men, while men devote more time to paid employment.^{2 3}

Women Perform Most Unpaid Care
(household work), **but far less** market work.
(research from Senegal)



87%
of unpaid
household work is
done by women



34%
of market work is
done by women

**Yet women work more total hours than men,
once unpaid care is counted.**

This unequal distribution leaves women with less time for paid employment, reinforcing gender inequalities in the labor market. CSOs advocating for gender equality and women's economic empowerment should prioritize interventions that recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work—through childcare services, social protection, labor-saving infrastructure, and efforts to expand women's economic and leadership opportunities.

What This Means for Civil Society Organizations

Care is not only a gender issue; it is a development issue that shapes human capital, labor force participation, productivity, demographic change, and broader development outcomes. As countries seek to achieve inclusive growth, realize the demographic dividend, and meet national and regional development commitments, addressing care constraints becomes increasingly important.

Civil society has a critical role to play in this process. CSOs bring citizens' experiences into public debate, influence policy priorities, and hold institutions accountable for commitments and public spending. This helps ensure that development policies respond to people's lived realities. Care is particularly relevant to this role because, despite

its influence on development outcomes, it often remains overlooked in public debate and policy processes.

Care also cuts across sectors such as health, education, social protection, employment, infrastructure, and local development. As a result, many civil society organizations may already be advancing aspects of the care agenda without explicitly recognizing the links between them. A care systems perspective can help connect these efforts, promote more coordinated responses to care needs, strengthen accountability for policies and investments that shape care outcomes, and maximize the impact of investments across sectors.



Civil Society Helps Turn Care Realities Into Accountable Policy Action

**From People's
Lived Realities**



- Care burdens
- Limited time and opportunities
- Service gaps and inequalities

**Through Civil
Society Action**



- Bring citizens' voices to the debate
- Advocate for care-sensitive policies
- Build coalitions and partnerships
- Hold institutions accountable

**To Accountable
Policy Response**



- Care-aware budgets and investments
- Quality services and infrastructure
- Stronger implementation
- Results that improve people's lives



**By connecting people, policies, and accountability, civil society
helps build inclusive and sustainable care systems.**

Priority Actions

Civil society organizations can advance the care agenda through evidence generation, advocacy, coalition-building, public engagement, and accountability efforts. Practical entry points include:

- 1 Use evidence from time-use surveys, labor force statistics, and care-related research** to show how unpaid care work affects employment, gender equality, and development outcomes, and to strengthen advocacy for childcare, social protection, and labor-saving infrastructure.
- 2 Apply a care lens to community engagement, advocacy, and policy processes** within the sectors where your organization already works, ensuring caregivers' experiences and priorities inform development planning and decision-making.
- 3 Engage in public finance and budget processes** to advocate for care-related investments in your sector(s) of focus—such as childcare, healthcare, social protection, water and sanitation, energy, transport, or family-friendly workplace policies.
- 4 Build coalitions across sectors**, including gender equality, health, education, labor, youth, social protection, and local development—to promote an integrated care systems approach and strengthen collective advocacy.
- 5 Monitor government commitments, budget allocations, and service delivery** related to care—including under SDG 5.4, national gender equality strategies, and social protection policies—to strengthen accountability and citizen engagement.

Why This Matters Now

The inclusion of unpaid care work in global and regional commitments—such as SDG 5.4 and the African Union's Agenda 2063—reflects growing recognition that care is a public policy and development issue, not solely a family responsibility. Governments across Africa already pursue goals on human capital development, gender equality, employment, social protection, and the demographic dividend, yet care often remains insufficiently recognized within these agendas. New sources of evidence and analytical tools—including time-use surveys, National Time Transfer Accounts, and demographic dividend frameworks—are making it possible to better understand, measure, and communicate the impacts of unpaid care work.

This creates a timely opportunity for civil society to engage. Decisions being made today on public budgets, childcare and social protection services, water and sanitation infrastructure, transport systems, and labor policies will shape care systems and development outcomes for years to come. Civil society can help ensure that care is recognized as a cross-cutting development issue, strengthen public accountability for commitments and investments, and promote more coordinated responses across sectors. Without active engagement from civil society, care risks remaining fragmented across policy areas rather than being addressed as a coherent, strategic development priority.

Learn More

Explore the full reference report, companion policy briefs developed for different audiences, and additional materials.



Elevating Unpaid Care Work as a Policy Priority in Francophone West and Central Africa. [More information about PRB's work on care](#)



(in English)



(en Français)

Explore Data and Analytical Tools



[National Transfer Accounts \(NTA\)-Country Briefs.](#)

Tracks economic production, consumption, and transfers across age groups.



[National Time Transfer Accounts \(NTTA\)](#)

Measures unpaid care and household work across generations.



[Budgeting Sensitive to Demographic Dividend](#)

Assesses whether budgets support demographic dividend priorities.



[Demographic Dividend Monitoring Index](#)

Tracks a country's readiness to achieve a demographic dividend.



[ILO-Measuring Unpaid Domestic and Care Work.](#)

Measures unpaid care and domestic work.

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1 International Labour Organization. 2024. "Unpaid Care Work Prevents 708 million Women from Participating in the Labour Market." ILO Newsroom, October 29, 2024. <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/unpaid-care-work-prevents-708-million-women-participating-labour-market>

2 Charmes, Jacques. The Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market: An Analysis of Time Use Data Based on the Latest World Compilation of Time-Use Surveys. Geneva: International Labour Office (ILO), 2019.

3 Ronald Lee and Andrew Mason, Counting Women's Work: Measuring the Gendered Economy in the Market and at Home, National Transfer Accounts Bulletin No. 11 (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2017), accessed June 4, 2026, <http://www.ntaccounts.org/doc/repository/NTA%20Bulletin%2011.pdf>