



Care-centered transition to equitable, low-consumption societies

*The escalating impacts of our ecological overshoot are putting social systems under extreme stress. Humanity is bordering on a turbulent era where the capacity for care work will be essential. This project explores the potential of a care-centered society – how a rebalancing of wage labor and care work could strengthen resilience and promote wellbeing in the necessary shift away from high material consumption societies. **This project brings together two systemic crises of our time - climate change and inequality – which, despite being increasingly overlapping, have been responded to by policies and approaches that have not been complementary and sometimes even contradictory.** These overlapping systemic crises require us to develop responses that address their root causes. We will explore the potential of care-centered societies for achieving equitable, low-carbon lifestyles, and champion care- and gender-sensitive approaches to climate change action.*

Global heating is expected to pass the 1.5° threshold within the next four years, biodiversity loss is accelerating, plastic pollution endangers marine life, agriculture, and human health – five out of nine planetary boundaries have been passed by now. The reason is well known: the human enterprise is in overshoot. Per capita consumption – even if very unevenly distributed over the planet – is the main course of environmental destruction. It is also well known by now that not the pattern, but the level of consumption is the main factor causing environmental impacts – income is the best predictor of damage caused. We have passed peak wealth in lots of countries, a fact only thinly veiled by national accounting systems ignoring the damage cost of losing our life sustaining systems. Consequently, we must reduce our consumption of natural resources, in particular in the affluent countries. As the majority of the World's poor are now living in middle income countries, poverty eradication requires not so much economic growth in general, but improved inclusion so that growth benefits underprivileged social groups. Cutting global resource consumption by half and reaching a fair distribution of resource access necessitates a reduction of resource consumption in the Global North by a factor 10.

At the same time, the economic growth and distribution of paid work in the global economy has been achieved on the often unacknowledged efforts of the unpaid economy, where work is largely done by women and girls. This results in lower social status, discrimination, lower access to resources and education, political power, as well as less time for leisure and lower earnings. In addition, systemic crises such as climate change disproportionately affect women and girls, especially those in communities most marginalized. Over the last two years, the COVID-19 health crisis has emphasized the significance of care work and demonstrated how low capacity for such activities makes societies vulnerable. To address the crises of inequality and injustice, care needs to be recognized as a central source of value and the foundation of wellbeing in our societies. In addition, revaluing care and rebalancing the relationship between wage labor and care work can contribute to a transition to low-consumption societies with drastically reduced greenhouse gas emissions and other ecological stressors.

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Without a care-sensitive approach, efforts to address climate change (such as consuming 90% less resources) in the current socio-economic setting would lead to widespread poverty and suffering and also exacerbate the crisis of care and inequality. Therefore, two big structural changes are necessary: a redistribution of wealth and strengthening the cohesion of societies to make them resilient in the face of reduced consumption levels. That does not imply that human needs go unfulfilled, but radical changes in the satisfiers used to meet them. An important contribution may come through a substantial shift from material goods to social care. A care-focused economy and society is one which provides the physical, social, and not least legal infrastructures enabling caring for the fulfillment of needs, with low resource consumption. However, reducing environmental impacts and resource use by moderation and significantly reducing the level of consumption is a daunting task. It is not easily imposed on citizens of a consumer society who are so far the winners of unfair global economic relations and whose leaders are just beginning to understand that they cannot buy their way out of the environmental meltdown.

To foster change into this direction we like to draw a comprehensive picture and define care work as follows:

Care work comprises the activities that nurture people and the planet - including the land, plants, animals, humans, and social groups. Care work therefore is not only essential in enabling society to function: it is the basis of wellbeing and quality of life.

This project brings together researchers, practitioners, and institutional representatives from diverse disciplines in a commission, and co-create an interdisciplinary analysis of the potential for a care-centered society to facilitate the transition to an equitable, low-consumption society. It explores questions such as:

- How can we make a radical transition to low-consumption lifestyles, while maintaining or increasing wellbeing?
- Can we simultaneously promote social justice and regenerative ways of living by putting care at the heart of our societies?
- How can we communicate effectively about care-centered transitions and bring society on board?

Exploring the interrelationship between care work and ecological sustainability will be the main goal of this project. In this regard, four hypotheses are built for this project.

