

Module 1 Transcript : The Foundation: Recognizing Work That Sustains Us

Slide 1: Building Inclusive and Resilient Care Systems: Induction Modules for Policymakers in Timor-Leste

Welcome to Module 1 of the induction series “Building Inclusive and Resilient Care Systems”—titled “The Foundation: Recognizing Work That Sustains Us.” We’re glad to have you with us.

Whether care is a new topic for you or something you’re already familiar with, this series is designed to equip you with both the concepts and tools needed to strengthen care systems. Care is becoming increasingly central to inclusive economic and social policymaking—and this module sets the stage for that conversation.

Let’s begin.

Slide 2: What's Ahead: Your Four-Module Induction Guide

This induction is made up of four modules, each one building on the last.

In Module 1, the one you’re in now, we’ll introduce the core ideas behind care and the care economy. These form the foundation for the rest of the series.

In Module 2 we’ll turn to Timor-Leste—examining the national care policy landscape

Module 3 will guide you through ESCAP’s Model Framework for Action—a tool to help design effective, care-responsive policies.

Module 4 explores how to put that framework into practice—translating ideas into real policy action.

Slide 3: Learning Objectives for this Module: What is care and why does it matter?

In the next 10 minutes, you’ll learn what care work is and why it matters for Timor-Leste’s development.

We’ll explore how care responsibilities are currently divided between women and men in our society, and the economic benefits of investing in better care systems.

This module provides key concepts that will prepare you, as policymakers, for our upcoming national consultation on building inclusive and resilient care systems.

Let’s begin with understanding what we mean by “care” and why it’s central to our nation’s growth and prosperity.

Slide 4: What is Care Work?

Let’s begin by defining care.

Care is the work of sustaining life—ourselves, others, and the planet. It includes all the support we give and receive to live with dignity and participate fully in society. Now, in the economic world, work is typically divided into two broad categories: paid work and unpaid work.

Paid work are the kinds of activities that are usually counted in national accounts and labour force statistics. In contrast, unpaid work, while performed without direct pay, are often left out of formal economic measures.

We can find care work in both paid and unpaid work.

Paid care work refers to care-related jobs in health, education, personal care, and domestic work. These include nurses, domestic workers, childcare assistants, and teachers—roles where care is the central function, and the worker receives a wage or salary.

Unpaid care and domestic work, on the other hand, includes tasks done for family or community without pay. These include caring for children, supporting sick or older relatives, cooking, cleaning, and other tasks that sustain households.

These categories help us understand how care fits into the wider world of work. And they also help us see why some forms of care are visible in policy and budgets.

In contexts like Timor-Leste, where many people engage in both caregiving and subsistence work, these categories often overlap. A single activity—like tending a garden or fetching water—might support both economic survival and caregiving responsibilities. That complexity matters, and we'll come back to it in future modules as we explore the care economy more fully.

You might take a moment to reflect: in your own work or community, where do you see care being provided? And which of these categories—paid, unpaid, or both—does it fall into?

Keep that in mind as we build toward understanding the care economy.

Slide 5: Care Economy: Making Visible the Invisibles

When we bring all these forms of care work together—paid and unpaid—we arrive at the broader concept of the care economy.

The care economy refers to all paid and unpaid care work that supports human survival, well-being, and economic stability. It recognizes care not just as a private or family duty, but as a critical part of how our economies actually function.

Care work can also be understood by the type of activity involved:

It includes direct care—like childcare or assisting sick or older persons—and indirect care, such as cooking, cleaning, and other household tasks that make caregiving possible, even if they happen behind the scenes.

Because care is so all-encompassing and embedded in daily life, it often disappears from view—going largely unremarked and unquestioned.

This is especially true for unpaid and indirect care, which are rarely reflected in labour statistics, GDP, or public budgets.

But just because this work isn't counted doesn't mean it isn't valuable. Care is the backbone of the productive economy. Everyone needs care at some point in their life—if not throughout life—in order to live with dignity and participate equally in society.

You may have come across the idea of the green economy, which reframes the environment as part of economic planning. The care economy works the same way. By naming it, we aim to bring visibility to care work—so we can invest in it, account for it, and build resilient societies around it.

Slide 6: Who Performs Care Work? Understanding the Care Diamond

Now that we've introduced the care economy and what it includes, let's turn to an important question: Who provides care?

To answer this, we use a simple framework called the care diamond. It identifies four main actors in society responsible for care provision: the state, the market, households, and communities.

In a well-functioning system, care is a shared responsibility. The state might offer childcare centres or long-term elder care. The market provides private options like paid nannies or domestic workers. Communities contribute through mutual aid, neighbourhood initiatives, or religious networks. And households—primarily families—deliver day-to-day care at home.

But in reality—especially across Asia and the Pacific—this responsibility is not equally shared. Instead, the burden falls mostly on households. And within households, it falls overwhelmingly on women and girls.

That's what we'll explore next.

Slide 7: Who Performs Care Work? The Global Care Economy in Numbers

Despite the ideal of shared responsibility, in practice, care work is overwhelmingly carried out by women and girls—both unpaid in homes, and in low-paid care jobs. More than three-quarters of all unpaid care and domestic work worldwide is carried out by women. This means women perform the vast majority of tasks essential for households and families—cooking, cleaning, childcare, and care for older persons—and they do it without any monetary reward.

In the paid care sector, women are also heavily overrepresented. About 76% of paid domestic workers globally are women. Yet despite their critical role, these workers frequently experience low wages, informal contracts, limited social protection, and challenging working conditions.

This unequal distribution of care limits women's economic opportunities. Globally, an estimated 606 million women are excluded from the labour market due to unpaid care responsibilities—compared to just 41 million men.

Moreover, care responsibilities extend across generations, with older women spending an average of over four hours daily on unpaid care. Many women even retire early to provide care, negatively impacting their pensions and financial security.

Slide 8: Who Performs Care Work? In Asia and the Pacific

In Asia and the Pacific, the gendered imbalance in care responsibilities mirrors global patterns, but with unique regional urgency.

As you can see on the graph on this slide, women across our region spend two to five times more hours on unpaid care and domestic work compared to men. Men in the region contribute only around one hour per day—the lowest level of male participation across regions.

At the same time, Asia and the Pacific host half of the world's paid care workforce, making it the largest care workforce globally.

Furthermore, the region faces a rapidly intensifying care deficit due to ageing populations. As the demand for care services rises, there is a pressing need for comprehensive policy responses, increased investment, and structural reforms in care systems.

Recognizing and addressing these gaps is crucial—not only to improve gender equality but also to ensure economic resilience and inclusive growth.

Slide 9: Investing in the Care Economy

While the need to strengthen care systems is urgent, it's equally important to recognize that investing in care is not just public spending—it's a smart financial investment that could ignite a virtuous cycle of economic growth and social prosperity.

As previously mentioned, today, our economies rely heavily on unpaid care and domestic work, mostly carried out by women and girls. This essential labour props up the economy—but remains largely invisible in how we measure economic value. If counted properly, the global value of unpaid care work would exceed US\$11 trillion—about 9% of global GDP. In Asia and the Pacific alone, integrating unpaid care work into GDP measurements would add US\$3.8 trillion to our regional economy.

The case for investing in paid care is just as compelling. Estimates show that each dollar invested to close global childcare gaps could increase global GDP by an average of US\$3.76 by 2035.

And the care economy is a powerful job creation engine. By 2035, investments in care could create up to 299 million jobs globally—most of them benefiting women. In fact, care generates two to three times more jobs per dollar than traditional sectors like construction, thanks to its labour-intensive nature.

Consider this: If you were making the economic case for investing in care to your finance ministry colleagues, which of these economic benefits would resonate most strongly in your national context?

Slide 10: Care and the Sustainable Development Goals

Investing in care also supports our commitments to global development goals. You might be familiar with the Sustainable Development Goals—the SDGs. These are 17 goals adopted by all UN Member States in 2015 to guide development efforts until 2030.

Goal 5—on gender equality—includes a very specific target: Target 5.4, which calls on countries to recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work. It encourages investment in public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies that reduce and redistribute care responsibilities.

Slide 11: Care Conceptual And Normative Frameworks

Beyond the Sustainable Development Goals, international frameworks increasingly recognize care as a cornerstone of sustainable development and human rights.

In 2021, the Global Alliance for Care was established by UN Women and Mexico's National Institute of Women. This alliance is the first multi-stakeholder community facilitating global collaboration, learning, and advocacy on care issues. As of 2024, Timor-Leste has joined more than 20 other national governments as a member, demonstrating its commitment to global dialogue and action on care.

More recently, the Human Rights Council adopted a landmark resolution

highlighting the centrality of care and support from a human rights perspective. In 2024, the International Labour Conference passed a resolution emphasizing decent work within the care economy.

At the regional level, ESCAP's Model Framework for Action—which we'll explore in our next module—offers practical guidance for policymakers. This framework also inspired the recently adopted ASEAN's Declaration on Care, creating a strategic roadmap for our region.

What these global frameworks show is clear: care is now at the heart of international development discussions and policies.

Slide 12: Care Conceptual And Normative Frameworks

The momentum behind care policy is building and will continue to shape development priorities.

In 2024, world leaders adopted the Pact for the Future at the Summit of the Future, explicitly recognizing investment in care as crucial for gender equality and human development.

This signals that care isn't a temporary focus but a lasting priority at the highest levels of global governance. By prioritizing care, governments commit to creating a sustainable and inclusive future for all.

Slide 13: ESCAP's Model Framework for Policy Action on the Care Economy for Asia and the Pacific

ESCAP's Model Framework for Action, or MFA, is one answer. It's a tool developed by ESCAP in partnership with the Institute of Development Studies to help countries design policies that build inclusive, sustainable care systems.

The MFA is made up of four core components. You can think of them as four pieces of the same puzzle—and we need all of them to build a strong, comprehensive system of care policies.

First, we have the normative principles—the values that guide us as we design care policies.

Second, the policy categories of care—which help us understand the types of policies we need to build a care system that works.

Third, the political economy of care—this shows us how institutions, power, and norms shape what's possible, and what isn't, when we make policy. And finally, the levers of change—these are the tools policymakers can use to move care issues onto the agenda and make reforms happen.

All of these might sound a bit abstract now—but don't worry. In the next few modules, we'll walk through each component one by one, with practical examples along the way.

Slide 14: Care to Recap?

In this module, we've walked through a series of exercises that show how the Model Framework for Action can be applied in real policymaking.

We've shown one possible way to use the MFA to identify a strong policy entry point. But remember—this isn't a fixed formula. The MFA is not a linear tool.

The steps we followed in this session are designed to support you during the national consultation. But depending on your national context, you might start from a different place—from a political opportunity, a budgeting window, or even an existing pilot.

That’s the strength of the MFA. It’s flexible, adaptable, and meant to meet you where you are.

This module covered a lot of ground—so before we wrap up, why not try out a few questions to test what you’ve absorbed?

Scan the QR code on screen to take the quick quiz for this module.