



www.africacaretogether.org

Sharing the Motherload: Engaging fathers and other key stakeholders to transform gender policy and foster care economies

Impact Story 4

KEY IMPACTS

This project set out to address the systemic undervaluing of unpaid care and social reproductive labour in South Africa. It demonstrates how lived experience-based, participatory approaches can reposition unpaid care as a public issue and economic concern. By treating care as infrastructure and positioning mothers and fathers as legitimate knowledge holders, the project offers a practical model for evidence-to-policy engagement that complements quantitative research.

August 20, 2026

Table of Contents

Project Overview	3
Project Activities	3
Project Achievements	4
Challenges & Lessons Learned	5
Care Sector Contributions & Next Steps	5



Project Overview

The [*Sharing the Motherload: Engaging fathers and other key stakeholders to transform gender policy and foster care economies*](#) project set out to address the systemic undervaluing of unpaid care and social reproductive labour in South Africa.

The project focused on how apartheid and colonial legacies, fragmented care systems and infrastructures, and the unequal distribution of care work constrains low-income women's wellbeing, equality, and economic participation.

While mothers were at the centre, the project deliberately expanded its focus to include fathers, policymakers, civil society organisations, and public audiences. The intended change was to make care visible as a shared social and economic issue - rather than a private responsibility - and to influence how care is understood, valued, and addressed in policy and programme design.

Project Activities

The project used a participatory action research and engagement approach, combining photovoice methods with iterative policy engagement. Mothers and fathers acted as co-researchers, producing photographs, captions, and calls to action that documented lived realities of care.

Delivery centred on the Sharing the Motherload photovoice exhibition series, launched through multiple public and policy-facing events, including exhibitions at the Iziko South African National Gallery, a mini-exhibition in Johannesburg, and a policy-facing

exhibition hosted in the Western Cape Government building. These spaces intentionally positioned lived experience as evidence, with mothers and fathers speaking directly to policymakers and stakeholders, and created opportunities for decision-makers and the wider public to engage with the realities of care. At key events, including the Iziko stakeholder launch and the SCIA Mid-Term Workshop, co-researchers guided attendees through the exhibition and participated in panel discussions alongside government and partner representatives.

Alongside exhibitions, the project engaged in targeted policy dialogue through provincial and national government partners, G20-aligned platforms (W20, T20, G20 Social Summit), academic and practitioner convenings, and NGO partner programmes. A growing suite of public outputs, including videos, policy learning briefs, and [The Motherload Project's website](#), supported wider dissemination and sustained engagement beyond in-person events.

Project Achievements

A key outcome has been increased recognition of unpaid care work as infrastructure shaping women's time, wellbeing, and economic participation. The exhibition series enabled policymakers and the public to encounter care through lived experience rather than statistics. Visitor reflections captured shifts in understanding, with one calling for "a real shift" away from patriarchal norms and another noting simply: "I thought of my mom."

The project also shifted whose voices enter policy spaces. Mothers and fathers spoke directly to decision-makers at exhibitions and learning events and being recognised as legitimate contributions to policy-relevant knowledge. Participating fathers reported changes in attitudes and practice. One reflected:

"When I get home... after all we've discussed here, I feel obligated to assist because I don't want to contribute to the Motherload."

Another shared:

"Since participating in th[ese] workshop[s], I've become more active in my children's lives... I d[o] things to ease the burden that mothers carry."

Policy learning deepened among government partners. A Western Cape Government official described how the project helped expose gaps between policy intent and lived experience and reframed care as foundational infrastructure, prompting new questions such as "whose reality is missing from this room?"

NGO partners also reported programme-level change. Flourish attributed organisational shifts, including removing user fees and expanding reach, to a “deeper organisational commitment to hearing, sharing and acting on the voices of those we work with.”

Challenges & Lessons Learned

The project revealed that scaling change through participatory, arts-based processes presents unique challenges, which limits the extent to which conventional scaling models apply. While exhibitions and dialogues were powerful, sustaining momentum required continuous relationship-building and follow-up. To ensure that co-researchers were able to participate meaningfully and safely, project planning and administration was intensive and resource requirements were considerable.

A key learning was that policy influence is most effective when evidence is engaged relationally rather than delivered as a finished product. As the project team reflected, the strongest shifts occurred when lived experience was combined with structured reflection spaces that allowed policymakers to grapple with how interconnected systems – care, work, health, infrastructure – shape everyday life.

Care Sector Contributions & Next Steps

The project’s main contribution is demonstrating how lived experience–based, participatory approaches can reposition unpaid care as a public issue and economic concern. By treating care as infrastructure and positioning mothers and fathers as legitimate knowledge holders, the project offers a practical model for evidence-to-policy engagement that complements quantitative research.

Next steps include sustaining and expanding these pathways through ongoing NGO programmes, continued engagement with provincial and national policymakers, and emerging collaborations with international actors such as the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Specifically, the research team is working collaboratively with the School of Hard Knocks designing primary and high school curriculum on recognising unpaid care and shifting gender norms on care labour. This curriculum development responds directly to a Call to Action in the exhibition, “Incorporate awareness of unpaid care work as a topic in school curricula (e.g., life orientation) to shift gender norms”.

The project’s outputs continue to circulate through exhibitions, policy briefs, and digital platforms, the central insight remains clear: progress on gender equality and wellbeing depends on recognising, valuing, and redistributing the care that underpins society.

About the Africa Cares Together Community of Practice

The [Africa Cares Together Community of Practice \(ACT CoP\)](#) is a vibrant, inclusive network of diverse actors committed to amplifying care work across Africa. It is coordinated by ActionAid International (AAI) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and is funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Global Affairs Canada (GAC), and the Hewlett Foundation. The ACT CoP network is made up of members from the 19 projects of the [Scaling Care Innovations in Africa \(SCIA\)](#) initiative, a partnership between IDRC and GAC.

Acknowledgements

This Impact Story was compiled by the 'Sharing the Motherload: Engaging fathers and other key stakeholders to transform gender policy and foster care economies' project team and the ACT CoP. Project partners include University of Cape Town; Western Cape Government; Flourish; and School of Hard Knocks.

