



When Childcare Stops, Everything Stops

Why Climate Action Must
Recognize and Support Caregivers



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Everyone talks about how climate change affects children. We see the statistics: floods disrupt schools, heatwaves endanger young lives, droughts increase malnutrition. But we rarely ask: who protects these children through climate shocks? Who stays up when a child gets sick from contaminated water after floods? Who repairs childcare centers damaged by storms? Who walks further for water during droughts? Who absorbs the economic shock when families cannot pay childcare fees?

The answer is caregivers, mostly women. Yet in every climate plan, financing mechanism, and adaptation strategy, these women remain invisible. Their work is unpaid or underpaid, their knowledge unrecognized, their voices unheard. This brief tells their story and calls for urgent action to recognize, support, and invest in the women and men who hold communities together through climate crisis.

“When you say climate, people think about crops; when you say care, they think about children. No one has shown how these two connect, yet the women taking care of those children are the same ones carrying water when there is drought. The burden is on them, but they are invisible in our plans.”

County ECD Director, Kenya

What Needs To Happen

Recognize childcare as essential climate infrastructure, not social welfare

1. **Reduce caregivers' climate burden** through accessible financing and climate-resilient infrastructure
2. **Redistribute responsibility** from individual caregivers to government, donors, and communities

3. **Represent caregivers** in climate decision-making spaces where their voices are missing
4. **Reward caregivers** through fair wages, social protection, and recognition as climate leaders

About This Research

This brief draws from research conducted by Samuel Hall and Uthabiti with 40+ childcare champions and stakeholders across Nairobi, Kisumu, and Kakamega counties between August and November 2025. Through participatory workshops, validation dialogues, and community storytelling, caregivers shared their lived experiences of climate impacts and co-created advocacy messages. This work is funded by Global Affairs Canada through Climate Action Africa.

The Missing Link

We Talk About Climate Affecting Children. What About Those Who Care for Them?

Climate change is everywhere in development discourse. We fund climate-smart agriculture. We build flood defences. We create early warning systems. We develop adaptation plans for water, health, and infrastructure. But ask any climate planner: where is childcare in your strategy? The answer is silence.

This absence has a name: the women who provide childcare. Across Kenya, 11,000+ informal childcare workers (92% of them women) operate small centres in their homes, rented rooms, or community spaces. They charge as little as 30 shillings per day because that is what families can afford. They work without licenses, without benefits, without recognition. And when climate shocks hit, they absorb every impact.

The Ripple Effect: When Childcare Collapses, Economies Stop

Childcare is not a social service. It is economic infrastructure. When caregivers have safe, reliable places to leave children, they can work. Market vendors can sell. Factory workers can show up. Domestic workers can earn. Small businesses function. The entire local economy depends on childcare being open, safe, and accessible.

When floods close childcare centres, parents cannot work. When extreme heat makes centres unsafe, income stops. Six in ten caregivers lose income during climate shocks. But rather than receiving emergency support, they continue operating by using personal savings, borrowing from savings groups, and repairing infrastructure themselves. They absorb adaptation costs that should be shared by the government, donors, and communities.

Caregivers across Nairobi, Kisumu, and Kakamega described climate impacts that climate plans overlook:

1. **Flooding:** Sewage mixing with clean water, infrastructure damage, disease outbreaks, days spent cleaning mud instead of caring for children
2. **Extreme Heat:** Iron-sheet roofs turning centres into ovens, children crying all afternoon, no ventilation, and having to pour water on floors to cool rooms
3. **Water Scarcity:** Walking farther for water during droughts, rationing water for cooking and hygiene, and children getting sick from poor sanitation
4. **Economic Shocks:** Families unable to pay fees, operating at a loss, using personal savings to keep centres open, no emergency funds or insurance
5. **Need for further research:** There is little data on the actual impact childcare workers have on the economy, making the idea that childcare work is an economic infrastructure inquantifiable.

"Inside the daycare, it feels like fire. Even the toys become hot, and the children cry the whole afternoon. You pour water on the floor to cool it, but it dries in minutes."

Women Childcare Workers, Pipeline, Nairobi

Childcare Workers Are Already Adapting

Caregivers are not waiting for climate plans. They are already innovating, adapting, and protecting children. But they are doing it alone, without financing, without technical support, without recognition.

- **Raising floors** to prevent floodwater intrusion
- **Digging drainage channels** around centres
- **Moving children** to neighbours' homes during emergencies
- **Using sacks and buckets** to manage water intrusion
- **Growing kitchen gardens** to supplement nutrition during food price spikes
- **Adjusting schedules** to avoid the hottest midday hours
- **Organising collective cleaning** and repairs through savings groups

This is climate adaptation. But when done by invisible women in informal settlements, it is called coping. When documented in climate reports, it is called agriculture, water management, or disaster risk reduction. The caregivers remain unnamed.



Building Capacity to Lead

This project recognised that caregivers need more than documentation: they need tools, training, and support to formalise their climate leadership. In November 2025, Samuel Hall and Uthabiti trained childcare champions in Nairobi, Kisumu, and Kakamega on community-based disaster risk reduction, climate preparedness, relevant legal frameworks and policy advocacy.

Participants learned to: identify local climate hazards, develop emergency preparedness plans, create Climate-Safe Childcare Checklists, understand early warning systems, and advocate in climate governance spaces. Uthabiti staff also received training to cascade this knowledge across their network of 11,000+ caregivers.

The System Excludes Them

During validation workshops, researchers asked caregivers: Have you heard of County Climate Change Funds? These funds exist in every county, designed specifically for community-level climate adaptation projects. The kind of infrastructure improvements, disaster preparedness, and resilience building that childcare centres desperately need.

Not a single caregiver had heard of these funds.

They did not know County Integrated Development Plans existed. They had never been invited to the ward climate committee meetings. They were unaware that climate financing mechanisms were making allocation decisions about community priorities.

Although there are climate change policies, such as the Climate Change Act, the National Adaptation Plan, NCCAP I, II, and III, and County Climate Change Funds (CCCFs), childcare is not only ignored as an adaptation sector but also not included as a community asset in society in need of protection. Additionally, the policies that do prioritise childcare, such as the Nairobi Childcare Facilities Act, the Kisumu Children's Act, and the Kakamega Draft ECD Regulations, lack disaster risk reduction standards, including flood safety requirements.

This is not due to a lack of coordination structures. Institutions such as the National Council for Children Services (NCCS), Child Protection Technical Working Groups, County-level ECD Committees and the CAC Platform (regional) exist but lack climate change as an agenda of administration and vertical coordination of the various structures.

The 5 Rs: A Framework for Action

The international framework for addressing unpaid care work provides a clear pathway forward. The 5 Rs "Recognise, Reduce, Redistribute, Represent, Reward" offer concrete actions for policymakers, donors, and all stakeholders:

1. **RECOGNIZE** childcare as essential climate infrastructure

Climate plans must acknowledge care systems and the women and men who sustain them as frontline climate infrastructure. This means including childcare in National Climate Change Action Plans, County Integrated

Development Plans, and climate financing mechanisms. It means counting climate-related disruptions to childcare in economic impact assessments. It means recognising caregivers as climate actors, not just beneficiaries.
Call to Action: Include childcare as a priority adaptation sector in NCCAP IV development (starting 2026). Train county climate planners to recognise childcare as climate-vulnerable infrastructure.

2. **REDUCE** the climate burden caregivers carry alone

Invest in climate-smart childcare infrastructure: improved drainage, ventilation systems, rainwater harvesting, elevated floors, and climate-resilient building materials. Provide disaster preparedness training so caregivers know how to protect children during extreme weather. Create emergency response protocols that include childcare centres alongside schools and health facilities.

Call to Action: Donors and development partners should fund pilot Green Care Hubs demonstrating climate-resilient childcare infrastructure in markets and urban areas. County governments should provide technical support for infrastructure improvements.

3. **REDISTRIBUTE** responsibility from individual caregivers to collective systems

Climate resilience for childcare cannot rest on individual women's shoulders. Responsibility must be shared between households, communities, county governments, the national government, donors, and international actors. This means making County Climate Change Funds accessible to childcare providers. It means county governments allocating budgets for climate-resilient childcare. It means development partners investing in care systems as climate infrastructure.

Call to Action: Revise County Climate Change Fund guidelines to explicitly include childcare as eligible for adaptation financing. Allocate dedicated CCCF budgets to childcare sector projects.

4. **REPRESENT** caregivers in climate decision-making spaces

Ensure childcare workers participate in County Climate Change Fund planning, ward climate committees, and national policy development. Their lived experience and practical knowledge are essential for effective, equitable adaptation planning. Without their voices, climate strategies will continue missing critical vulnerabilities and opportunities.

Call to Action: Reserve seats for childcare representatives on ward climate committees. Invite caregivers to county climate planning sessions with stipends to compensate their time. Build their capacity to engage effectively through accessible training.

5. REWARD caregivers through fair wages, social protection, and recognition

Provide caregivers access to climate finance, emergency grants during disasters, insurance schemes, and professional recognition as climate champions. Support their savings groups to access adaptation microloans. Create certification programs for caregivers completing climate and disaster risk reduction training. Recognise their innovations and leadership publicly.

Call to Action: Develop emergency funds that caregivers can access during climate shocks. Support women's savings groups to access climate adaptation financing. Create professional development pathways recognising climate leadership.



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Key Recommendations

For County Governments

Revise CCCF guidelines to include childcare. Invite caregivers to ward climate committees. Integrate childcare into County Integrated Development Plans. Work with ECD departments to add climate resilience standards to childcare regulations. The infrastructure exists; caregivers just need access and greater awareness of the available platforms.

For Donors and Development Partners

Fund pilot Green Care Hubs in markets and urban areas. Support caregiver training in climate resilience and disaster preparedness. Provide technical assistance for caregivers to access County Climate Change Funds. Invest in platforms that amplify caregiver voices in climate spaces. When you fund climate adaptation and market systems development, ask: where is childcare in this strategy?

For the National Government

Position childcare as a priority adaptation sector in NCCAP IV development. Create coordination mechanisms between climate, childcare, and gender ministries. Support county governments to integrate childcare into climate planning. Work with NITA to institutionalise climate content in childcare training curricula.

For Civil Society and Advocacy Organisations

Amplify caregiver voices in climate forums, policy dialogues, and public campaigns. Build their capacity to engage with climate governance structures. Document their innovations and leadership. Use platforms like the Collaborative Action for Childcare and Africa Childcare Forum to elevate the climate-care nexus regionally and globally.

If They Could See Us

During validation workshops, caregivers created advocacy messages under the theme "If They Could See Us." If policymakers could see the daily reality of managing childcare through floods, heatwaves, and economic shocks. If donors could see the infrastructure repairs financed through personal savings. If climate planners could see the knowledge caregivers hold about local risks and adaptation strategies.

This brief makes them visible. It shows that climate change does not just affect children; it affects the women and men who protect them. It demonstrates that childcare is not social welfare but economic infrastructure. It proves that caregivers are not victims but climate leaders already adapting without support.

When childcare stops, everything stops. When caregivers are supported, entire communities become more resilient.

"We are not asking for charity. We are asking to be seen. We are asking to be included in the plans that are made about climate and children. We are already doing the work; we just need support."

Childcare Champion, Validation Workshop



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About This Work

Partners

Samuel Hall is a social enterprise that conducts research, evaluates programmes, and analyses data in and on contexts of migration and displacement. With a deep focus on amplifying the voices of migrants, the forcibly displaced, and host societies; our mission is to inform and inspire more inclusive programmes and policies, rooted in an ethical and academically rigorous approach.

Uthabiti Africa is a platform convener and advocacy organization strengthening Kenya's childcare ecosystem through training, financial inclusion, policy advocacy, and the Collaborative Action for Childcare (CAC) Platform. Our network includes 11,000+ childcare champions across Kenya.

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