**Harmonising our footprints: reducing the ecological while accumulating (growing) the care – exploring the prospects for a holistic care economy**

‘Unlike geopolitics, which views nature exclusively as strategic resources, biosphere politics views the environment as the irreducible context that sustains all of life and sets the conditions and limits for all other human thought and activity. In the biospheric era, the exploitation of nature gives way to a sense of reverence for the natural world and a sustainable relationship with the environment’ (Rifkin, Biosphere Politics 1991:4)

**Introduction**

This brief paper makes three main points:

1. That the conventional care economy needs to widen its scope to include the existentialist aspects of care and its inter-dependence with a healthy biosphere;
2. That the market economy as it currently exists, levies a disproportionately heavier care cost on both people and planet as capitalist modes of production and distribution become more entrenched. In particular, the emphasis on ‘renewable or clean energy’ as part of the green economy agenda creates a ‘care deficit’ for certain constituencies of women;
3. That sustainable economies need to embed the social dimensions of development including ‘care’ factors and costs on a systemic level.

**Redefining the care economy:**

In this period of market instability where the fundamentals of the conventional economics are under serious scrutiny, there is scope for prioritizing new ethics[[1]](#footnote-1), values and principles around the concepts of care and the welfare of future generations. A holistic care economy should include three dimensions:

* Care for community and society today – through securing human dignity and quality of life;
* Care for future generations in a finite world – through equitable management of natural resources and consumption;
* Care for nature – through nurturing bio genetic vitality, bio diversity, regeneration and stewardship.

The care economy currently defined is primarily about the first dimension: human-to-human care. A revitalized ‘care economy’ should arguably extend beyond human-to-human care to human-to-earth care and earth-to-human care. After all, when it boils down to it, isn’t it the case that the well-being of *all* species depends on the essential ecological systems that provide fresh water, clean air, waste treatments and healthy landscapes? Care defined that way, is a biosphere issue.

To date the discussion by economists on the ‘care’[[2]](#footnote-2) or ‘reproductive’ economy has been limited to labour economics, labour markets and labour rights – seeking equitable regulation of markets by government and by interest groups; marked and measured by costs to the economy and its dependence on the unpaid services of care givers.[[3]](#footnote-3) The sector is marked by characterizing ‘care’ as a ‘cost burden,’ a service (as opposed to an emotion) – not especially owned by anyone, but certainly needed by everyone.

No one owns it, we all claim a right to it, and we all have the (infinite?) capacity to give freely of it. In some ways, “care” is part of the public commons[[4]](#footnote-4). The commons have positive externalities for everyone: when quality care work is provided, everyone benefits. The growing support for the commons as an alternate vision of responsibility and ‘ownership’ applies to the care economy.

**Care is an existentialist issue**

Is there a link to be made between reducing our human ecological footprint on the one hand (and so conserving ecological health) while also increasing our human care footprint? Could the ‘valuing’ of care also extend to the deeply emotional satisfaction of land stewardship? Are there particular ‘care’ aspects of living with nature (as opposed to against nature) that we need to be recognising? Could the stewardship of collective resources and biodiversity be appropriately extended to organising around values that affirm life? Can a more holistic concept of care incorporate health care, ethics, economics and environmental choices?

**Care deficit – deep sea diving in Antigua**

People are taking more responsibility for their own health and well-being[[5]](#footnote-5), and where they have choices, quality of life and human dignity trump all. On the Caribbean island of Antigua, women rarely attended training workshops organised by the Ministry of Fisheries since fishing is perceived to be a male dominated activity. On one occasion however[[6]](#footnote-6), women – mothers, wives, sisters, girlfriends – were invited to attend a training session on conch shell diving. The shell has been over-fished from shallow waters (mainly for the tourist industry) and divers dive deeper making conch fishing an increasingly dangerous activity. Decompression Sickness or ‘the bends’ as they are referred to, can affect divers when they resurface - they can suffer from partial paralysis or even fatal consequences if not treated in a timely manner. The women realised that they were being taught to recognise the symptoms, treat injuries and care for lasting impacts. At the end of the training, a good number of women turned to their menfolk and scolded them, warning them that they would receive no such care if they were crazy enough to compromise their health for the sake of income from a shell. In other words, to these women, the opportunity cost of sound health is zero. Or put another way, these women cared so much for the health of their men, they refused to be put in a situation of having to ‘care’ for the painful and debilitating aspects of dive injuries.

This story suggests that when women’s values are brought into the equation, a compelling argument is made for the longer term vision about health, well-being and other factors that weigh in more importantly than income. They reject the ‘winning formula’ of earning income at any cost.[[7]](#footnote-7) Put another way, women’s **productive, regenerative, stewardship and conservation** roles as care givers are inherently inter-linked and inter-dependent.

**Care deficit – a low carbon future and real health costs**

How does a holistic ‘care economy’ fit within a “low-carbon future” where the business and politics of “clean” energy combined with efficiency production is evolving at speed and in directions of immense scale. With global investments reaching a record of US$260 billion in 2011, accounting for around 44% of new generation capacity worldwide – are there implications for the care economy?

According to the Africa Environment Outlook[[8]](#footnote-8) – the economic value of the Zambezi River Basin[[9]](#footnote-9) alone in terms of crops and agriculture is priced at close to *USD50 million* a year[[10]](#footnote-10). And yet this region has a very high level of stunting of children - between 28 per cent and 45 per cent of all children are stunted due to poor nutrition.[[11]](#footnote-11) In Zambia half the children under five are malnourished and over a quarter are underweight. Between 1991 and 2002/03 the proportion of stunted children increased from 40 to 49 per cent. Low birth weight is also an indicator of poor maternal nutrition before and during pregnancy – over 10 per cent of children born in Zambia have a low birth weight while around the same percentage of Zambian mothers of children under three years are malnourished.[[12]](#footnote-12) ‘Stunting does not come easily. It happens over time, and means that a child has endured painful and debilitating cycles of illness, depressed appetite, insufficient food and inadequate care.’[[13]](#footnote-13) Similarly in Mozambique, more families switch from maize to eating cheaper and less nutritious cassava, which accounts for higher numbers of children with Kwashiorkor.



Figure 1 Woman interviewed by author Malawi dec 2010

In Malawi, mothers of young children line up for food supplements for their infants, the production of 5 tons of micro-nutrient soya or peanut product is produced every 24 hours for malnourished children in the southern region alone. In 2009, the PPB (Project Peanut Butter) factory in Malawi produced about 650 metric tons of Plumpy’nut, enough to treat between 40,000 and 45,000 severely malnourished children. In the most fertile delta area of southern Malawi, rural women are now no longer able to produce from land – because the best lands have been taken up by an ever-expanding sugar plantation (majority ownership is British) where the market value lies in ethanol production. Aside from their vulnerability in the face of corporate expansion, what is clear is that their care responsibilities are unlikely to be systematically addressed until their land production and local market systems are recovered.

The intrusion of Jatropha and tree plantations into pastoral and forest lands and the diversion of grazing and arable land to agrofuel farming undermines livestock maintenance, dairy production and directly impacts nutrition levels of children and the vulnerable. The most immediate and visible outcome when farmers are no longer growing for their own communities but are growing primarily for an export market, is that local nutrition levels drop. In Argentina, as soy fields increased by 141% between 1995 and 2004, the percentage of malnourished Argentinian children simultaneously increased from 11% to 17%[[14]](#footnote-14).

In Wales, a £600M biomass power station was approved in 2011 - Burning wood pellets to generate enough electricity to power 300,000 homes, approximately 25% of the houses in Wales. The venture anticipated employing 600 people during massive construction project at the Anglesey Aluminium site and 100 more permanent jobs once operational.[[15]](#footnote-15) One power station operator in the UK estimated they would need 2.4 million tonnes of biomass(wood) per year which would require at least one million hectares of tree plantation to feed this one power station alone[[16]](#footnote-16).

Members of the European Union support the development of a European Energy Policy which delivers a sustainable energy future for Europe. The EC has a 10% (binding) target by 2020 which corresponds to 27 bn litres of ethanol and 24 bn liters of biodiesel. The EC and European Member States have also agreed on a binding target to reach a 20% share of renewable energy sources (i.e., biomass, biogas, wind, solar, hydro and geothermal energy) in the total energy output of the EU by 2020. If enforced, studies forecast a 200-300 million m3/year wood deficit in Europe in 2020.

“Timberland investments have outperformed any other asset class regarding return and volatility over the past 60 years… performed better than real estate, bonds or gold… which makes timber investments a perfect inflation hedge … trees will just continue to grow in volume and value exponentially”[[17]](#footnote-17).

The disruption of community life caused by plantations both through displacement and evictions, and particularly the *contract labour system* is responsible for family breakdown; increased alcoholism, drug use and crime; the proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV AIDS; as well as perpetuating a cycle of poverty that entrenches poor nutrition, inadequate education, and illness. In Mozambique over the last four years, the main impact of large-scale pine and eucalyptus plantations on peasants in Niassa province has been the appropriation of community lands by companies. This has reduced the access of peasant families to their lands. The care levy on these constituencies, on their eco systems and on the prospects for future generations is immense[[18]](#footnote-18).

**Parallels with “embedding care” into farming systems**

There is a growing “back-to-the-land movement”[[19]](#footnote-19) and even though there are more people in urban centres than ever before, our links to land are far from severed. Agricultural livelihoods are essential for about 2.5 billion people worldwide, providing jobs for approximately 1.3 billion people, of whom most are small-scale land holders or landless. Women in agriculture tend to perform unpaid labour tied to household or smallholder production (e.g., tending livestock, grains) and temporary or seasonal work (e.g., in fruit, flowers, tea) and are principally involved as farmers, food gatherers and custodians of medicinal plants.

The principles of organic production[[20]](#footnote-20) have been agreed to globally through IFOAM[[21]](#footnote-21). They apply to agriculture in the broadest sense, including the way people tend soils, water, plants, animals and each other in order to produce, prepare and distribute food and other goods. They concern the way people interact with living landscapes, relate to one another and shape the legacy of future generations. Is it a coincidence that organic farming around the world is especially attractive to women and that the ethos of tending to the land is part of their own empowerment.[[22]](#footnote-22)   
  
Most notably, of the four principles[[23]](#footnote-23) of organic production one principle is that of CARE: “*Organic Agriculture should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to protect the health and well-being of current and future generations and the environment”[[24]](#footnote-24).*

As land and water stewards, farmers who maintain vegetative cover, soil health and moisture content are essentially building the long-term wealth of their natural systems. Since modification of agricultural production choices can provide positive environmental externalities, payment for ecosystem services (PES) has become a topic of interest and experimentation within conventional economic frameworks. The close links between environmental sustainability and poverty reduction are resulting in intensified efforts to develop PES programmes that aim to achieve both objectives. Land stewards could in theory earn fees for their services – if in fact they are positioned to negotiate a seat at the table and equal terms of payment.[[25]](#footnote-25) Arguably if the ‘care’ and ‘stewardship’ components of farming are embedded into the costing formula, everyone stands to gain and this would not just be diminished into a payment system that women risk losing access to once again!

An on-going discussion

We need to move away from an ‘exchange price’ to express societal value – and consider how a care economy might be valued understanding that:

1. **Some aspects of society are simply priceless**: if we make the mistake of commercializing care, we risk diminishing the value of care. Put another way ‘dollars and acres’ are inadequate measures for human and environmental health. People, other living things and nature have an inherent value that is irreducible to economic value[[26]](#footnote-26). Living life in a caring manner might fall in this category.
2. **Care as a continuum**: if we don’t fund one part of the care continuum other parts will suffer. That potentially means that all aspects of production and consumption should have a care component built into them – in that way care can be compounded into future generations.
3. **Care as commons**: If care is a public commons should it be collectively funded? Is it just about valuing and accounting for ‘care’ work in ‘dollars and hours’ or is it something much more systemic than that – and what would that look like? Does this call for a stronger state? Are government sponsored job schemes to the provision of public goods and building social capital part of this visualization?

The conversation needs to begin with a national reassessment of how globalization is affecting society and what it will take to thrive and protect what is important in a rapidly changing biosphere.

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1. Aldo Leopold (A Sand County Almanac) defined an ethic as a set of rules invented to meet circumstances so far in the future, that the average person cannot foresee the final outcomes. That is why any ethic worthy of the name ha to encompass the distant future. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nancy Folbre (2006) defines care in terms of children, elderly, sick, adults and self – and suggests that the four most important categories of relationship to the market are: unpaid services, unpaid work that helps meet subsistence needs, informal market work and paid employment. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For example, the way home and community care is expected to grow in Canada is assessed on the basis of its current economic footprint. Total estimated spending on home and community care in 2010 ranged from $8.9 to $10.5 billion, accounting for between 4.6 and 5.5 per cent of total health spending. Between 22 and 27 per cent was paid by private sources. The home and community care sector relies heavily on volunteer efforts and unpaid care. The estimated cost to Canadian businesses was over $1.28 billion in 2007 in lost productivity as a result of caregivers missing full days of work, missing hours of work, or even quitting or losing their jobs. (Source: Home and Community Care in Canada: An Economic Footprint The Conference Board of Canada, May 2012 Report by Gregory Hermus, Carole Stonebridge, Louis Theriault, Fares Bounajm) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. That said, the use of the term “commons” is problematic. In 1991, Jeremy Rifkin observed “*As nation after nation has moved to enclose the land commons, traditional pastureland and subsistence agricultural practices have given way to the raising of commercial livestock and cash crops for export markets. The commodification of lands and resources and the rush for profits has destabilized traditional rural communities and overtaxed the carrying capacity of the soil*”. Rifkin’s observations coincided with the appropriation of the ‘language of the commons” by the World Bank and the United Nations. Under the guise of protecting biodiversity and conserving the global commons, the World Bank oversaw the turning of rain forests into ecological reserves and lent its support to the expelling of populations that for centuries had drawn their sustenance from them, while ensuring ready access to those who could pay for the privilege of eco-tourism’s voyeuristic pastime. Similarly, the United Nations was instrumental in revising Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) which defines the rights and responsibilities of nations in their use of the world's oceans. (See Tandon 2012). Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom offers an alternative vision bringing economics, political science and sociology together. Focusing on the management of water resources, Ostrom looked at management of fish stocks, pastures, woods and groundwater basins and, in the process, provided compelling evidence that a third form of property neither privately owned nor state controlled, is based on *common ownership*. Ostrom argued that economic activity is not merely split between the alternatives of market and state, but that it may be regulated by *collective social activity*. She introduced the term Common Pool Regimes (CPR) to categorise such forms of property. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://tfccontent.com/Freethinking/Future\_Perspective\_Reframing\_Well-being\_2012.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Author’s interview with Ministry of Fisheries, Antigua January 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Diane Elson: (2005) the fact that much “unpaid care work is done for love, does not mean that we always love doing it”. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Africa Economic Outlook 2010 McKinsey [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The river basin spans Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The economic value of fisheries in the wetlands is estimated at *USD80 million* a year. Wetland-dependent eco-tourism in the river basin is valued at more than USD 800,000 annually and natural products and medicines associated with these wetlands are considered worth over *USD2.5 million* a year. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. According to UNICEF, the child stunting rate in Ghana is 28 per cent, in Tanzania 42 per cent, and in Zambia 45 per cent. <http://www.childinfo.org/undernutrition_nutritional_status.php> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Danish Church Aid (DCA), ‘Zambia: Food security programme document, January 2006-December 2010’, October 2005, pp 28, 29 and 34 and Carol del Ninno, Paul Dorosh and Kalandhi Subbarao, ‘Food aid and food security in the short and long run: Country experience from Asia and sub-Saharan Africa’, Social Protection Discussion Paper, World Bank, November 2005, p.73 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See also health effects of GMO soya: <http://healthimpactnews.com/2012/over-50-of-argentinas-cultivated-land-is-gmo-soy-with-serious-health-effects/> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <http://www.dailypost.co.uk/news/north-wales-news/2011/09/17/go-ahead-for-biomass-power-station-on-anglesey-to-create-700-jobs-55578-29437137/> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <http://bio-fuel-watch.blogspot.com/2010/01/biomass-wood-chip-power-station-on.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Klaus Biskup, Director of Sales & Marketing, EccoWood European CEO Journal April 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. More information on tree plantations available from Tandon unpublished paper 2011 “From Under Their Feet”. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Where “working the land” was considered primarily the livelihood of those who had ‘failed to do better’ – there is now a generation of young professionals, women and youth who are looking to farming and fisheries as the new income security. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. IFOAM’s definition of Organic Agriculture: Organic Agriculture is a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. Organic Agriculture combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved. See: <http://www.ifoam.org/growing_organic/definitions/doa/index.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. International Federation for Organic Agriculture Movement – see <http://www.ifoam.org/about_ifoam/principles/index.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See IFOAM report: Organic Agriculture and Women’s’ Empowerment Studies, Cathy Farnworth and Jessica Hutchings <http://www.ifoam.org/growing_organic/1_arguments_for_oa/social_justice/pdfs/Gender-Study-090421.pdf> and research from Chiappa and Flora (1998) with women farmers in Minnesota found they validated the key elements of independence, harmony with nature, decentralisation, community, diversity, and restraint. The women respondents also added two more elements - quality family life and spirituality. Yet due to women’s lack of voice, these ele­ments do not yet form part of mainstream sustainable farming discourse, leaving them in an unacknowledged female slipstream. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The principle of health, The principle of ecology, The principle of fairness, The principle of care [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Organic agriculture is a living and dynamic system that responds to internal and external demands and conditions. Practitioners of organic agriculture can enhance efficiency and increase productivity, but this should not be at the risk of jeopardizing health and well-being. Consequently, new technologies need to be assessed and existing methods reviewed. Given the incomplete understanding of ecosystems and agriculture, care must be taken. This principle of care states that precaution and responsibility are the key concerns in management, development and technology choices in organic agriculture. Science is necessary to ensure that organic agriculture is healthy, safe and ecologically sound. However, scientific knowledge alone is not sufficient. Practical experience, accumulated wisdom and traditional and indigenous knowledge offer valid solutions, tested by time. Organic agriculture should prevent significant risks by adopting appropriate technologies and rejecting unpredictable ones, such as genetic engineering. Decisions should reflect the values and needs of all who might be affected, through transparent and participatory processes. (IFOAM) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Although PES programmes have the potential to be an income stream for rural poor women and men, it remains to be seen how much of these payment schemes will actually benefit women. Women, for instance, who have always cleaned the water canals that feed their fields as a matter of course, may find that as soon as ‘ecosystem services’ become commercialized, they are pushed aside by the men in the community whose priority is to earn income. As long as they are not privy to the negotiated terms around PES, they will continue to be ignored, or worse exploited, by these regimes. Tandon, N (2012) Empowerment of women in a Green Economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See for example Tom Crompton: Common Cause: the case for working with our cultural values (September 2010) Common-interest frame where the goal or value associated with each item is given in parenthesis: *I will assist people who need it, asking nothing in return; the things I do will make other people’s lives better; I will help the world become a better place*

    (community feeling)*; unity with nature (fitting into nature) and broadmindedness (tolerance of different ideas and beliefs) are important guiding principles in my life; social justice (correcting injustice, care for the weak) is an important guiding principle in my life* (universalism)*; to be helpful (working for the welfare of others) is an important guiding principle in my life* (benevolence). <http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/reports/common_cause_report.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-26)