

POLICY BRIEF

CARING WITH DIGNITY:

Towards an Integrated Home Care System for Older Adults in the Dominican Republic

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“Initiatives to strengthen care policies in Latin America and the Caribbean”

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Introduction

Care is one of the foremost public policy challenges in Latin America and the Caribbean. Rising life expectancy, population ageing and the growing prevalence of dependency are increasing demand for long-term care, while exposing the limitations of traditional models based almost exclusively on family labour.

In the Dominican Republic, this reality takes on a particular significance. Care continues to be provided predominantly by women within households, often without economic recognition, social protection or access to respite mechanisms. This social organization of care reproduces gender inequalities and transfers to families responsibilities that require a broader response from the State.

In this context, the Familia de Cariño programme represents an innovative experience in home-based care. Its design incorporates two strategic components: financial support for caregivers and a training and certification process aimed at improving service quality and advancing the professionalization of care work.

This policy brief presents the main findings of the study Caring with Dignity: Towards an Integrated Home Care System for Older Adults in the Dominican Republic, whose purpose was to evaluate the programme from the perspectives of rights, decent work and the care economy. Rather than measuring programme outcomes alone, the study analyses its capacity to contribute to the construction of a sustainable, rights-based public care policy, identifying the main challenges and opportunities for strengthening it.

The Familia de Cariño programme and the study methodology

The Familia de Cariño programme, implemented by the National Council for Older Persons (CONAPE) in coordination with the Supérate programme, constitutes a public response to the growing demand for long-term care in the Dominican Republic.

Its objective is to enable older persons in situations of dependency to remain in their homes with quality care, preventing institutionalization when deemed unnecessary and strengthening the well-being of both older persons and those who care for them.

The programme is structured around two complementary components. The first consists of a monthly stipend of RD\$15,000

for the caregiver, intended to provide economic recognition for work that has historically been rendered invisible and to make the provision of care at home viable. The second is a training and certification process, developed together with INFOTEP, aimed at professionalizing care work, standardizing the quality of care and expanding participants' opportunities for labour market integration.

To evaluate this experience, the Caring with Dignity study analysed the programme from the perspectives of the care economy and decent work. Rather than assessing only its operational results, the research sought to identify the extent to which Familia de Cariño contributes to laying the foundations for a future Integrated Care System and the main challenges for its consolidation.

The research adopted a mixed-methods design, predominantly qualitative and supported by descriptive quantitative evidence. The qualitative component included 25 in-depth interviews and five territorial workshops conducted using the World Café methodology, making it possible to understand caregivers' everyday experiences, the risks associated with the work and opportunities to improve the programme. The quantitative component was based on a survey of 149 caregivers, equivalent to 87.6% of those contacted, which made it possible to characterize participants' working conditions, working hours, social protection, health, income and expectations.

It is important to note that the quantitative component of the study was descriptive and exploratory in nature, based on a non-probability sample of caregivers linked to the programme. Consequently, the quantitative results make it possible to identify trends and describe perceptions and working conditions, but not to draw statistical inferences about

the programme universe or establish causal relationships. The findings are strengthened through triangulation with the qualitative evidence obtained from interviews and territorial workshops.

The profile of caregivers reveals the persistence of a deeply feminized organization of care. Women account for 94% of participants, 41.6% are between 51 and 60 years old, and 75.8% care for a direct family member, demonstrating that the programme continues to operate within a structure in which care work remains closely tied to family responsibilities. Before joining the programme, 38.3% were unemployed and 26.2% performed unpaid care work, confirming that, for many women, Familia de Cariño represents their first opportunity to receive economic recognition for an activity that had historically remained invisible.

This profile is particularly relevant for public policy as it demonstrates that the programme not only serves older persons in situations of dependency but also creates opportunities for the economic inclusion of women whose labour trajectories have been marked by informality, unemployment or unpaid domestic work. At the same time, it shows that building an Integrated Care System will require addressing structural challenges related to the feminization of care, social protection and the professionalization of a workforce that currently constitutes the programme's main support.

The territorial workshops served a dual function: they constituted a participatory research technique for gathering collective evidence and, at the same time, spaces for exchange, reflection and organizational strengthening facilitated by FENAMUTRA. Accordingly, some findings related to knowledge of rights, collective organization or the appropriation of certain concepts should also be interpreted in light of this formative dimension and not attributed exclusively to the original design of the Familia de Cariño programme.

Main findings

The evaluation of the Familia de Cariño programme suggests that the Dominican Republic has a public initiative capable of strengthening home-based care for older persons and laying the foundations for a future Integrated Care System. However, the research also shows that the programme's success will depend on its capacity to evolve from an assistance-based model towards a public policy that guarantees decent work, social protection and shared responsibility.

1. Home-based care is an effective policy response to population ageing

The programme's main strength is that it demonstrates that the State can play an active role in organizing long-term care. Home-based care enables older persons to remain in their homes, preserve family and community ties and receive more personalized

care. Participants report that this strategy contributes to improving beneficiaries' quality of life and reduces pressure on institutional care services.

The research also shows that caregivers positively value the support provided by the programme and consider that the training received strengthened the quality of care. These findings suggest that public investment in home-based care not only responds to a growing social need, but also constitutes an effective strategy in the context of population ageing.

2. Professionalization transforms perceptions of care work

One of the study's most relevant findings is the impact of training and certification on caregivers' professional identity. Training not only strengthened technical knowledge; it also changed the way participants understand their own work.

The results indicate that training expands employment expectations and strengthens the perception of care as an occupation with prospects for professional development. Among those who received training on several occasions, 75.9% consider that it had an important or very important impact on their future employment opportunities. The interviews reinforce this finding: many caregivers state that certification enabled them to transition from viewing themselves merely as informal family helpers and to begin

recognizing themselves as workers with specific competencies and rights.

Nevertheless, the research identifies a paradox. The more extensive the training, the greater the awareness of the complexity of the work and of the programme's limitations in guaranteeing adequate working conditions. Professionalization strengthens capacities, but it also makes more visible the need to move towards genuine formalization of the sector.

3. Work overload remains the main challenge

The study reveals that the economic recognition provided by the programme fails to mitigate the high-intensity conditions that characterize care work. The survey shows that 59.1% of caregivers work more than twelve hours per day, while 69.1% provide care between six and seven days per week. Among those caring for relatives, this situation is even more pronounced: 81.4% devote practically the entire week to care, limiting opportunities for rest, self-care and participation in other work or personal activities.

The interviews describe care as a continuous activity, without clearly defined schedules and requiring permanent availability. This reality generates physical and emotional strain and confirms that the challenge is not only to provide economic recognition for care work, but also to create mechanisms that reduce time poverty, protect caregivers' health and ensure

conditions compatible with the principles of decent work.

Consequently, the programme's sustainability will depend both on the quality of care provided to older persons and on the State's capacity to protect those who make such care possible every day.

4. Economic recognition is an important step forward, but the formalization of care work remains insufficient

The programme has taken an important step by economically recognizing care work through a monthly stipend and a certification process. For many participants, this has been their first experience of remuneration for an activity historically carried out as a family obligation and without institutional recognition.

However, the research shows that this recognition has not yet translated into fully protected working conditions. Caregivers continue to face significant gaps in social security, coverage for work-related accidents, occupational health protection and safeguards against the risks associated with care work. The study concludes that the programme has made greater progress in recognition and training than in the formalization of care work, maintaining a situation of vulnerability that limits its sustainability.

The interviews also show that many caregivers find it difficult to set boundaries between work and family responsibilities, especially when caring for a direct

family member. This overlap between affective ties and paid work hinders the effective exercise of labour rights and contributes to the normalization of long working hours, constant availability, and the absence of rest.

These findings show that the programme's next stage should focus on consolidating a decent work model in which economic recognition is accompanied by social protection, labour regulation and institutional mechanisms that guarantee dignified conditions for those who provide care.

5. Familia de Cariño provides a solid foundation for an Integrated Care System

The study's main conclusion is that Familia de Cariño should not be understood solely as an assistance-based programme, but rather as a pilot experience with the potential to guide the construction of a national care policy.

The programme experience suggests that it is possible to combine home-based care, caregiver training and economic support within a public strategy that improves the quality of life of older persons and strengthens the capacities of those who provide care. At the same time, the research identifies valuable institutional lessons on inter-institutional coordination, professionalization and territorial organization that can serve as a basis for future reforms.

Nevertheless, the study also

shows that population ageing will require the progressive expansion of coverage, stronger financing and the articulation of care policies with health, social protection, employment and gender equality systems. In other words, the challenge is no longer only to continue validating the pilot experience, but to move towards a rights-based Integrated Care System.

Synthesis of the evidence

The findings indicate that the Dominican Republic now has a solid foundation on which to build a national care policy. The evidence gathered shows that Familia de Cariño has helped raise the visibility of the social value of care, improve the quality of home care services, and strengthen the professionalization of care workers. However, the research also demonstrates that these achievements continue to coexist with structural challenges related to the feminization of care, excessive workloads, inadequate social protection, and the limited formalization of the care sector.

The development of an Integrated Care System will therefore require not only sustaining the programme's achievements but also advancing a second generation of reforms that place decent work, shared responsibility for care, and social protection at the centre of public policy. Only through such reforms will it be possible to guarantee both older persons' right to receive quality care and care workers' right to perform their work under decent working conditions.

Public policy recommendations

The findings suggest that Familia de Cariño constitutes a promising experience on which the Dominican Republic can build a national care policy. To consolidate this process, the following priorities are proposed:

1. Advance towards an Integrated Care System

Integrate long-term care as a permanent component of the social protection policy, strengthening CONAPE's leadership and establishing coordination mechanisms with the health system, the social security, INFOTEP, the Supérate programme and local governments. Home-based care should be consolidated as a public service with progressively expanded coverage and sustainable financing.

2. Ensure decent work for caregivers

Economic recognition should be complemented by measures that ensure access to social security, coverage for occupational accidents, occupational health protection, and working conditions compatible with decent work standards. The formalization of the care sector is an essential condition for ensuring the programme's long-term sustainability.

3. Strengthen the professionalization of care work

Training and certification should be institutionalized as permanent

components of public policy. This requires expanding opportunities for continuing professional development, strengthening competency-based certification, and developing specialized training pathways that support the establishment of a professional career in the care sector.

4. Reduce work overload and protect caregivers' well-being

The research highlights the need to create relief mechanisms, psychosocial support services, and self-care strategies that reduce the physical and emotional strain associated with daily care work. Ensuring that care workers have adequate time for rest and to attend to their own health is essential to maintaining the quality of care.

5. Strengthen evidence generation for decision-making

The consolidation of a national care policy requires the continuous production

of information on working conditions, the needs of older persons, and the outcomes of public interventions. In this regard, it is recommended to move towards the creation of a National Care Observatory, bringing together the State, academia, trade unions, and international organizations to produce evidence, monitor key indicators and support the continuous improvement of public policies.

Conclusions

The Dominican Republic faces the challenge of responding to population ageing with public policies capable of guaranteeing the right to provide and receive care. The evidence presented in this study suggests that Familia de Cariño has generated significant progress in home-based care for older persons and in the recognition of caregivers' work. Training, certification and economic support are important achievements that have contributed to professionalizing an

activity that has historically been rendered invisible.

Nevertheless, the study also confirms that these advances still coexist with conditions of overload, insufficient social protection and limited formalization of care work. The programme's next stage should focus on consolidating these achievements through policies that strengthen decent work, expand the social co-responsibility for care and articulate the different components of the social protection system.

More than an evaluation of a programme, Caring with Dignity offers a roadmap for the construction of an Integrated Care System in the Dominican Republic. Building on this experience will make it possible to respond to population ageing through rights-based public policies grounded in gender equality and sustainable development, placing care at the centre of the public agenda as a pillar of well-being and social cohesion.

