

Heatwaves

Essential lessons for humanitarian responders

2023 is seeing intense heatwaves. According to a July 2023 briefing by the World Meteorological Association temperatures will frequently reach above 35–40°C in many places across the Mediterranean region, with temperatures in the Middle East and southeastern Türkiye reaching up to 45°C and, in North Africa, 44–49°C. April–May 2023 also saw temperature records broken across many parts of Asia, including Thailand, Laos and Myanmar.

The IPCC predicts that 420 million people will be exposed to extreme heat and heatwaves in the near future. Hundreds of thousands of people die from preventable heat-related causes each year, while temperature extremes and wildfires cause devastation to lives and livelihoods. According to the WMO, 'heatwaves are amongst the deadliest natural hazards [and] heat is a rapidly growing health risk'.

These lessons for humanitarian heatwave response begin with actions organisations can take in the immediate period and move to longer-term considerations to anticipate future heatwaves. They are drawn from ALNAP's 2021 paper '[Adapting humanitarian action to the effects of climate change](#)'.

Lesson 1: Focus support on the most vulnerable groups

- At-risk groups include older people, children, pregnant or breastfeeding mothers, and people with cardiovascular or pulmonary disorders
- Those in poverty are also particularly vulnerable

Lesson 2: Contribute to awareness-building

- Use targeted outreach strategies (billboards, mobile messaging services, media alerts) to warn vulnerable groups and communicate key messages

Lesson 3: Poor people in urban areas have specific needs

- Informal workers and those who work outside, such as street cleaners and vendors, are at heightened risk from extreme daytime temperatures

- People living in informal settlements (slums) and migrant camps often have reduced access to water and reliable energy sources, making it difficult to resist heat stress
- Install drinking water stations and reliable shelters from the heat
- Work with employers and relevant organisations (eg local governments, the construction industry) to provide water and shade for outdoor workers

Lesson 4: Partner with government agencies to support social protection

- Some groups - especially in urban areas - are more vulnerable to the effects of heatwaves because of insecure livelihoods, poor living conditions and inadequate access to medical care
- Humanitarian actors can play a role in encouraging governments to expand social safety nets to these groups to cover public healthcare and compensate for lost earnings

Lesson 5: Consider the complex impact of extreme heat on livelihoods

- Humanitarian organisations should develop their understanding of how extreme heat disrupts livelihoods, and so the ability of affected communities to meet their basic needs
- Consider the ways extreme heat affects livestock and fisheries, as well as supply chains, especially of perishable goods

Lesson 6: Support reliable access to sustainable energy

- Indoor air conditioning, while effective in the short term, is unsustainable
- Air conditioning is also unaffordable for the most vulnerable groups. Reliance on air conditioning places vulnerable people at risk from energy supply failure during heatwaves
- Even lower-energy solutions, such as electric fans, increase the cumulative risk of energy supply failure when the system is under stress during heatwaves. Energy blackouts have a knock on effect on critical infrastructure, such as healthcare

Lesson 7: Make extreme heat a core consideration in future strategy and planning

- As extreme heat becomes more common it requires a shift from ad hoc responses to strategic planning. Long-term heatwave planning should be embedded in programmes.
- Map the effects of heatwaves on behaviour and migration trends to support better informed future planning

See the January 2023 issue of *Southasiadisasters.net* '[Building Adaptation and Resilience to Heat Waves](#)' for more information, including contributions by ALNAP member organisation AIDMI

Lesson 8: Design interventions that engage affected communities in heatwave mitigation plans and programmes

- Involving communities in the development stage gives significantly better outcomes, and engaging communities in the programme itself can lead to vital behaviour changes

ALNAP's 2021 paper '[Adapting humanitarian action to the effects of climate change](#)' is available [here](#), and includes lessons for tropical storms as well as general strategies for engaging with climate change. The information on heatwaves is in Section C, pp48–56

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