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Without action plans, India's poorest will continue to bear brunt of heatwaves: study

Of the 37 plans it analysed, the Centre for Policy Research found that nearly all of them failed to target vulnerable groups, are underfunded and have weak legal foundation

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File photo of a family seen carry twigs in Churu District under hot weather conditions. | Photo Credit: KRISHNAN V.V.

Following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's high-level meeting earlier this month **to review the heatwave preparedness** — a new report by the think-tank Centre for Policy Research on "How is India Adapting to Heatwaves?" indicates that the country is ill-prepared to face the heat.

The centre analysed all the 37 heat action plans (HAPs) across 18 States, to evaluate how policy action is keeping up with the warming weather in India and found that most HAPs are not built for local contexts. It found that nearly all HAPs fail to identify and target vulnerable groups and are underfunded with weak legal foundations and are insufficiently transparent.

Extreme heat poses an unprecedented challenge to health and productivity, cautioned the centre adding that heat waves (prolonged periods of extreme heat) have increased in frequency in recent decades due to climate change.

Landmark heatwaves (1998, 2002, 2010, 2015, 2022) have each led to large death tolls (according to government estimates) and extensive economic damage by reducing labour productivity and affecting water availability, agriculture, and energy systems.

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Governments across India at the State, district, and municipal levels have responded by creating heat action plans (HAPs), which prescribe a variety of preparatory activities and post-heatwave response measures across government departments to decrease the impact of heatwaves.

The current report analysed 37 heat action plans at the city (9), district (13) and State (15) levels across 18 States.

Need for vulnerability assessments

The report states that only — two HAPs carry out and present vulnerability assessments (systematic studies to locate where the people most likely to be affected are in a city, district, or State). While most HAPs list broad categories of vulnerable groups (elderly,

outdoor workers, pregnant women) and the list of solutions they do not necessarily focus on these groups. Additionally only three of 37 HAPs identify funding sources and eight HAPs ask implementing departments to self-allocate resources, indicating a serious funding constraint.

None of the HAPs reviewed indicate the legal sources of their authority. This reduces bureaucratic incentives to prioritise and comply with HAPs instructions, said the report.

It also said that there is no national repository of HAPs and very few HAPs are listed online. It is also unclear whether these HAPs are being updated periodically and whether this is based on evaluation data.

‘Economic losses, health issues’

“India has made considerable progress by creating several dozen heat action plans in the last decade. But our assessment reveals several gaps that must be filled in future plans. If we don’t, India will suffer damaging economic losses due to decreasing labour productivity, sudden and frequent disruptions to agriculture (like we saw last year), and unbearably hot cities as heatwaves become more frequent and intense,” said Aditya Valiathan Pillai, associate fellow at CPR and co-author of the report.

The CPR’s report recommends that HAPs identify sources of financing — either from new funds or by combining actions with existing national and State policies — and set up rigorous independent evaluations as a basis for constant improvement.

“Without implementation-oriented HAPs, India’s poorest will continue to suffer from extreme heat, paying with both their health and incomes,” added Mr. Pillai.