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GENERAL STUDIES 3: ECONOMY

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TOPIC: issues relating to employment

It is time to protect India's workers from the heat

Introduction: Heatwaves and the Urban Workforce Crisis

- In **April 2025**, Delhi experienced temperatures above **41°C**, with nights remaining unusually warm.
- Extreme heat conditions are now **frequent and prolonged**, driven by **climate change**.
- **Urban informal workers**—including construction workers, street vendors, waste pickers, gig workers, and rickshaw pullers—are **most vulnerable**.
- Despite their essential economic role, these workers are **excluded from Heat Action Plans (HAPs)**.
- The **RBI's 2024 warning** noted that rising heat could cost **India 4.5% of GDP**, underlining the **economic urgency**.

Key Challenges in Current Heat Action Plans (HAPs)

1. Weak Policy Design and Implementation

- Many cities follow **Ahmedabad's HAP model**, aligned with **NDMA** guidelines.
- However, **over a decade later**, most HAPs are **perfunctory, underfunded, and poorly coordinated**.
- Treat heatwaves as **seasonal disasters**, ignoring their deeper **climate linkage**.

2. Neglect of Informal Workers

- Informal workers are **barely mentioned**, often grouped as vague “outdoor workers.”
- HAPs **lack specific occupational safety protocols**:
 - No defined rest hours
 - No hydration infrastructure
 - No shade provisions
 - No income protection for lost work



3. Fragmented Governance

- Ministries (Labour, Health, Urban Affairs, Environment) work in **silos**.
- **No central coordination** to ensure cohesive heat risk management.
- **City-level HAPs** focus mostly on **health awareness**, not **livelihood protection**.

4. Lack of Long-Term Urban Planning

- Most plans focus only on **summer months** and are **reactive**.
- They do not include:
 - Urban cooling strategies
 - Climate-resilient infrastructure
 - Thermal comfort in informal workspaces

International and Indian Best Practices for Worker Protection

Region/Country	Measures Implemented
Ahmedabad, India	Adjusted working hours, shaded rest areas
Odisha, India	Mandatory halt to work during peak heat
California & Oregon, USA	Employers must provide water, shade, training
France (Plan Canicule)	Mandatory hydration, adjusted schedules, public cooling spaces
Qatar & Australia	Restrictions on outdoor work, risk assessment mandates

Key Elements of a Worker-Centric Urban Heat Response

1. Policy Inclusion and Framework Reform

- Update NDMA 2019 guidelines to explicitly include **informal workers**.
- Map **occupational vulnerabilities** by sector:
 - Construction, gig economy, waste management, vending, transport.
- Incorporate **clear actionable protocols**:
 - Safe work hours, shaded breaks, water access, first-aid and emergency services.



2. Participatory Governance

- Mandate **worker participation** in designing HAPs at both **city and state levels**.
- Move from **top-down planning** to **co-creation** with:
 - Worker collectives, labour unions, welfare boards, NGOs, and local communities.

3. Infrastructure and Physical Safety

- Build **cooling infrastructure**:
 - Rest zones, hydration booths, shaded shelters
- Locations:
 - Labour chowks, markets, transport hubs, construction sites, public offices
- Ensure that these are:
 - **Gender-sensitive**
 - **Publicly accessible**
 - **Co-managed** by local communities and workers.

4. Institutionalisation and Financing

- Create **dedicated budgets** for heat response within city/state budgets.
- Enable **innovative financing** through:
 - Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds
 - Urban development funds
 - Health insurance coverage for heat-related illnesses

5. Urban Design and Built Environment Adaptation

- **Standardize**:
 - Cool roofs
 - Shaded walkways
 - Passive ventilation architecture
- Incorporate these into:



- **Master Plans**
- **Building bye-laws**
- **Infrastructure standards**
- Promote **natural shade** through:
 - Urban forests, green corridors, water bodies (“blue networks”)
- Retrofit **informal work zones** (e.g., vendor markets) with **climate-resilient materials**.

National Coordination and Institutional Mechanisms

1. Formation of an Inter-Ministerial Task Force

Ministries involved:

- **Labour and Employment**
- **Housing and Urban Affairs**
- **Environment, Forests and Climate Change**
- **Health and Family Welfare**
- **NDMA and State Disaster Management Authorities (SDMAs)**

Objectives:

- Link **climate resilience, worker safety, and labour codes**
- Ensure **inter-agency collaboration**
- Issue guidelines, coordinate funding, and set compliance benchmarks

2. Local Implementation Structures

- Appoint **dedicated heat officers** in every city/district.
- Responsibilities:
 - Monitor heat conditions
 - Coordinate among departments
 - Ensure proper implementation of worker-centric measures



Governance Reforms and Action Areas

Governance Level	Key Reforms and Actions
City Planning	Embed heat safety in urban planning, building codes
Urban Greening	Create urban forests, tree corridors, integrate water-based cooling
Informal Workspaces	Retrofit for climate comfort using heat-resilient designs
National Coordination	Establish climate-labour task force for strategic oversight
Local Administration	Appoint heat officers, enforce accountability at ground level

Conclusion: A Climate Crisis Already Felt by Workers

- For informal workers, **climate change is not tomorrow's concern**—it affects **health, income, and survival today**.
- Ignoring this crisis risks:
 - **Lost lives**
 - **Reduced productivity**
 - **National economic instability**
- India must act decisively by making **urban heat governance inclusive, preventive, and long-term**.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/it-is-time-to-protect-indias-workers-from-the-heat/article69558234.ece#:~:text=Millions%20of%20urban%20informal%20workers,of%20flawed%20Heat%20Action%20Plans&text=In%20the%20first%20week%20of,of%20a%20new%20C%20deadly%20normal.>



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