

Extreme Heat is a Slow-Onset and Unequal Urban Disaster: Heat, Health, and Livelihood Protection

Roundtable Report

1. Introduction

The virtual roundtable on “**Extreme Heat is a Slow-Onset and Unequal Urban Disaster**” was organised by the **All India Disaster Mitigation Institute (AIDMI)** on **September 25, 2026**, as part of the launch of the special issue of [Southasiadisasters.net](https://southasiadisasters.net) on the same theme. The discussion focused on how extreme heat affects health, livelihoods, income, safety, dignity, water access, housing, urban infrastructure, and social protection.

The roundtable was moderated by **Ms. Harakh Patel, AIDMI**, who introduced the session by noting that extreme heat is increasingly affecting workers, women, commuters, migrants, and low-income communities because of unequal access to infrastructure, services, and governance protection.

The roundtable brought together **90 participants from 19 countries** across South Asia, Europe, Southeast Asia, Africa, North America, Latin America, and West Asia. The countries represented were India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Denmark, Portugal, Georgia, Italy, Germany, United States, Brazil, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, United Arab Emirates, Nigeria, and Kenya.

2. Roundtable At a Glance

Date: September 25, 2026

Time: 4:00 PM to 5:30 PM IST

Format: Virtual Roundtable

Participants: 90 participants from 19 countries

Main Focus: Extreme Heat, health, livelihood, and inequality

Moderator: Ms. Harakh Patel, AIDMI

Speakers: Ms. Melissa Ananthraj, AVPN; Mr. Piyush Poddar, Martha Farrell Foundation; Mr. Gaurav Mehta, DCB Bank

Concluding Remarks: Mr. Mihir R. Bhatt, AIDMI

The roundtable recognised that extreme heat is no longer only a weather concern. It is a **slow-onset and unequal urban disaster**. Unlike floods or cyclones, heat may not create a single dramatic moment of visible destruction. Instead, its losses accumulate quietly in health, sleep, working hours, productivity, household expenditure, water access, business continuity, and dignity. Mihir R. Bhatt underlined that heat must now be understood beyond weather and public health, as an urban disaster and an unequal disaster.

3. Key Insights from Speakers

Ms. Melissa Ananthraj, AVPN, located extreme heat within the wider climate-health and investment challenge in Asia. Her presentation showed that heat affects **health** through illness, mortality, and pressure on health systems; **livelihoods** through lost working hours, productivity, and household income; and **equity** because exposure is greatest among people with fewer resources to protect themselves.

She stressed that Asia does not lack solutions. The challenge is that many solutions remain stuck in pilot and early stages because the enabling ecosystem, including financing, procurement, evidence and pathways to scale, is still underdeveloped. She described this gap as the “**missing middle**” between local solutions and funders,

where nonprofits and social enterprises have outgrown small grants but are not yet ready for large institutional or commercial funding.

“There are 200 solutions... and there are funders, but they don’t seem to be able to reach each other,” she said.

Mr. Piyush Poddar, Martha Farrell Foundation, brought the lived experience of women domestic workers into the centre of the discussion. He explained that participatory knowledge is not simply women participating; it is when women lead change in their communities and own the change they want in their lives.

His presentation showed how heat affects a domestic worker’s entire day: collecting water early, cooking in a hot home, walking to work because transport is costly, working in poorly ventilated kitchens, using wet clothes as a coping strategy, and struggling to sleep at night because rooms and floors remain hot. Heat increases electricity costs, water burden, sleep loss, rashes, headaches, blood-pressure problems, violence risks, and wage insecurity.

“Participatory knowledge or participatory approach is not just when women participate. It is when women lead changes in their communities and own the change they want in their lives,” he said.

Mr. Gaurav Mehta, DCB Bank, brought a CSR, banking, and infrastructure perspective. He argued that heat action must move beyond colour-coded alerts. Alerts may recognise risk, but communities need scalable, practical, repeated, and locally relevant actions.

His presentation identified the urban drivers of heat risk: loss of green cover and water bodies, dense and poorly ventilated housing, heat-absorbing concrete and asphalt, limited public shade and drinking water, power cuts, overburdened health systems, weak last-mile warnings, and livelihoods that require continued outdoor exposure. He also showed how CSR can support heat resilience through green cover, biodiversity parks, water-body revival, watershed restoration, renewable energy, and emergency support for migrant and daily-wage workers.

“We need to move on to what all things can be done on a mass scale and quickly and effectively and repeatedly,” he said.

Mr. Mihir R. Bhatt, AIDMI, concluded by stressing that the same temperature does not mean the same capacity to respond. A large institution may have cooling, backup power, insurance, and financial reserves, while a small business may have none. One hot afternoon can mean fewer customers, shorter working hours, higher electricity costs, reduced productivity, and less income. He suggested key themes, made concluding remarks, and listed way ahead based on the presentation and discussions.

“The purpose of Heat Action Plan... is not only to manage temperatures... it is to protect health, protect livelihoods and local economies of India,” he said.

4. Key Themes Emerging from the Roundtable

First, **heat is both a health crisis and a livelihood crisis**. It affects bodies through illness, fatigue, sleep loss, rashes, stress, and health risks. It affects livelihoods through lost wages, reduced productivity, higher costs, fewer customers, and business interruption.

Second, **early warning must become early action.** Warnings matter only when people can act. This requires water, shade, cooling, rest, flexible work, health support, transport access, and financial protection.

Third, **community knowledge is essential evidence.** Women domestic workers, informal workers, small businesses, migrants, and residents of informal settlements know where heat enters daily life. They should be treated as knowledge holders, not only as beneficiaries.

Fourth, **finance must move from response to prevention.** CSR, philanthropy, social investment, banking, and public finance should reduce losses before they occur.

Fifth, **cooling is public infrastructure.** Shade, drinking water, cool roofs, tree cover, public transport, rest spaces, water bodies, and cooling centres are disaster risk reduction measures.

5. Concluding Reflection

The roundtable made clear that extreme heat is not only about temperature. It is about **unequal protection.** Those with income security, cooling, water, insurance, and institutional support can reduce exposure. Those without these protections must continue working, travelling, cooking, caring, and earning through heat.

The discussion showed that heat resilience must connect health, livelihoods, housing, water, finance, gender, and local economies. It must also ask who is still outside protection: who receives a warning but cannot act, who continues working because there is no alternative, and whose local knowledge is still missing from Heat Action Plans.

6. Way Ahead and Follow-up Action

1. **Move from Heat Action Plans to heat protection** by linking alerts with water, shade, cooling, rest spaces, health services, transport access, and livelihood support.
2. **Document community evidence** from women domestic workers, small businesses, informal workers, migrants, and low-income communities for ways to work Heat Action Plans perform on the ground.
3. **Bridge the “missing middle” in finance** by connecting local solutions with CSR, philanthropy, banking, social investment, and public systems in innovative and strategic ways.
4. **Measure protection and continuity**, not only activities: track whose health was protected, whose income was secured, and which businesses and communities could continue safely during heat in the city.
5. **Form a small working group on urban Heat, Health, and Livelihood** with clear terms of reference and a short timeline to convert roundtable insights into practical, time-bound action and cover the above four.

“Extreme heat is a slow-onset and unequal urban disaster. The way ahead is people-centred, health-focused, livelihood-sensitive, locally grounded, and financially supported heat action.”