



FRAMING SOLUTION NARRATIVES FOR HEAT

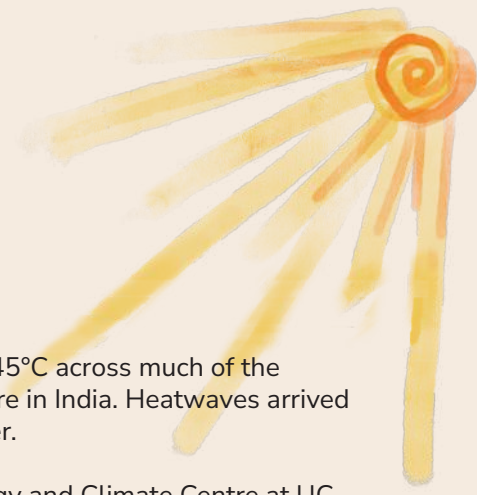
5 June 2026



SOLUTIONS



Executive Summary



India's 2026 summer was one of the hottest on record. Temperatures crossed 45°C across much of the country, and on a single day in late April, all 50 of the world's hottest cities were in India. Heatwaves arrived earlier than usual, before bodies had time to acclimatise, and have lasted longer.

The human cost is severe and largely uncounted. Research from the India Energy and Climate Centre at UC Berkeley (May 2026) estimates that a single day of extreme heat causes roughly 3,400 excess deaths; a five-day heatwave, nearly 30,000. Yet hundreds of thousands of heat strokes and deaths go unrecorded each year. Informal workers labour through peak heat with little protection, and the exposure faced by women, low-income households, and those in poorly ventilated homes stays largely invisible to policy.

The crisis is deepening, but the discourse hasn't kept pace. Heat is still framed as a seasonal inconvenience — temperature records, health warnings, death tolls, meteorologist quotes. What's missing tells the real story: how cooling solutions work on the ground, whether Heat Action Plans are funded or implemented, the experiences of workers and slum residents, night-time and indoor heat, and the economics of who can and cannot afford to cool down.

To close these gaps, Asar Social Impact Advisors, Momentum Shifts, and Youth Ki Awaaz, with support from Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies, convened Framing Solution Narratives for Heat. On 5 June 2026, over 40 journalists, civil society organisations, policy advocates, researchers, and communicators gathered in Bengaluru to map existing solutions and sharpen the narratives needed to drive public and policy action — through group discussion, persona analysis, and collaborative narrative-building.



The Narrative Shifts

Six underlying beliefs needed shifting: that heat is a private burden, that shade equals protection, that warnings save us from warming, that heat is a daily normal, that it ends at sunset, and that it affects everyone equally.

Participants identified nine narrative directions — six straight from the room, three from the wider evidence base. One shift sits beneath them all: from heat as a personal problem individuals must cope with, to a public issue institutions are responsible for solving — from coping to entitlement, from individual resilience to collective obligation. The other eight sharpen this across specific fronts:

▶ **Greening and labour:** Shade is necessary but not sufficient. It doesn't give a delivery rider the right to stop working at 45°C, or protect a woman cooking over a stove in an unventilated home. Greening plus worker protection.

▶ **Early warning:** Measure an alert by whether people reached safety, not whether it was issued. A warning that saves no one isn't a warning.

▶ **Health:** With ~2 lakh heat deaths uncounted each year, heat must leave the weather register and enter the language of public health emergency. We don't call a disease outbreak "a bad season."

▶ **Cooling solutions:** Drop the sacrifice frame. Lead with lower electricity bills and co-benefits — heat and air pollution solved together — and replace guilt with self-interest.

▶ **Time:** Heat isn't a daytime, summer problem. Nights block recovery; warming winters hit food systems. A year-round timeline changes both the urgency and the policy ask.

▶ **Accountability:** Move from counting the dead to preventing the deaths — tracking what could have been stopped, and who was responsible for stopping it.

▶ **Urban cooling:** Cooling is shared public infrastructure, not a private comfort for those who can afford an AC. A city that doesn't protect its workers protects none of its residents.

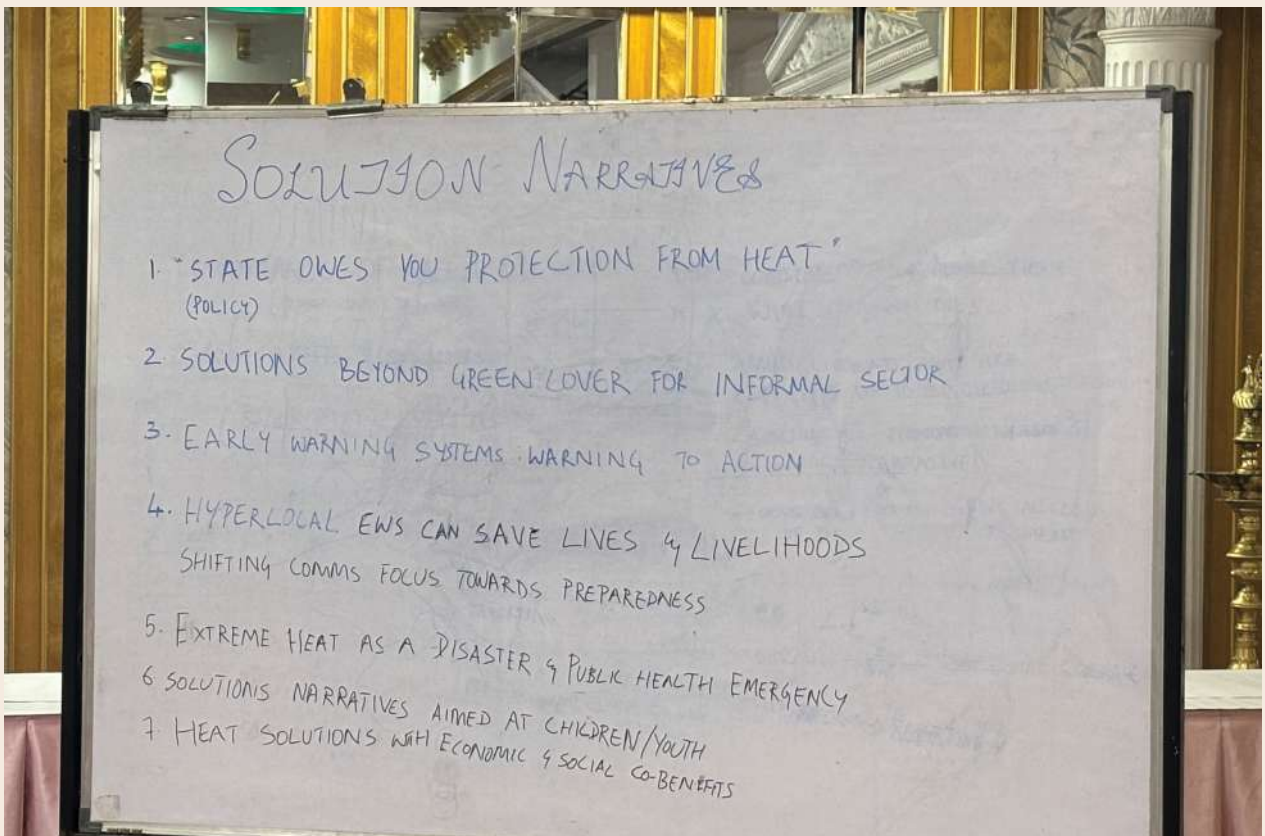
▶ **The future:** Heat is a generational inheritance being set now. The temperatures our children will live in is a frame that travels across audiences and political lines.

Cross-cutting Themes

Three threads ran through every group:

- Equity as a structural lens. Caste, gender, and class shaped every discussion — who is recognised, who can access solutions, and whose labour and suffering stay invisible.
- Heat as a disaster and occupational hazard. Multiple groups reached this independently; it's the policy lever most likely to unlock labour protections, emergency funding, and accountability.
- Data and accountability gaps as a shared ceiling. Missing humidity data, underreported deaths, and absent implementation accountability constrain even the strongest solutions.

The day closed with concrete commitments: advocating for heat disaster notification across all states, gathering economic evidence on workers' heat exposure, publishing investigative pieces, building community-centred health narratives, and framing heat as a development issue for women, care workers, and outdoor workers.





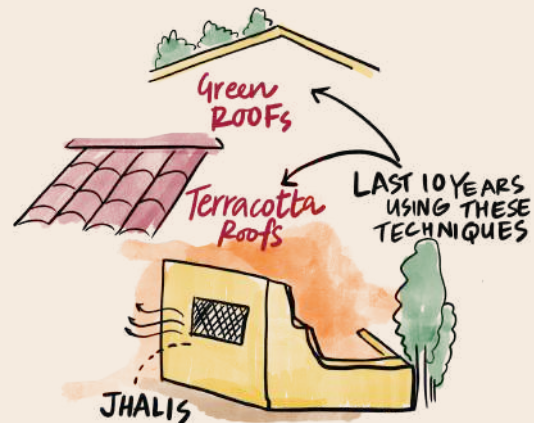
Mapping Existing Solutions: Group Work Report-Back

The exercise: participants were divided into groups, each assigned one solution bucket. Within their bucket, groups identified promising solutions, the barriers to adoption, and what it would take to scale them — viewed through individual, community and systems lenses.

BUILT ENVIRONMENT

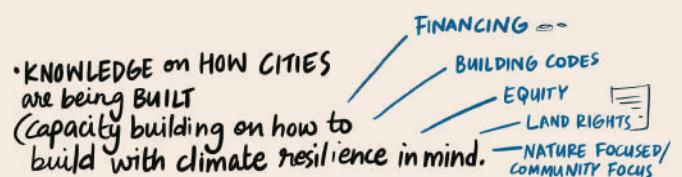
PROMISING SOLUTIONS

- Roofs beyond white paint — green roofs, terracotta roofs, and vernacular techniques (jaalis, courtyards). Building design itself is critical: well-designed buildings of the last decade avoid active cooling altogether.
- Materials matter. Glass is cheap and fast but performs poorly; the question is which materials actually work (khus, vetiver and similar), balancing thermal comfort with function.
- Ventilation and the space around a building — not just the structure itself — shape how it performs.



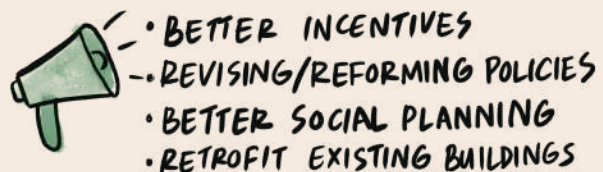
BARRIERS

- Heavily urban-centric framing; the rural built environment is under-considered. Government orders favouring pucca houses push people to demolish cooler traditional homes.
- Gaps in knowledge and capacity on climate-resilient construction; financing; weak building codes; equity and land rights.



WHAT IT TAKES TO SCALE

- Better incentives, stronger building codes, capacity-building, and revised/reformed policy — alongside better social planning and retrofitting of existing stock.

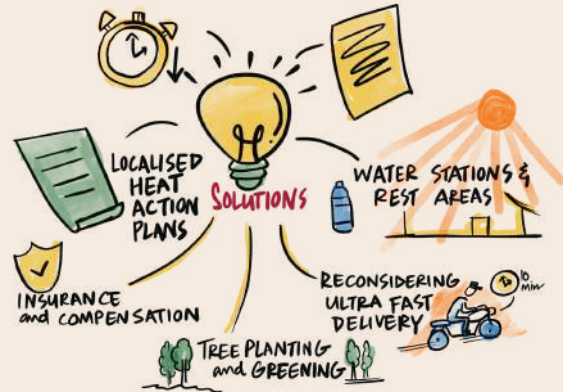


WORK and LIVELIHOOD

Focused on informal workers in rural and urban areas, examining barriers through caste and gender lenses.

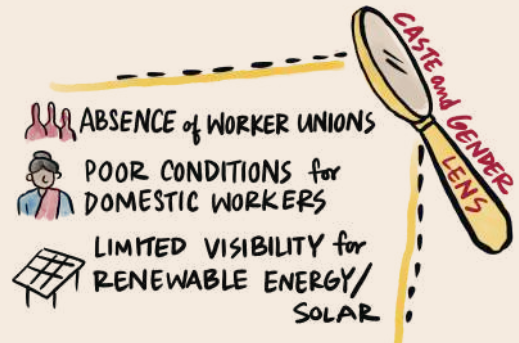
PROMISING SOLUTIONS

- Reduced working hours during extreme heat; linking heat provisions to labour protections; localised Heat Action Plans.
- Water stations and rest areas (lessons from Chennai); insurance and compensation for heat-affected workers; tree planting and urban greening.
- Rethinking ultra-fast delivery models (e.g. 10-minute deliveries) that push workers into peak heat.



BARRIERS

- Absence of worker unions and collectives, especially in the informal economy; poor conditions for domestic workers; low visibility of risks in sectors like solar and renewables.
- Many workers are unrecognised in the unorganised sector — raising the question of how they would even access proposed solutions, and who would own and implement systems like Early Warning Systems.
- Women's unpaid labour and exposure in poorly ventilated homes remains largely invisible in labour and policy discussions.



WHAT IT TAKES TO SCALE

- Recognise heat as a disaster and as an occupational hazard; strengthen worker collectives; sensitise corporates on heat risk; design context-specific solutions with clear enablers; tap CSR and philanthropic funding; ensure EWS reach communities in accessible formats.

- **STRONGER WORKER COLLECTIVES/UNION**
↑ informal economy
- **OPPORTUNITIES EXIST to TAP into CORPORATE and PHILANTHROPIC FUNDING for HEAT RESILIENCE INITIATIVES**

POLICY, BUDGET & ACCOUNTABILITY

PROMISING SOLUTIONS

- More comprehensive, better-implemented Heat Action Plans; notifying heat as a disaster across all states (currently only about half); recognising heat as an occupational hazard so labour laws and ILO standards apply.
- Land-use surveys and heat-focused research to design better mitigation; stronger monitoring and evaluation; more cooling centres.



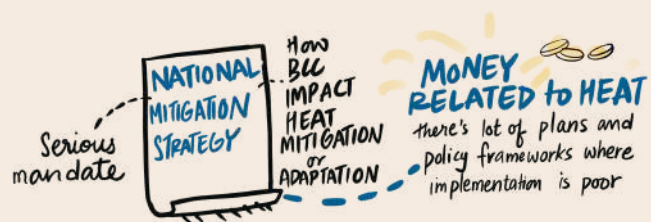
BARRIERS

- Weak inter-departmental coordination on funding and implementation; local governments often don't treat heat as a local issue; limited expertise and training among policymakers and implementers.
- Many strong plans and frameworks exist but implementation and accountability are poor — when things go wrong, no one is answerable.



WHAT IT TAKES TO SCALE

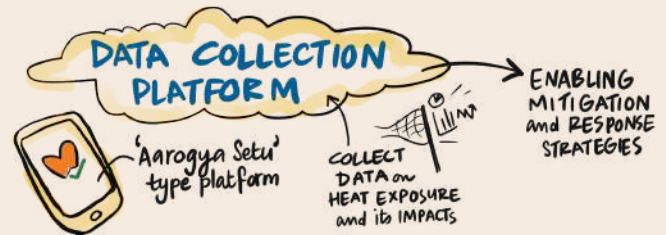
- A national mitigation strategy that trickles down into a serious mandate; empowering and funding local governments; diversifying funding (philanthropy, CSR, corporates); using Multilateral Development Bank funding with climate clauses to build heat-mitigation infrastructure.



PUBLIC SYSTEMS

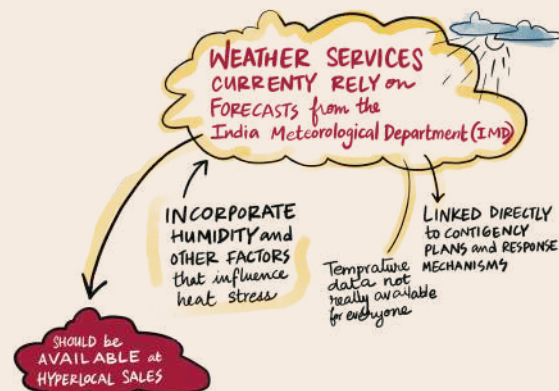
PROMISING SOLUTIONS

- Stronger health solutions and treatment protocols backed by granular, local-level data; a public platform capturing the full spectrum of heat impacts (physical health, mental health, livelihoods) — a model similar to Aarogya Setu was suggested.
- Hyperlocal forecasts (taluka, ward or neighbourhood level) linked directly to contingency plans; an expanded network of weather stations; community-based monitoring combined with traditional knowledge.
- Making the IHIP platform accessible and public to record heat-related cases and illnesses exacerbated by heat.



BARRIERS

- Temperature data is not readily available to all; humidity data — critical to heat-stress measurement — is not released by IMD.
- Significant underreporting of heatstroke deaths (estimated close to 2 lakh); Early Warning Systems exist but are not used effectively.



WHAT IT TAKES TO SCALE

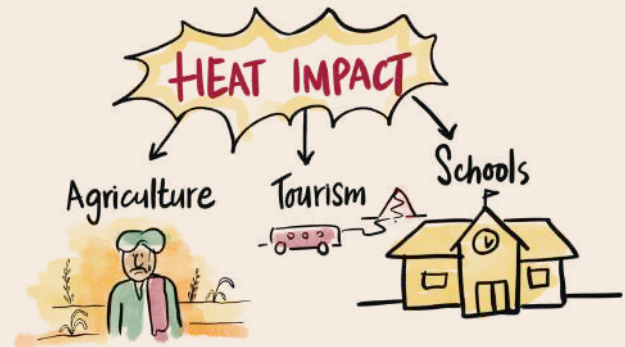
- Two-way communication platforms that identify the most vulnerable and gather local input; reanalysis/global datasets (e.g. ERA5, CSTEP's 1km×1km data) to improve resolution on temperature and humidity; integrating heat resilience with energy, water security and green cover.



COMMUNITY & HOUSEHOLD

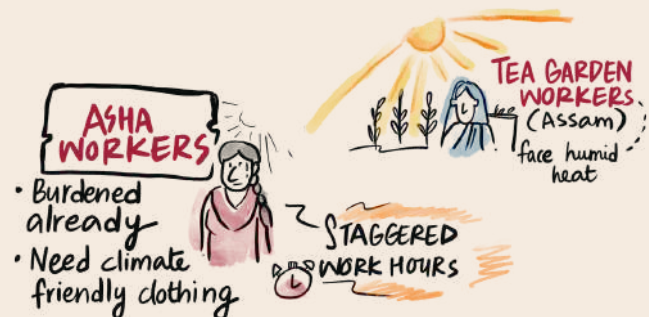
PROMISING SOLUTIONS

- Restructuring the school calendar to protect the academic year (heat disruption is linked to dropouts, e.g. in Bihar); rural infrastructure for shade, ponds and water access, with agency given to panchayats.
- SEWA's parametric heat insurance and cooling jackets for women workers (indoor and outdoor) — expensive now, but cost could fall with scale; phone-based alert systems.
- Indirect solutions such as the Gujarat biogas pilot, which cut women's cooking-fuel heat exposure while improving pollution and soil health.



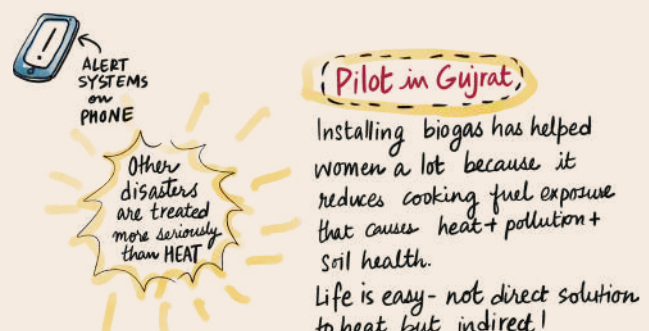
BARRIERS

- When PHCs cannot treat heat stress, people travel long hours to reach health centres.
- ASHA workers are already overburdened and their clothing is not climate-friendly; staggered work hours don't suit everyone (e.g. tea-garden workers in Assam facing humid heat).
- Open questions on parametric insurance: who pays, and who decides thresholds and premiums.



WHAT IT TAKES TO SCALE

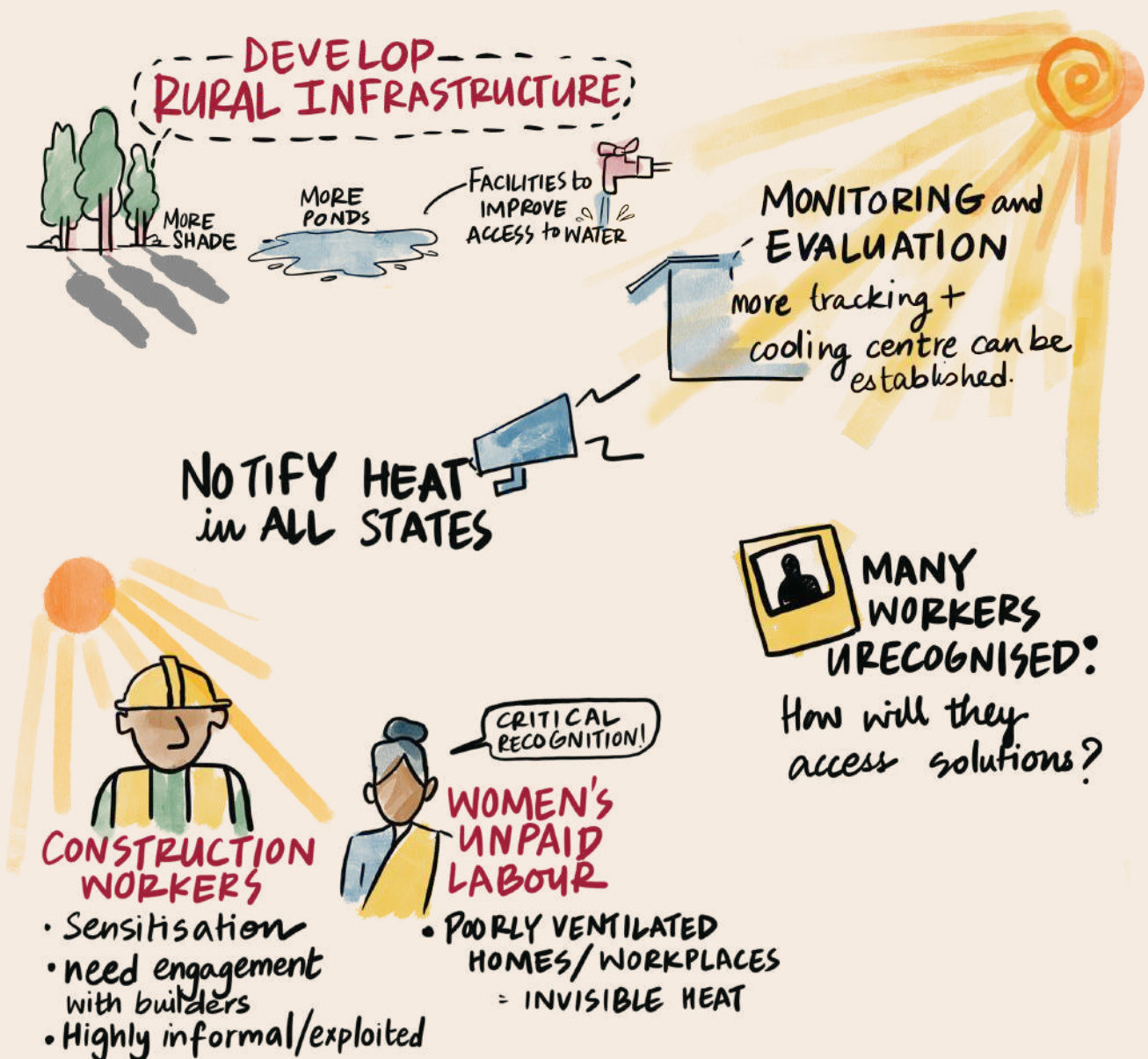
- Treat heat with the seriousness given to other disasters and evolve how communities respond; develop better rural resources and provisions; bring scale to insurance and cooling interventions to lower cost.





Cutting Across the Buckets

- A recurring instinct across every group: name a solution, then immediately surface the barrier — a sign of how implementation-aware the room was.
- Caste, gender and equity ran through all five buckets, especially around who is recognised, who can access solutions, and whose labour stays invisible.
- A shared call to recognise heat as a disaster and an occupational hazard — the policy lever that several groups arrived at independently.
- Data gaps (humidity, hyperlocal forecasts, death undercounting) and weak implementation/accountability emerged as the common ceiling on otherwise promising solutions.







Drafting Solution - Narratives

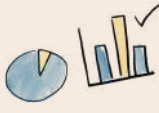
Participants moved into a solution-narrative drafting exercise, working through six audience personas: engaged rural voters, urban residents, politicians, developers, journalists and influencers, and election officials. For each audience, groups identified the values that shape decision-making, the cooling solutions most relevant to them, and the barriers that prevent adoption.

Discussions highlighted that communication often fails when it relies on technical language, guilt, or one-size-fits-all messaging, rather than connecting heat solutions to people's immediate concerns such as livelihoods, affordability, public services, productivity, or political visibility.

The exercise underscored that different audiences respond to different motivations and generated practical and creative ideas for activation.

AUDIENCE	CORE INSIGHT	WHAT RESONATES	WHAT DOESN'T	COOLING SOLUTIONS THEY CARE ABOUT	WHERE THEY ALREADY ARE / HOW TO REACH THEM	CREATIVE ACTIVATION EXAMPLE
Engaged Rural Voter 	Fairness, dignity, and security are core values. Faces heat impacts on daily livelihood — farming, water scarcity, health risks for children and elderly. 	Drinking water access, more amenities in the village, shelter, and planting more trees in the community.  	Language barriers; urban-centric schemes like Metro that feel distant and irrelevant.   Urban Centric Schemes like metro	- Planting more trees - Water plantation - Drinking water in the village - Community shade infrastructure   	- SHG meetings - Gram Sabhas - Chhath festivals - Common village facilities    	Ek Ghar Ek Ped campaign; Mela stalls where they can discuss and get information. Bihar Panchayat model — one tree per household as a community-led cooling intervention.  

AUDIENCE	CORE INSIGHT	WHAT RESONATES	WHAT DOESN'T	COOLING SOLUTIONS THEY CARE ABOUT	WHERE THEY ALREADY ARE / HOW TO REACH THEM	CREATIVE ACTIVATION EXAMPLE
Engaged Urban Voter City Resident 	Stability, aspiration, and belonging. Experiences heat privately — children's schooling disrupted, WFH discomfort, rising electricity bills. 	Lower electricity bill, status symbol, political influence, community prestige, and child well-being. 	Guilt, distant workers, activist framing — feels preachy and disconnected. 	- Blue and green infrastructure - Efficient appliances - Solar energy - Green roofs 	- RWAs - WhatsApp forwards - Children as messengers - Creator-led content 	Green roof competition; entertainment-led influencer content. Frame: 'A city that does not protect its workers in heat is a city that protects none.' 
The Politician Elected Representative / Leader 	Motivated by voter trust, visibility, and legacy. Seeks opportunities to associate with popular, visible public goods. 	Distribution of cooling kits (like ORS, gamcha); cooling stations with name/poster; cleaning up of temple tanks. 	Technocratic or invisible solutions; anything that doesn't have visible political credit.	- Cooling stations - Cooling kits distribution - Temple tank restoration 	- Industry and CSR partners - Local party workers - Local reporters - Local influencers 	Invite as Chief Guest for heat management events; link to youth employment campaigns; cooling conclave with political branding and social media amplification. 

AUDIENCE	CORE INSIGHT	WHAT RESONATES	WHAT DOESN'T	COOLING SOLUTIONS THEY CARE ABOUT	WHERE THEY ALREADY ARE / HOW TO REACH THEM	CREATIVE ACTIVATION EXAMPLE
The Development Builder / Developer 	ROI, reputation, and competitive edge. Worried about productivity losses, project delays, and accessing financing. Also looking for subsidies. 	Cost-saving measures; reputational edge ('what are others doing?'); subsidies on thermal cooling materials; vernacular/green designs. 	Mandates without incentives; solutions that delay projects or raise upfront costs. 	- Thermal cooling materials - Vernacular architectural designs - Building-integrated cooling solutions - BACU access 	- PWD collaboration - Architectural bodies - Industry associations - Financing institutions 	Recognition on architectural bodies for vernacular designs. MADE IN INDIA hook for green building materials. National-level cooling design competition linked to PWD and urban planning bodies. 
The Journalist / Influencer 	Security, aspiration, and virality. Needs stories that attract audience and sell for their channel. Journalists need authenticity; influencers need shareability. 	Access to credible data, right language, stories with strong headlines, relatable hooks. 	Jargon-heavy CSO reports forwarded as-is; messages that read like press releases. 	- Data-driven heat stories - Community impact angles - Policy accountability pieces 	- Social media platforms - Editorial desks - Expert network access - CSO briefings 	Teach CSOs to write press-ready, jargon-free briefs. Create a 'story toolkit' for journo — data, case studies, expert contacts. Frame: find the human story in every heat data point. 

SHARPENING the TOPLINES: NARRATIVE SET

Part A Sharpened From the Room

1. FROM PRIVATE BURDEN TO PUBLIC PROTECTION

Shift: “Surviving heat is on you”
“Protection from heat is owed to you”

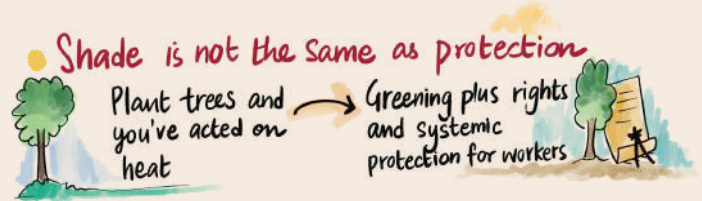
Why it works: Relocates responsibility from the individual to the state, turning a coping story into an entitlement. The room’s strongest consensus shift.



2. SHADE IS NOT THE SAME AS PROTECTION

Shift: “Plant trees and you’ve acted on heat”
“Greening plus rights and systemic protection for workers”

Why it works: Pushes past the easy greening default toward labour protection and policy — and surfaces women’s invisible heat exposure in unventilated homes and workplaces.



3. A WARNING THAT SAVES NO ONE ISN'T A WARNING

Shift: “We sent the alert”
“We got people to safety in time”

Why it works: Reframes hyper-local, inclusive early warning around outcome rather than issuance — the alert’s job is protection, not broadcast.



4. HEAT IS A HEALTH EMERGENCY, NOT A DAILY 'NORMAL'

Shift: “It’s a brutal summer”
“This is a public health emergency”

Why it works: Lifts heat out of the weather register into the seriousness of an emergency; anchored by the estimated ~2 lakh under-reported heat deaths.



5. HEAT DOESN'T END AT SUNSET

Shift: “Heat is a daytime, summer problem”
“Heat is a year-round crisis”

Why it works: Drawn from the media-gap analysis: night-time heat blocks bodily recovery and warming winters hit wheat. Moves heat off the peak-temperature headline and onto a continuous timeline.

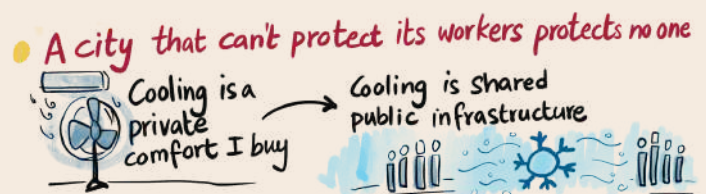


Part B Derived to Push Further

6. A CITY THAT CAN'T PROTECT ITS WORKERS PROTECTS NO ONE

Shift: “Cooling is a private comfort I buy”
“Cooling is shared public infrastructure”

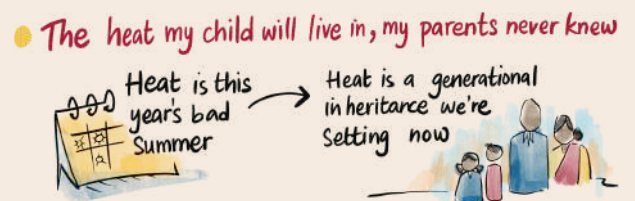
Why it works: Sharpened from the urban-voter persona's own line. Ties the comfortable resident's self-interest to worker protection, reframing cooling from an AC purchase to a public good.



7. THE HEAT MY CHILD WILL LIVE IN, MY PARENTS NEVER KNEW

Shift: “Heat is not a new concern in India”
“Our children will inherit unlivable temperatures”

Why it works: From the closing reflection. A portable, emotional frame that carries across audiences and connects today's choices to a future people already feel responsible for.





Next Steps & Shared Commitment

Closing the day, the room agreed on shared priorities and a set of collective commitments for the next phase of work on heat narratives. These are held by the group as a whole, not assigned to any one person or organisation.

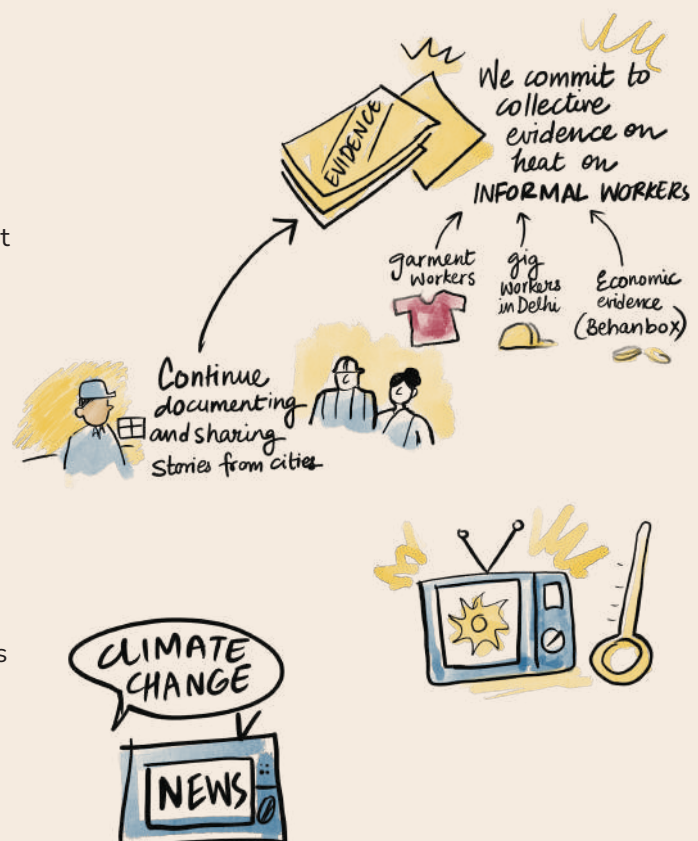
Cutting Across the Buckets

- Shift heat from a personal problem to navigate toward protection the state owes you — from individual to collective.
- For the urban informal sector, pair greening with systemic and policy design that supports workers — not greening alone.
- Link early warning systems to early, inclusive action.
- Recognise that hyper-local early warning systems can save both lives and livelihoods.
- Recognise the importance of, and protect, green and blue spaces as core heat infrastructure.

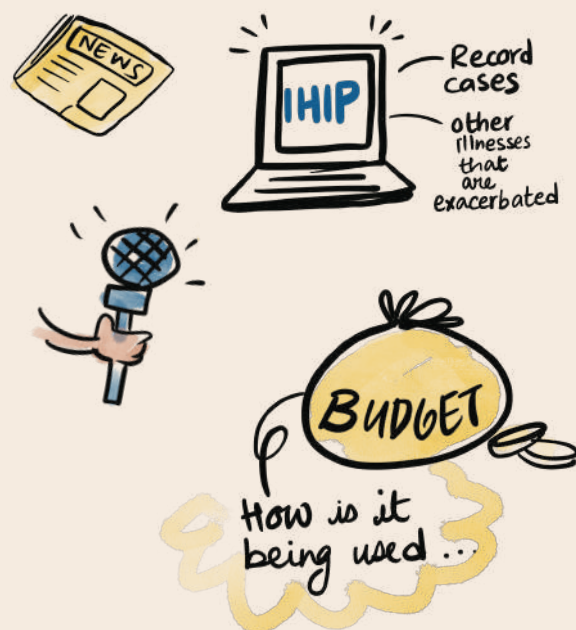


Shared Commitments

- Advocate for recognition of heat as a disaster at state and district levels, strengthening notification and implementation, drawing on the Rajasthan Heat Action Plan. (11 states currently recognise it.)
- Collect evidence on heat's impact on informal workers — including garment and gig workers — with economic evidence, and build partnerships to carry it up to the policy level.
- Continue documenting and sharing city stories, especially of informal workers and the worst-affected communities.
- Frame heat as a development issue, not only an environmental one, tailored to women, care workers and delivery workers.
- Educate reporters and the public to bridge the vocabulary gap — heat is everyday language, climate change is not — using current narratives on news and disaster.



- Produce focused journalism on heat issues over the coming weeks.
- Build a serious narrative on how heat affects health, working closely with the most vulnerable and drawing on their wisdom for actionable solutions.
- Bring stories that deserve amplification to the wider group — reach out and share, you never know who might read it.
- Cover under-reported angles and go deeper after the disaster passes — pursue the intersections rather than the obvious stories.
- Examine whether public budgets are doing enough on heat, and how those funds are used.



About the Convenors



Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies supports non-profits and institutions working on civic engagement, ecological sustainability, gender equity, and access to justice through trust-based, often catalytic funding.



Asar Social Impact Advisors is an environment and social justice advisory that convenes multi-stakeholder conversations on climate resilience.



Momentum Shifts is a narrative partner working to mainstream critical social issues into everyday conversation across India.



Youth Ki Awaaz is India's largest civic participation platform, connecting citizen voice, data, and public policy through a community of 200,000 monthly contributors and 20 million readers.

Acknowledgments

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to Aditi Agrawal from the Climate Narrative Hub for her contributions and for facilitating sessions during the convening.





Supported by:

