

EFFECT OF A HEATWAVE IS NOT JUST PHYSICAL, IT HAS ECONOMIC IMPACT TOO

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion and Climate Change

Heatwaves and coldwaves in the country have increased greatly over the past two years, according to the ministry of statistics and programme implementation. While the number of heatwaves increased 14 times in 2017 compared to 2016, the number of cold waves spiked 34 times in the same period. The numbers for 2018 dropped marginally, the report added. The report should not surprise us: The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2018 warned of more extreme temperatures in the United States, China and India, the three largest greenhouse gas emitters in the world. Fuelled by climate change, extreme weather events are becoming more intense and more frequent across the world. Last year, 2018, was the fourth hottest year on record. Globally, 14 of the 15 hottest years ever recorded have occurred since 2000. In countries such as India, heat is debilitating for a large portion of the population. This is because huge numbers of people work outside in the blazing sun, and a large number of people commute in non-air-conditioned vehicles. The vast majority of buildings and homes don't have air-conditioning either.

The historic Ahmedabad heat wave in 2010 resulted in over 800 deaths in one week alone, which led to the National Disaster Management Authority's heat action plan. This plan talks about the measures states must take to ensure that there is no loss of life due to heat/coldwaves. Some states such as Gujarat and Kerala have taken exceptional measures to tackle a heatwave: For example, Kerala is ensuring drinking water facilities, basic medicines, ORS (rehydration salts) and ice packs at construction sites and work places.

The effect of a heatwave on humans and animals is not just physical; it has a vast economic impact too. Therefore, investing in adaptation policies becomes important. In a working paper for the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi, economist Saudamini Das gives a few policy options: In some developing economies that have been experiencing heat waves and problems, she writes, the organised sector has started taking adaptive measures, like changing work hours, working at night, providing shade or air-conditioned restrooms. But in South Asia, which is poised for faster growth that involves large-scale construction and other exposure-based activities, the focus has to include the unorganised sector too. If the present trends in temperature continue, this may, she adds, involve large increases in private and public expenditure on adaptation, more provision of electricity and changes in technology and work environment.

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