



Communicating Climate-Health Risks in an Era of Fatigue and Mistrust

From heatwaves to air pollution and flooding, cities are on the frontlines of climate-related health risks. Yet many city officials report growing difficulty in communicating these risks to the public. Climate “fatigue,” information overload, and public mistrust are eroding attention and momentum across cities, complicating efforts to ensure the wellbeing of urban residents.

This issue brief builds on the work of **Urban Pulse**, which first brought cities’ voices to the forefront of the climate–health–equity conversation. It synthesizes insights from two July 2025 sessions of the Climate, Health & Equity Community of Practice (CoP), a joint effort between the Resilient Cities Network and Sustainable Markets Initiative’s (SMI’s) Health Systems Task Force that aims to respond to the urgent need for integrated city-focused approaches to climate adaptation that prioritize the health and wellbeing of priority populations. The brief offers examples and guidance to help cities reframe their communication strategies, better convey risk to the public and spur effective and lasting climate solutions. This brief is the first in a series of issue briefs that will be generated from the ongoing work of the CoP, aimed at identifying and elucidating pressing concerns for cities at the intersection of climate and health.

KEY CHALLENGE:

How do we communicate climate–health risks in ways that cut through fatigue, resonate with local experience and foster preparedness for urban communities?

TAKEAWAYS FROM COP DISCUSSIONS



Climate–health fatigue is real: the public are overwhelmed by competing crises and desensitised to warnings. Over-communicating can result in apathy or fear.



Trust is fragile: People often dismiss risk messages when they come from unfamiliar or “official” sources which is why identifying trusted messengers is paramount.



Community ownership is key: Communication is more effective when co-produced with those it aims to reach.

THE MOST EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES TREAT RESIDENTS AS PARTNERS, NOT TARGETS. WHEN PEOPLE SHAPE THE MESSAGES, TRUST THE MESSENGER, AND UNDERSTAND THE RISK IN THEIR OWN TERMS, COMMUNICATION BECOMES ACTION.

EVIDENCE FROM RESEARCH

A University of Adelaide study on heatwave communication found that while more general messages regarding risk may technically apply to a wider audience, targeted messages for specific groups may actually be seen as more relevant by a greater number of people. It recommends tailoring content to offer new, actionable insights and segmenting by different types of vulnerability related to specific conditions (e.g. housing conditions, age, geography).

The Yale Program on Climate Change Communication developed the “Six Americas” typology, which categorizes audiences from ‘alarmed’ to ‘dismissive’. This model underscores the need to tailor tone and channel by audience segment.

Effective risk communication, per the IPCC and WHO, should increase risk perception while also enhancing self-efficacy. People are more likely to act when they understand both the threat and what they can do about it.

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WHAT CAN CITIES DO – 5 ACTIONS FOR CITIES SEEKING TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE CLIMATE RISK:

1 CO-CREATE THE MESSAGE:

Work with residents to design communication tools and campaigns. Engagement builds trust and ensures relevance.



GREATER MANCHESTER (UK)

Project Heatwave was developed in Greater Manchester in 2024 and focuses on officials co-designing heat-health messaging with seniors, who are particularly vulnerable to effects of extreme heat. Officials gained critical insights from project workshops that they translated into a practical “Talking About Heat” toolkit that can be used by local actors during a heatwave. Takeaways included the importance of linking local community efforts to formal emergency response; the need to recognizing the diversity of older adults’ experiences and capacities; and the fact that many older residents do not perceive themselves as vulnerable.

2 EMPOWER TRUSTED MESSENGERS:

Train and equip local figures—from housing officers to religious leaders—to deliver messages within their networks.



CALI (COLOMBIA)

Through the SATIC programme, Cali established a network of community teams serving as the primary hubs for monitoring, coordination, and communication in areas facing elevated climate and health risk. By providing them with access to real time and historical data and building capacity, the programme empowers these teams as a first line of defence against threats including extreme heat, flooding and infectious disease. In recognition of their deep territorial knowledge, the city engaged these community teams to design risk maps and action plans, while also relying on them to validate evacuation routes and the placement of sensors and alarms.

3 MAKE THE COST OF INACTION CLEAR:

Data-drive assessments of how the high costs of not tackling the climate crisis can be powerful advocacy tools and help policy makers prioritize solutions based on the socio-economic return on investment.



LAGOS (NIGERIA)

The state of Lagos has recently published the Lagos State Climate Adaptation and Resilience Plan, which has a strong health focus and clearly lays out the cost to the city-state if climate adaptation is not actively pursued, citing that between USD ~33–39 billion is at stake. As a result, the plan serves not only as a clear outline of the state’s ambitions but also as a strong advocacy tool for the strategies and projects it includes.

4 BE TRANSPARENT AND CONSISTENT:

Explain the evidence, admit uncertainties, and avoid exaggeration. Consistency builds credibility.



MEDELLÍN (COLOMBIA)

Following an interdisciplinary process to develop Medellín’s Climate Change and Health Adaptation Plan, city officials found challenges in aligning health data to climate events in specific geographic areas over time. In response, Medellín created zones of active health surveillance to prioritize hotspots where heat and poor air quality worsen health outcomes. This data-led strategy allowed officials to target these areas with preventative, participatory health approaches and deliver tailored advice and resources directly to those most at risk—where and when they needed it.



5 ENHANCE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO INFORMATION:

Ensure materials are available in appropriate languages and formats. Use community-based organisations to reach marginalised groups.



MEXICO CITY (MEXICO)

Pairing accessible alert systems with territory- and community-specific data, Mexico City uses a colour-coded traffic light system for heat alerts. In parallel, the City has partnered with local universities and communities to map local heat perceptions. This participatory approach results in heat maps that reflect residents' lived experience and on-the-ground realities across the cities' varied contexts and has helped build local awareness of heat risk as well as trust in official messaging and responsiveness to emergency situations.

Additional information & resources about health and climate communication:

- [Talking About Heat Toolkit \(Greater Manchester\)](#)
- [Community Heat Mapping Methodology \(Mexico City\)](#)
- [EPICAS Risk Communication Model \(Cali\)](#)
- [Message Strategies for Global Warming's Six Americas](#)
- [Peters E, Boyd P, Cameron LD, Contractor N, Diefenbach MA, Fleszar-Pavlovic S, Markowitz E, Salas RN, Stephens KK. Evidence-based recommendations for communicating the impacts of climate change on health. Transl Behav Med. 2022 May](#)

Cities in the Climate, Health & Equity Community of Practice



Cities that participated in the Community of Practice session in July 2025 include:

Buenos Aires (Argentina), Cali (Colombia), Cape Town (South Africa), Christchurch (New Zealand), Glasgow (UK), Greater Manchester (UK), Guadalajara (Mexico), Lagos (Nigeria), London (UK), Medellín (Colombia), Melbourne (Australia), Mexico City (Mexico), Monterrey (Mexico), Nairobi (Kenya), Panama City (Panama), Penang (Malaysia), Ramallah (Palestine), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Santa Fe (Argentina), Santiago (Chile), Sydney (Australia), Quezon City (Philippines)

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