



Ethical
Trading
Initiative



Extreme heat

Risks for workers in
global supply chains

A snapshot for responsible business

Introduction

This snapshot provides key excerpts from ETI's member briefing on extreme heat. It aims to:

- ▶ Explain how periods of extreme heat increase risks for workers in global supply chains.
- ▶ Stimulate collaboration and action between companies, suppliers, and worker representatives to address these risks as part of a broader HRDD approach.

It uses key clauses of the [ETI Base Code](#) as a structure and highlights the importance of crosscutting principles and recurring actions. It forms part of ETI's work on [Just transitions](#).

1. Context

Our planet is heating-up, and quickly. [2023 was the hottest year](#) since the pre-industrial age and each decade since the 1980s has been warmer than the previous. Periods of extreme heat are becoming more frequent and more severe, with drastic impacts on health and mortality.

People are as vulnerable in their working lives as in their non-working lives. A recent [ILO report](#) highlighted that more than 70% of workers around the world face climate change-related health risks, with more than 2.4 billion people likely to be exposed to excessive heat on the job.

Extreme heat is a human rights risk that is rapidly increasing in saliency. It affects workers at multiple stages of supply chains and in both indoor and outdoor settings. The [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) are unequivocal: *"The responsibility to respect human rights is a global standard of expected conduct for all business enterprises wherever they operate."* These rights include those set out in the ILO's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, which form the basis of the [ETI Base Code](#). As our planet warms and risks to workers from periods of extreme heat become more commonplace and severe, **businesses must take every action to prevent and mitigate impacts on workers in their supply chains.**

ETI's expectations for responsible business

ETI expects responsible businesses to:

- ▶ Adhere to the [ETI Base Code](#) and [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#),
- ▶ Implement a human rights due diligence (HRDD) approach, in line with the [HRDD Framework](#).

These expectations apply equally during and prior to climatic events such as periods of extreme heat.

2. Cross cutting principles & actions

Implementing the [ETI Base Code](#) and conducting effective HRDD during extreme heat relies on several crosscutting principles and actions. These are explained in the key below and recur throughout the snapshot.



A risk-based approach

Extreme heat impacts different people and their respective job roles in diverse ways. A risk-based approach is vital to ensure efforts to mitigate impacts of extreme heat account for these nuances. Start by identifying and protecting those workers most at risk of adverse impacts.



Planning ahead

Periods of extreme heat are usually forecast in advance. Buyers and suppliers should keep abreast of these advance warnings, plan ahead, and collaborate, engaging with workers and their representatives on any adjustments.



Social dialogue with workers & their representatives

[ETI Base Code clause 2](#) specifies “*freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining are respected.*” Workers themselves have the deepest knowledge of their work and how it is affected by climatic events. Working collaboratively with workers and their representatives, before, during, and after periods of extreme heat is essential.



Financial burden

Any changes to workplace practices or provisions should not result in workers facing financial disadvantage. Ensure costs are equitably shared between suppliers and buyers.



Gender and inclusion

Gender and inclusion are crosscutting issues and relevant to all ETI Base Code clauses. Extreme heat affects women and men differently. Its impacts can intersect with and worsen other pre-existing social inequalities. Therefore some groups of workers are more at risk of adverse human rights impacts as temperatures rise. Gender and inclusion should be considered throughout.



Grievance mechanisms

Workers must have access to effective [grievance mechanisms](#) that are confidential, secure and gender responsive. This crosscutting issue is relevant under all Base Code clauses.

Women workers

A high proportion of workers in global supply chains are women: women make up [43% of the global agricultural workforce](#), and [60% of garment workers](#). And at the same time as working, social norms around the world often mean that women undertake the majority of care work – the burden of which increases during climatic events. However, women workers are excluded from decision-making spaces and their voices are often ignored or silenced. It is therefore imperative that HRDD deliberately and systematically engages with trade unions, including with women representatives, and with specialist organisations led by and for underrepresented groups.

Identifying at risk workers

When assessing risks for workers in supply chains it is tempting to start by considering the most numerous or most prominent groups of workers. However, these workers may not always be those most at risk from extreme heat. Certain workers may be more at risk due to the nature of their job role, such as security guards and transport workers. Some workers may be more at risk because of their contract, like sub-contracted workers who may be less likely to be members of a recognised trade union. Some sections of the workforce may be more likely to be occupied by older people, or migrant workers, who may face language and cultural barriers. Looking deeper, beyond roles and broad groups, requires a level of individual screening to identify key risk factors such as health conditions or pregnancy.



3. Expectations and recommendations

This section highlights [ETI Base Code](#) clauses that are directly or indirectly impacted by extreme heat. Find high-level recommendations and expectations for companies and their suppliers on how to prevent and mitigate risks for workers.



Base Code, clause 3

Working conditions are safe and hygienic

As temperatures rise, the body must work harder to stay comfortable and safe. This can lead to heat-related illnesses like heat exhaustion and heat stroke, [which can be fatal](#). It is crucial to be aware of particular factors like humidity and duration and intensity of physical exertion. Early detection and action are essential. Certain individuals, such as those with pre-existing medical conditions, older and pregnant workers are more vulnerable. Rising temperatures also increase the risk of [workplace accidents](#) due to decreased focus and impaired judgement.

Expectations



Compliance with local laws: Employers must adhere to laws governing working conditions, temperatures, and extreme heat. The ILO provides overviews of legal requirements in many national jurisdictions.¹

- ▶ Collaborative efforts with suppliers and worker representatives are crucial to establish policies on safe working conditions and temperatures, especially in jurisdictions that lack specific laws on maximum working temperature.

Hydration and breaks: Ensure all workers have access to regular breaks and clean, cool water for rehydration.

Indoor working environments: Maintain safe, comfortable and legal temperatures. Air conditioning, fans, natural airflow and ventilation may be required.

Outdoor working environments: Provide accessible shaded and cool areas for breaks. Ensure these are at accessible distances for workers.



Appropriate PPE: Supply appropriate and comfortable personal protective equipment (PPE) for higher temperatures, free of charge.

- ▶ Consult women workers and their representatives to ensure these are appropriate and effective for them.

¹ ILO (2024), [Global Report: Ensuring safety and health at work in a changing climate](#), see pages 23–27.
ILO (2024), [Heat at work: Implications for safety and health](#), see pages 31–49.



Heat-related illness protocol: Train first aiders to identify and respond to heat-related illnesses promptly. Ensure workers are informed and trained to recognise early signs.



Flexible working arrangements: Adapt working schedules to avoid workers working or commuting during the hottest times of the day.

- ▶ Consult women workers and their representatives to ensure there are no unintended negative consequence for them, for example in relation to safety and care responsibilities.



Food safety and nutrition: Ensure food storage and preparation facilities are safe and effective during high temperatures.

Childcare facilities: Ensure childcare staff are equipped to handle potential risks to children from extreme heat.



Base Code, clause 6

Working hours are not excessive

[Research](#) shows that in higher temperatures, work will slow and productivity will decrease. It is important to adapt to this natural response, rather than attempt to ignore or counteract it. Impacts on health may lead to higher absence rates. Workers should not be expected to work longer hours to compensate for reduced productivity or colleagues' absences. Extreme heat periods are typically forecast in advance.

Recommendations



Planning ahead: Buyers and their suppliers must stay alert to extreme heat forecasts and adapt sourcing and production to ensure no undue pressure on workers.



Absences and care responsibilities: Ensure pay for staff absences, whether for heat-related illnesses or care responsibilities, is made in consultation with worker representatives, and complies with local laws.



Flexible working arrangements: Consider and consult worker representatives on temporary adjustments to working hours and shift patterns.

Responsible purchasing practices: High quotas and low piece rates can increase pressures to work excessive hours to meet targets and earn sufficient income. Buyers and their suppliers should collaborate through [responsible purchasing practices](#) to mitigate risks of excessive hours and impacts on health.

Recruitment practices: Any recruitment of additional temporary workers must be undertaken in ways that prevent any risk of modern slavery or forced labour.² Temporary or migrant workers should be extended the same protections.

² Guidance available here: [ETI Base Code Guidance: Modern Slavery](#)



Base Code, clause 9

No harsh or inhumane treatment is allowed

During extreme heat, lower productivity and higher absences may lead to strained management-worker relations, especially if these realities are not factored into sourcing and production plans. This may increase the risk of harsh treatment towards workers, such as verbal abuse and harassment. In addition, a [growing body of evidence](#) shows that higher temperatures lead to increased risk of gender-based violence. This reality must be recognised and mitigated.

Recommendations



Heat-related illness protocol: Management and supervisors must be trained on the effects of extreme heat, including impacts on productivity, absences, stress and health and safety risks.



Grievance mechanisms: Employers must establish accessible, confidential, secure and gender responsive grievance mechanisms in collaboration with worker representatives, especially women and other at risk groups. Train workers on their rights and ensure management are equipped to recognise signs of gender-based violence.



Social dialogue: Ensure ongoing dialogue and collaboration between management and worker representatives including trade union representatives, particularly with women worker representatives.





Base Code, clause 5

Living wages are paid

During prolonged extreme heat, workers may face higher expenses due to increased prices for basic goods as well as higher healthcare, electricity and childcare costs. Paying living wages is essential to maintaining a healthy and stable workforce. Workers' inability to meet basic needs can lead to higher turnover and reduced ability to adapt and develop new skills. ETI supports the [ILO's agreement](#) which puts social dialogue and collective bargaining at the centre of living wage calculation processes.³

Recommendations



Understanding living wage levels: Ensure ongoing dialogue between company members, suppliers, trade unions and civil society organisations to understand how living wage levels are changing during the era of climate crisis.

Responsible purchasing practices: Ensure purchasing practices align with the [Common Framework for Responsible Purchasing Practices](#). Prices paid should reflect living wage rates and wages protected in price setting negotiations.



Social dialogue: Ensure freedom of association and collective bargaining are respected and work to maintain long-term stable trading relationships.



Base Code, clause 7

No discrimination is practised

Some groups of workers are more at risk from extreme heat than others. These include workers with underlying health conditions, elderly, and pregnant workers. As periods of extreme heat increase in frequency and severity it is essential that these risks are not used to perpetuate or increase discrimination against these groups. Commitments to equality are enshrined in laws, international agreements, and fundamental to responsible businesses practice.

Recommendations



A risk-based approach: Identify and provide additional support to at risk workers. Ensure other rights are not compromised by these adjustments.

Recruitment practices: Ensure processes are fair, transparent and [ensure equal opportunities](#).



Social dialogue: Collaborate with worker representatives to ensure an inclusive and diverse workforce.

³ Further information available here: [What does it take to make living wages a reality?](#)



Gender and inclusion: Collaborate with civil society groups, especially those led by and for underrepresented groups to strengthen institutional understanding of needs and make necessary adjustments.



Base Code, clause 4

Child labour shall not be used

During extreme heat, schools and childcare centres may close. However, this can lead to increased risks for children who may need to accompany parents to work, especially in informal settings. It is important to consider legitimate concerns of caregivers, such as the heightened risk of children being left unsupervised and vulnerable to harm. Management and buyers should recognise and support workers with young children who may experience added stress during these times. Adequate workplace protections for workers during periods of extreme heat help reduce the risk of children being drawn into work when adult family members fall ill due to heat related illness. Workplace protections are thus essential in preventing child labour more broadly.

Recommendations



Care responsibilities: Ensure adjustments are made in consultation with worker representatives to support workers affected by school or childcare closures during extreme heat; ensure women worker representatives are consulted.

Responsible purchasing practices: Ensure purchasing practices align with the [Common Framework for Responsible Purchasing Practices](#). In collaboration with suppliers and worker representatives, adjust quotas and/or piece rates to reduce pressures and mitigate risks of children working to support their parents.

Children's safety and wellbeing: Where risks of children accompanying adults to work is higher, consult and work collaboratively with stakeholders to develop solutions centred on children's safety and wellbeing.



A risk-based approach: As extreme heat events increase in severity and frequency, migration patterns may grow and shift. Child labour risks may increase in sectors reliant on seasonal or temporary workers, and with high informality levels. Continuous risk assessment is crucial.



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to learn more about ETI's work
on just transitions.



+44 (0)20 7841 4350



ethicaltrade.org



eti@eti.org.uk



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