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Motion

Heat, Justice and Peace: Adapting to the Climate Crisis in Europe Without Leaving People Behind

Signed by: Austrian National Youth Council (ÖJV)

Co-signed by: Swiss National Youth Council (SAJV/CSAJ), Youth and Environment Europe (YEE)

1. Background and Context

This motion calls on the European Youth Forum to treat extreme heat as one of the deadliest consequences of the climate crisis in Europe today. It is not a risk of the distant future, but something that is already costing thousands of people their lives every summer. This motion calls for adaptation policy to be primarily focused on protecting people, particularly those who are most affected and least protected.

This directly concerns the young people the European Youth Forum represents. Extreme heat is not a distant political issue. It already shapes the health and daily lives of every child and young person in Europe each summer and its consequences run deeper than health alone. They cut into children's rights: every child has the right to education and, under the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment No. 26 (2023), the right to grow up in a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. When schools are too poorly equipped to provide safe and effective teaching during heatwaves, these rights are undermined. Therefore deepening existing inequality. In Austria alone, more than one in five children and young people are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and those most at risk are also the least likely to have access to air-conditioned spaces, which are rarely free to enter. And they harm mental health directly. In 2026, global meta-analysis found heat exposure and heatwaves measurably raise the risk of mental health problems in children and young people. The European Youth Forum must therefore advocate for policies that do not leave the next generation in a worse environment than the one we inherited, but instead work towards a better future. Let us address the acute challenges that we increasingly experience every summer across Europe.

In summer 2026, temperature records were broken one after another across the continent. To understand the scale of what happened, it is useful to look at individual countries:

- Austria recorded its hottest summer since detailed weather records began in 1858, reaching a maximum temperature of 41.2 °C on 5 August 2026 — the highest ever measured in the country. 646 people died of heat-related causes in June and July 2026 alone, the highest number ever recorded for these two months and double the 284 heat-related deaths recorded over the same period in 2025.

- Germany recorded an estimated 15,800 heat-related deaths between April and August 2026, almost twice the previous record of 8,900 in 2018.

- France recorded 5,764 heat-related deaths so far in 2026. Wildfires also triggered the largest peacetime civilian evacuation in the country's history.

- England recorded 2,877 heat-related deaths in May and June 2026 alone, already close to the total of 2,985 for the entire summer of 2022.

- Spain recorded 212 heat-related deaths within a single four-day period and declared a national state of emergency over wildfires for only the second time ever.

- Belgium recorded 2,570 heat-related deaths and the Netherlands 968, over comparable periods in summer 2026.

- Across Europe, more than 32,000 heat-related deaths were recorded between mid-July and mid-August 2026 alone. The same summer saw new all-time temperature records in Sicily (48.4 °C) and Switzerland (38 °C, Basel).

This is not a one-off, unusually bad year. An independent study published in Nature Medicine estimated more than 61,000 heat-related deaths in Europe in the summer of 2022 (Italy 18,010; Spain 11,324; Germany 8,173). The 2026 European report of the Lancet Countdown found that the number of heat-related deaths is increasing in 99.6 % of the European regions studied, with around 63,000 heat-related deaths in 2024 alone.

The EU's official European Climate Risk Assessment (EUCRA) describes the future health risk from heat as "catastrophic" if nothing changes.

2. Impacts on Vulnerable Groups

Heat does not affect everyone in the same way. The same heatwave may be uncomfortable for one person and fatal for another. The data consistently point to three groups carrying the greatest burden, and children and young people are affected by all three, either directly or through the people they depend on and love.

Children and young people

The UNICEF report "Children's Climate Risk Report 2026" found that 1.1 billion children, almost half of all children worldwide, are already exposed to at least three overlapping climate risks where they live, while more than 4 million are simultaneously exposed to six risks. Heatwaves are already affecting children's everyday lives in very concrete ways. In the United Kingdom, hundreds of schools were closed in 2026 because classrooms were considered unsafe due to the heat. Every child has the right to education and European countries must ensure and provide a healthy learning environment for children and young people. Crucially children and young people will also carry the consequences of today's heatwaves the longest: a child born now will live through far more extreme summers over their lifetime than any adult alive today, making this generation the one that bears the cumulative long-term burden of decisions taken or not taken right now.

Other groups at heightened risk

Two other groups carry a disproportionate share of the burden, and both connect back to young people's own lives. Older people are dying from heat in the greatest numbers of all. WHO data show an 85% rise in heat-related deaths among the over 65s between 2000–2021, Germany's 2026 heatwave killed mostly people over 75, and in Austria over 70% of hospitals and care homes faced 20+ days of extreme heat, straining the very system meant to protect them. Many of these are young people's own parents and grandparents, and protecting them is an act of the intergenerational solidarity the European Youth Forum stands for. People with disabilities face a mortality rate in

disasters up to four times higher than the general population, driven by poverty, stigma and exclusion from disaster planning rather than by disability itself: only 1 in 4 can easily follow evacuation instructions, just 26 national adaptation strategies address their inclusion, and an estimated 10% of children worldwide live with a disability yet are routinely excluded from disaster planning. Across both groups, the same pattern holds: survival depends less on biology than on access to cooling, clear information, care and a voice in decisions - air conditioning remains rare across much of Europe, so protection has to mean social support, not just technology.

3. Climate Justice, Youth, Peace & Security and the Question of Militarisation

Climate justice is the idea that these unequal impacts are not simply an unfortunate coincidence, but the result of political decisions and should therefore be treated as a political problem, not merely a technical one. Historically, countries of the Global North were responsible for approximately 92 % of all CO_2 emissions between 1850 and 2015 while the Global South was responsible for around 8 %. Yet, within Europe too, it is consistently those with the least power and fewest resources – children, older people, people with disabilities and people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds – who are affected first and hardest. Climate justice means recognising that adaptation that ignores this pattern will always fail the people who need it most.

The climate crisis is also a recognised driver of displacement and conflict. The World Bank's Groundswell report projects that by 2050 up to 216 million people could be displaced within their own countries due to climate pressures such as water scarcity or crop failures. Importantly, the same report finds that decisive climate action and more equitable development could reduce this number by up to 80 %. Displacement is not predetermined; it depends on how much we act now. Research on environmental peacebuilding shows adaptation and displacement can go either way: fuelling competition over scarce water or land, or building cooperation and trust when programmes are conflict-sensitive and give young people a meaningful role.

This leaves Europe with a real choice: respond to climate-related displacement by militarising borders, or by investing in peacebuilding and conflict-sensitive adaptation? The current direction is concerning. EU border authorities like Frontex have increasingly treated migration, including climate-related migration, as an existential threat requiring a military-like response, which peace researchers warn does three things at once: justifies greater militarisation, undermines migrants' human rights, and diverts money and attention from the root causes pushing people to flee. The alternative is proven: the UN Peacebuilding Fund's own review

of youth-led climate, peace and security projects finds that involving young people in managing shared natural resources and shaping conflict-sensitive local adaptation reduces community tensions more sustainably than a security-first approach. This is precisely why UN bodies now run dedicated "Climate, Peace and Security" training.

The European Youth Forum should take a clear position on this: adaptation and migration policy must prioritise environmental peacebuilding, conflict-sensitive programmes and youth participation. Militarisation must never be treated as a substitute for climate justice.

This debate is not abstract; it is happening right now. Five of the ten EU “Omnibus” simplification packages of 2025/2026 directly weaken environmental and health related standards, including Omnibus VIII on the environment. This is relevant here because the European Environmental Bureau estimates that inadequate enforcement of existing environmental laws already costs Europe around €280 billion per year in health and environmental damage, an amount far exceeding the administrative savings anticipated by the European Commission.

Across Europe, there are already examples of good practice showing that these recommendations are realistic and not merely wishful thinking. Legally binding registers of vulnerable residents help authorities reach those most at risk before a heatwave. Networks of free accessible cooling locations in existing public buildings can reach most of a city’s population within a short walking distance. Multi-channel, location-based warning systems also reach people who might otherwise miss written or app-based warnings. Structured co-design processes that deliberately involve actors from health, care and social services in heat planning for vulnerable groups improve actual protection. Disability organisations that are involved throughout the design and testing of early warning systems, rather than consulted only afterwards, measurably increase trust and use. And youth-led governance of shared natural resources has demonstrably reduced rather than intensified tensions in climate-affected communities. The following examples are provided for further reading and inspiration:

- **Legally binding registries**: France's "Plan National Canicule" requires municipalities to maintain a register of at-risk residents so they can be identified and supported before a heatwave hits; now cited internationally as a model approach.

- **Public cooling infrastructure:** Barcelona's network of 409 "climate shelters" (libraries, pools, schools, museums) puts around 90% of the city within a 10- minute walk of a cooling space; Paris runs a similar network of "îlots de fraîcheur."

- **Multi-channel early warning**: Belgium reached the population directly with around two million location-based SMS alerts during the 2021 floods, showing the value of channels that don't rely on people already following the news.

- **Inclusive co-design with vulnerable groups**: Vienna co-designed 13 of its 28 Heat Action Plan measures directly with health, care and social-service actors; in the Pacific, the CREWS early-warning initiative involved disability organisations throughout design and testing, not just consultation afterwards.

- **Youth-led peacebuilding:** in Coyah, Guinea, a UN Peacebuilding Fund project gave young people a formal role in local decision-making, measurably reducing community violence.

- **Ongoing health monitoring**: since 2023, Germany's Robert Koch Institute has published weekly, near-real-time heat-mortality reports each summer, allowing authorities to track and respond as developments happen.

4. Recommendations

Therefore, the European Youth Forum calls on:

The European Union to:

- Ensure adequate funding and enforce heat-health action plans in all Member States with binding protection standards for care homes, schools and workplaces.
- Explicitly reserve EU adaptation funding for children, older people and people with disabilities, including accessible early warning systems in multiple formats.
- Reject the securitisation of climate-related migration and redirect part of border-security spending towards environmental peacebuilding, conflict sensitive adaptation and safe, regular migration pathways, building on projects supported by the UN Peacebuilding Fund.
- Reverse the weakening of environmental and health standards under the Omnibus packages, particularly Omnibus VIII, given the direct link between environmental regulation and adaptive capacity.
- Ensure adequately resourced and meaningful youth participation in the design of national and EU-wide strategies on heat and climate security.

The Council of Europe to:

- Expand training on climate security and conflict sensitivity for young people and peacebuilding actors.
- Promote a human-rights-based approach to heat adaptation that explicitly protects older people, children, young people and people with disabilities during emergencies and evacuations.

National governments to:

- Adopt legally binding, disability- and age-inclusive heat-health action plans with concrete evacuation and care protocols.
- Invest in social infrastructure such as cooling centres, care workforce capacity and community support networks alongside technical measures.
- Collect and publish data on heat-related mortality and morbidity disaggregated by age, disability and socio-economic status.
- Ensure young people are meaningfully involved in developing and implementing national heat-health strategies and action plans not only consulted after the fact.

Member organisations and national youth councils of the European Youth Forum to:

- Advocate nationally for disability- and age-inclusive climate adaptation policies.
- Participate in Climate, Peace & Security and environmental peacebuilding processes (e.g. the UN Peacebuilding Fund and the Climate Security Mechanism) to ensure that youth voices are represented in this emerging policy field.
- Actively challenge securitised and militarised narratives of climate migration in national advocacy and instead promote conflict-sensitive, peace-oriented alternatives.

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