



We Are Dying in Silence — and No One Is Talking About It **Statement by European Grandparents for Climate on the 2026** **Heatwaves, August 20, 2026**

As Europe reels from one heatwave to the next, people are dying. Not spectacularly, not visibly — but alone, in overheated homes, mostly at night, mostly old. At the peak of the heatwave, in the week ending 28 June, excess mortality reached 14,260 — more than 12,000 of those deaths among people over 65. Eighty-eight per cent of those who died were elderly people found alone in their homes. And that was only the first heatwave. Across Europe, approximately 175,000 people die each year from heat-related causes — the equivalent of a medium-sized city, year after year. Heat mortality among people over 65 has risen by 85 per cent between 2000 and 2021. This year we can expect higher numbers because of the multiple heatwaves. For people over 80, the mortality rate on extreme heat days is 768 per cent higher than for those aged 65 to 79. **768 per cent.** That number should wake all of us up. We, the members of European Grandparents for Climate, are not speaking about statistics here. We are speaking about people like us.

Let us put these numbers in a context that makes them tangible. In all of 2024, approximately 19,940 people were killed in road traffic accidents across the EU. In 2023 alone, an estimated 47,690 people died from heat across Europe. **Heat kills more Europeans than road accidents.** We would never accept such a death toll on our roads without acting. Why do we accept this silent dying in our living rooms? For road deaths, we have speed limits, airbags, safety campaigns, legislation, and billions in investment. For the heat, we have individual advice: drink plenty of water. Close the blinds. Avoid the midday sun. We do. But what about the retiree whose flat heats up to 38 degrees because her pre-war apartment block has no air conditioning and she cannot afford one? What about the 84-year-old man with no family to check on him? Individual precaution requires resources — money, health, social networks. It requires not being alone. For a growing share of older Europeans, none of these conditions are in place.

And this is only the beginning. The 2022 heatwave cost more than 61,000 lives across Europe. Climate models tell us that what we experience today as an extreme summer will, within twenty years, be an average one. At that point, individual adaptation will fail entirely. No amount of personal preparation will compensate for cities designed for a cooler climate, housing stock without insulation, and social infrastructure that leaves older and ill people invisible.

What is needed is not better advice to individuals — it is systemic change on two levels. First, adaptation: urban planning that treats cooling as a basic right. Heat protection treated with the same seriousness as road safety or fire safety — with laws, standards, investment and accountability. But adaptation alone is not enough, and we must say this clearly: if we only adapt to the heat without fighting its causes, we are building a world in which every decade brings worse summers, more deaths, and ever higher adaptation costs — until adaptation itself becomes impossible. The only real answer is to stop the warming. That means drastically reducing greenhouse gas emissions now — phasing out fossil fuels without delay, ending public subsidies for coal, oil and gas, and holding financial institutions accountable for the capital they continue to pour into carbon-intensive industries. **Adapting to a burning house is not a strategy. We must also put out the fire.**

We call on the governments of Europe: stop treating the heatwave as a natural event. It is a political failure — the foreseeable result of decades of insufficient climate action. We are grandparents. We have lived long enough to know what a liveable world looks like — and to see it slipping away. We are angry. And we refuse to be quiet and to accept this fatal disregard of people's health.

Godela von Kirchbach and Eva Riemer (co-chairs European Grandparents for Climate)