

A landslide forced me from my home—and I experienced our failure to deal with climate change at first hand

April 11 2024, by Ralitsa Hiteva



The author and her neighbours now find themselves on the edge of a cliff.
Credit: Ralitsa Hiteva

One stormy evening in February 2024, I heard the sickening sound of trees breaking just beyond my garden in the town of Hastings on England's south coast. Heading outside to investigate, I soon found cracks opening up in the ground near our property's border with the Old Roar Gill—a narrow valley containing ancient woodlands, a stream and

much wildlife, plants and trees.

These cracks soon [became a landslide](#) affecting several homes overlooking the Gill, ultimately swallowing tons of land and trees and leaving chunks of our properties at the bottom of the valley. Most of our garden and outer buildings have disappeared. The [local council](#) has forced my family out of our home, which is now teetering on the edge of a cliff.

The events were not just a personal tragedy for those of us who lost our homes and sense of security, but a stark indication of a broader governance crisis. As an academic who studies the [impact of climate change](#) on infrastructure and its governance, I have now experienced first-hand something I have noted in [my research](#): there's a huge gap between what best practice for climate adaptation policy should be, and what is currently happening.

For Hastings, this February was [one of the wettest ever recorded](#). While investigations into the cause of the landslide are ongoing, it is clear that this unprecedented amount of rain played a significant role, alongside issues of drainage, planning and maintenance, affecting both the built and natural environment.

The shocking gaps revealed by this disaster shows how local governments in the UK aren't prepared to cope with extreme or unexpected weather driven by climate change, and lack the capability to respond to emergencies which require whole systems thinking and working across multiple utilities and stakeholders.

This is worrying, as events like these will become more and more common in the years to come. Although Hastings is a coastal town, our property is inland, so this could happen to anyone, anywhere.

No one wants to take responsibility

In the aftermath, as my family and two other neighboring properties grappled with the reality of our situation, we tried to seek help from the various authorities. Despite our best efforts to engage with local councils, the water company and insurance providers, we encountered a labyrinth of bureaucracy, disinterest—and a stark absence of support systems for landslide victims.

This response—or lack thereof—reveals a troubling incentive structure, where the fear of assuming liability results in inaction.

Our attempts to be rehoused or to have the landslide damage addressed were met with challenges at every turn. [Emergency prohibition orders](#) were issued, making it illegal for us to remain in our homes, yet no clear pathway was offered for resolution or support.

And, all the while, the damage to our properties is ongoing, as the land continues to slide, in the absence of any action by the local council.

Previously rare events aren't factored in

The landslide reveals current climate governance frameworks are inadequate, since they simply don't consider previously rare events like these.

The UK's journey on flooding is illustrative here. Though extreme flood levels are happening much more often than they used to, it took decades of lobbying and thousands of ruined lives to put in place flooding support, with adequate information, emergency funding and insurance schemes.

If the UK doesn't move more quickly in supporting landslide victims, it is bound to repeat the mistakes of the past at a huge environmental and economic cost for many communities.

Currently, local authorities aren't required to work across different governance levels and different system operators (water and electricity companies, road maintenance, insurance companies) to find solutions to these crises. This means landslide victims have to do it themselves, at enormous personal cost, and often without any prior technical or policy experience.

A call for systemic change

The solution lies in a comprehensive overhaul of our approach to climate resilience.

In an ideal world, this issue would be dealt with by local authorities or utility companies. They are best placed to understand these landslides and mitigate their impact. But, because action can imply liability, they are instead rewarded for doing nothing. Scared they will end up stuck with a hefty bill if they admit any liability, it is much safer and easier for everyone to simply walk away.

So we need policies that empower (or force) local authorities and utility companies to act without fear of legal liability.

We also need more government-backed support for landslide-affected communities, to better inform those affected of what to do, streamline the process with [insurance companies](#)—and reduce the mind-boggling number of bureaucratic hurdles affected people are forced to jump through.

Victims of the Old Roar Gill [landslide](#) have set up a [Facebook page](#) and

a crowd funder to help build support for their work. My personal journey through this crisis has transformed my academic interest in climate governance into a pressing call for action. We are spearheading efforts to create open-source guides and resources to support communities across the UK facing similar threats.

However, beyond these immediate actions, we need to have a broader conversation about integrating climate resilience into our governance. As the climate changes, catastrophes like this one can happen to anyone, no matter how secure we may feel.

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