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London snow: gorgeous and deadly. Ilan Kelman.

Giving real-time context to the headlines:

Why let snow be a disaster

Ilan Kelman

The "Beast from the East" is one of the politer names for the snow plaguing the UK this week. With homeless people freezing to death, the army called out to assist, and the country issuing a warning about running out of natural gas which provides much heating and electricity, it is a major, national disaster.

Other parts of Europe are affected. Airports from Geneva to Dublin closed. Motorists were trapped in their cars in southern France. All of Ireland has been told to stay indoors for at least a day.

From southern England, the comparatively mundane stories are perhaps the most telling. Hundreds of people were trapped overnight on trains, some without water, power, or working toilets.

One train traveller wrote how "this morning we realised the air con was on". They asked that it be turned off and the driver complied. It seemed to the customer that the driver had not realised that air conditioning is a bad idea in freezing temperatures.

Should we believe a tweet or a media quotation? Not necessarily. When numerous such stories emerge, they indicate the lack of forethought evident in such small ways leading to much larger implications.

One of the main British Gas call centres is not taking calls because they had to evacuate due to an unspecified emergency. A company whose owner had £1.2 billion in operating profits in 2017 does not provide basic contingencies for some services. Dangerous situations, such as a gas leak or power outage, have other numbers available.

The train companies affected are also no strangers to large profits. They receive government subsidies, some of which (not all) are paid back to the government depending on the profits. Which hardly helps when customers freeze in the dark.

Where is the contingency? We know that small issues can lead to big problems without pre-planning. A short inconvenience for train and gas customers pales beside dying on poorly ploughed/gritted roads or because you cannot afford a roof over your head--both of which also happened in southern England. Yet those short inconveniences can be lethal if not addressed.

While this level of snow around Europe is rare in some places, it is far from unprecedented, even in southern England. The weather forecast provided plenty of warning. Money is available to invest in preparedness, as evidenced by the profits.

Where is the planning? Where is the application of knowledge and experience that trains currently perform poorly in the snow? Why are services inadequate for recognising that homeless people sleep outdoors and that cold weather kills?

With the right infrastructure, trains can survive snow and cold. With the right training, vehicles, and resources, customers on stranded trains could have been reached and rescued.

With the right personnel, support, and resources, homeless people could have been given warm shelter--as well as opportunities to avoid being homeless in the first place. With the right attitudes and values, available cash would help everyone, not just those who can afford to purchase company shares.

This disaster, at least in southern England, was allowed to happen. How can we make active decisions to provide long-term investment for thinking ahead of the weather and saving lives in the snow?

The above article is part of the MAHB's commitment to providing systems-based context to pressing global headlines

MAHB Rapid Response: <https://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/why-let-snow-be-a-disaster/>