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How to Achieve the “Leave No One Behind” Pledge of the SDGs in Newham and Tower Hamlets, East London

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ABSTRACT



The sustainable development goals (SDGs) are intended to make the 17 goals and the 169 targets globally applicable with the necessary contextualisation so as to “leave no one behind” (LNOB). This paper examines how the SDGs can be localised to LNOB in the London boroughs of Newham and Tower Hamlets. These boroughs with one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the country are amongst the high growth boroughs of London but also with one of the highest social and economic deprivations. The research offers insights into how policy framework requires a targeted engagement with marginalised communities. The empowerment of such individuals and communities can in turn enable them to access opportunities that require higher levels of skills in their home boroughs and elsewhere in London. Additionally, the inclusion of cultural norms and practices can further strengthen the process to address the capability deprivations. This approach therefore has wider relevance to achieving the “LNOB” pledge of the SDGs. Globally, in both developed and developing countries, some marginalised communities living with intergenerational deprivations remain untouched by macro-level efforts.

KEYWORDS

SDGs London; Newham; Tower Hamlets; capability deprivation; multidimensional poverty; leave no one behind (LNOB)

Introduction

This paper investigates what might be needed to operationalise the “leave no one behind” pledge (LNOB) of the sustainable development goals (SDGs). LNOB draws attention to reaching the most marginalised communities wherever they are. Lack of opportunities restricts people’s choices in life and hinders realisation of one’s aspirations in life or what one “values doing and being”. The UNDP has identified five domains that can cause individuals and communities to experience a life of opportunity deficit and depletion (UNDP 2018). These include *discrimination* (identity-based exclusion), *geography* (area of residence-based poor infrastructure), *governance* (institution-based inequity), *socio-economic* (social and economic entitlement-based disadvantage), *shocks*

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and fragility (vulnerability-based setbacks). While these domains are somewhat generic, the framework offers sufficient conceptual elasticity to allow examining specific community contexts of capability deprivations. These capability deprivations shaped by UNDP's five domains noted above and the inability to access the opportunities push individuals into tenacious marginalisation and being "left behind". This study therefore draws on the UNDP's wide categorisation of domains to capture the capability deprivations experienced by communities in the London boroughs of Newham and Tower Hamlets (NETH).

There is enthusiasm at the country level to embrace the SDGs with increasing attention to its framework of multiple domains of development and a critical role of local governments at the city level (Valencia et al. 2019; Fox and Macleod 2021; Fisher and Fukuda-Parr 2019). The ward/borough level mapping of the SDG progress too is on an encouraging rise (Biggeri, Ferranini, and Arciprete 2018; LSDG 2021). This paper joins the emerging body of literature that investigates micro contexts, focusing on two of the poorest boroughs of London in United Kingdom. The study is situated in the wider discourse on inequalities and poverty in the developed country context (Alston 2018; JRF 2018) with the specific focus on NETH in East London. Additionally, these boroughs have been most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in worsening of the already high social and income inequalities.

The first phase of this research deploys the SDG framework to map the opportunities and the challenges (lack of opportunities) people face in specific indicators through existing borough level data and plans. The UNDP's five domains that can push people into a life of opportunity deficit and thus be "left behind" have been used to capture the opportunities and lack of these in the two boroughs. The paper offers insights into the need for localising the SDGs, and a conceptual capability-based framework of how this might be done. These outcomes are likely to have relevance for policy makers at the national and local levels as well as for resource allocation at the borough level.

The paper captures the first part of an ongoing research. Much of the primary data collection has been delayed because of the pandemic. The team is in the process of reactivating the primary research.

Opportunities and Capability Deprivations in NETH

The Greater London geographical space is divided into 32 local authority administrative districts known as boroughs. NETH are boroughs located in the inner east part of London. Newham which is home to one of the most diverse population also has one of the youngest populations in the country. Thus, it exhibits potential for a strong demographic dividend. Equally, Tower Hamlets is a place with a rich history. From beginning as a historic dock and manufacturing area, it has grown and developed at a faster rate than anywhere

else in the United Kingdom (London 2019). Additionally, 680 new affordable, social and other discounted housing completions were made over three years, the highest figure of all London boroughs. Rapid emergence of organisations like East London Business Alliance (ELBA) connects businesses and local communities, building capacity of local organisations and supporting young people to upskill.¹ Opportunity initiatives within the creative industry include Skills Youth Network, The People's Pavilion and Fusion Futures to name a few.

NWTH, despite the rich social and cultural capital offering potential for a range of opportunities in the gig economy, hospitality and creative industry, face significant struggles with issues relating to capability deprivations. For example, 35.6% of employees in Newham are low paid, which is the highest percentage in London, and the poverty rate in Tower Hamlets at 37% is ten percentage points higher than the London average (London 2019). Similarly, Tower Hamlets poverty rate is 39%, and 43% of children live in poverty, this is the highest rate in London (London 2019).

Watt's (2020) research in East London comprising the boroughs of Barking and Dagenham, Hackney, Havering, Newham, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest highlights insecurities in housing and employment amongst young people between the ages of 18 and 30. The study shows how homeless and income insecure youth from multi-ethnic backgrounds in the boroughs of East London are increasingly trapped in lives of precarity. A key determinant for this precarity appears to be reprioritisation of social housing allocation policy that is pushing this cohort into the expensive private rental sector with stringent insecure tenancy rights. This configuration of deprivations through socio-economic status, identity and policy indicates how several communities experience multiple domains of disadvantage that restrict life choices and opportunities. This pushes them in the just "getting by" or merely "making ends meet" category with very little prospects for achieving a flourishing life.

The social and cultural capital of the boroughs is reflected by its ethnic diversity. The non-white British ethnic groups² in NW make up 72.9% of the borough's population. The borough of TW is not far with two-thirds of its population belonging to minority ethnic groups. However, Watt (2020) points to the racialised character of precarity mainly in the black British/African/Caribbean rather than South Asian ethnic groups. Additionally, educational qualifications in his data cohort tended to be limited to GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education, grade 11). The study also points to unsettled family structures and insecure living arrangements that push the young people into homelessness.

Furthermore, while some health indicators such as the overall infant mortality rates improved in NWTH, there was an increase in epidemics of AIDs and tuberculosis (TB). In Newham, 22 per 100,000 population, aged 15 years or older, were diagnosed with HIV, and in Tower Hamlets, this rose significantly to 32 per 100,000. Both figures from NWTH remained much higher

than that of England at 8.7 per 10,000. Also, Newham continued to have the highest rates of TB in London with 47 per 100,000, 163 cases, double the London average at 21.7 per 10,000 and four times the rate across all of England in 2017 as reported by Public Health England (PHE).

Another crucial health concern in the boroughs is the rising instance of mental health illness amongst the 25–44 years old cohort, in particular. These mental health needs assessment studies found severe mental health illness in the boroughs to be much higher than national levels with acknowledgement that these could be even higher by 25–40% due to self-underreporting. While there is higher prevalence of mental health illnesses amongst black ethnic groups, stigma associated with mental health illness in the South Asian communities (Mooney, Trivedi, and Sharma 2016) creates barriers for those seeking help. This further adds to the increasing numbers of people with poor wellbeing who are not on any official data base for mental health illness. Such individuals face dwindling life opportunities despite visible domestic stabilities because of mental health illness that remains invisible to the society.

Additionally, Newham reported the third highest Covid-19 deaths at 432 per 100,000 in the country and highest in London. Thus, household income constraints and poor health outcomes in NWTH can be mapped to the UNDP categorisation of “social and economic status” domain of disadvantage. This inhibits access to a range of life opportunities and wellbeing, further exacerbating the capability deprivation of the NWTH communities. Although NWTH are taking actions to reduce the disparities in inequality and poverty, lack of opportunities in multiple domains have been worsened by the pandemic (HRA 2021).

The capability deprivations of the marginalised communities as well as the opportunities in NWTH, drawing on the above discussion, are conceptually framed in Table 1. The domains reflect the UNDP construct for deprivations that can cause individuals and communities to experience a life of marginalisation and being left behind. The opportunities in these domains offer pathways if accessed, into capability expansion of the NWTH resident communities. However, given the social and economic poverty contexts within which the NWTH communities live, the conversion factors that are essential to accessing the opportunities are absent, feeble or out of reach.

Methodology and Mapping NWTH Onto the SDG

The current SDG framework was contextualised, for application at the sub-national level, and inputted into an excel spreadsheet so that it could be used as a mapping framework. Any indicators that were inappropriate at the borough level were identified or altered to reflect the ethos of the goals and targets. This process entailed use of alternative indicators such as the rise in

Table 1. Opportunities and capability deprivation in Nwth.

Domains	Opportunities	Capability deprivations
Geographic and economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Fastest growing area in London building on 2012 Olympic Legacy * 40% increase in jobs projected in TH by 2026 (pre-covid projection) * 20% of London's jobs projected in NW by 2030 * 60,000 new jobs in NW by 2030 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Low paid jobs for residents (over 80% higher paid jobs filled by non-residents) * Insecure employment for residents * Jobs to "get by", no fulfilment of aspirations * Low skills for better paid jobs * 49% of NW population lives in poverty
Social	<p>Health</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * 81 premises in TH: GP (General Practitioner) surgeries, community health centres, clinics, in hospital and patients in their homes * (similar in Newham) * Barts Health NHS (National Health Service) Trust five major hospitals <p>Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * 84 primary and 32 secondary schools in TH * 8 post 16 colleges in NW (similar schools as TH) * Several universities – East London, University College London East, Queen Mary <p>Community organisations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * High concentration of voluntary and faith-based orgs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Homelessness amongst young people * Insecure and unsustainable tenancy * Overcrowding and poor housing * High instance of mental health problems * Poor access to health services * Life expectancy at birth 9–10 years less in Newham than for England's healthiest areas (PHE 2019) * NW has highest rate of pollution deaths in England: 96 people dying prematurely each year (PHE 2019)
Discrimination and diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Opportunities through diversity in culture, art, food, festivities, language offered by Newham's Black, South Asian and minority population that represent 72.5% of the borough's residents * Around 100 languages spoken in the borough with Gujarati, Urdu, Bengali and English as the main spoken languages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Linguistic disadvantage (not able to fully communicate in English) led poor participation * Racial discrimination led attenuation to life chances * Cultural norm led opportunity attenuation (FGM, child/forced marriage) * Cultural stigma led opportunity attenuation (not seeking help for mental illness and resulting inability to access opportunities) * Gendered inequalities in health, employment, safety
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Borough level strategies and plans for social and economic development * Borough level climate change action plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Social housing policy led insecure tenancy, unaffordable housing and homelessness

Source: Author's research based on reports from GLA, Newham Council and Tower Hamlets Council.

foodbanks and number of children dependent on free school meals to capture data on SDG 2. Another example of contextualisation and identifying the root cause of the problem is the indicators for SDG 12. While the UK has

implemented robust strategies to reduce waste and ensure sustainable consumption, in 2018, Tower Hamlets household waste recycling rate was 26.4%, ranking it 25th out of all 33 London boroughs (DEFRA 2019). NW ranked lowest at 33 with waste recycling rate at 14.1% (DEFRA 2019). A key barrier to recycling in NWTH is its densely populated landscape, with high levels of deprivation. On the other hand, some of the areas in London with the highest recycling rates also had the highest household waste per person. Tower Hamlet household waste per person was 237.5 kg, ranking them second out of all 33 London boroughs. Newham household waste per person was 338.7 kg, ranking 15th out of all 33 London boroughs (DEFRA 2019). These results show that while the recycling rate was low, both boroughs have comparatively low household waste compared to other boroughs.

Furthermore, the spreadsheet implemented colour-codes to facilitate interpretation: red indicated negative trends, orange indicated little progress in trends and green lines indicated positive trends. Literature search was carried out to source, collate and harvest relevant secondary data that would indicate NWTH mapping of the SDGs. As part of this process, all relevant statistical data was recorded on the SDG mapping framework and analysed to provide the following information: (1) which measurement had been used, (2) the data's provenance, (3) whether the data measurement was relevant, (4) the progress to the goal, (5) the confidence in the use of the data and (6) the rationale for the choice of measurement.

A brief overview of the above process and the findings for NWTH are presented here by selecting one goal from each of the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic growth (economy): SDG 8 – decent work and economic growth; social inclusion (society): SDG 5 – gender equality; and environmental protection (biosphere): SDG 13 – climate action.

SDG 8: In NWTH, the challenges experienced at the national level trickle down to borough level. The figures for unemployment showed 5.5% of males and 7.4% of females were unemployed in Newham. In Tower Hamlets, the figures rose to 9.1% of males and 10.7% of females (DEFRA 2019). When combined with data on high levels of in work poverty in the boroughs, the progress towards decent employment seems high unemployment together with in work poverty creates enormous costs for the individual and the economy as a whole, including a reduction in living standards, loss of businesses, fall in tax revenues and high spending on welfare payments and social deprivation. Scarcity of other sub-national level data makes it problematic to map NWTH progress in achieving SDG 8. While micro-level studies such as Watt's (2020) draw attention to capability deprivations in specific ethnic groups, a far more detailed data capture is required to identify opportunity gaps and domains of disadvantage to enable communities to over the barriers.

SDG 5: Data collated showed that NWTH has made progress towards gender equality. Women's participation in local authority increased steadily from

38.3% women serving as councillors in 2017, 48.3% in 2018 in NW and from 28.9% to 40% in TH. Furthermore, both boroughs have implemented gender equality frameworks and strategic plans to improving people's lives and helping them to fulfil their potential by reducing inequality. However, much work is needed to eliminate violence against women, domestic abuse, forced marriages and female genital mutilation (FGM) that are of concern in the boroughs. Violence against women and girls (VAWG 2019) showed that 31.8 females per 1000 in NWTH were subject to physical, sexual or psychological violence in the previous 12 months.

SDG 13: During the research, data for climate change action provided measures being taken to combat environmental crisis at the city level. Since then though, both NW and TH have published detailed plans to embrace carbon neutrality, mitigate pollution, expand green spaces and public engagement for environmental literacy. Tower Hamlets became one of the first boroughs to declare climate emergency in 2019 having a track record of climate change mitigation and adaptation policy and debates since 2009. Proposals for dialogues with communities in both boroughs are encouraging. The macro-level framework though indicates an opportunity structure without much clarity of how people on fragile livelihoods can participate and access these.

The mapping process within the “LNOB” aspiration of the SDG framework in NWTH highlighted the need for engagement in three key domains. First, with a far more detailed data capture at the community level comprising ward level household data of a wide range of the socio-economic indicators,³ this would enable capturing the most vulnerable households likely to be left behind including those living in “in-work” poverty, dependent on foodbanks and community kitchens as well as those whose children require free school meals to get their daily nutrition. Such households are unable to access opportunities without targeted conversion factors to better their situation. Second, with an in depth understanding of the cultural context in terms of the cultural norms and practices within the ethnic communities that reside in NWTH, this can help in reducing gender inequalities in education, paid work, improve well-being and address cultural norms of FGM that cause long lasting mental and health setbacks amongst girls. The conversion factors would entail carefully thought through targeted information and support interventions. Third, with the social, economic, cultural and environmental policy contexts in the boroughs, this would help in shaping a focused strategy to upskill the youth and other residents of NWTH to access the rapidly expanding landscape of creative industry, innovation and entrepreneurship in East London. A targeted approach as noted above would enable people living in precarity to be empowered in the required domain harness the opportunities to be then not left behind.

Micro and Macro Actors of “LNOB”

The “LNOB” aspiration can be conceptualised as deploying individuals and communities as the primary building block for tracking its progress. The nuanced focus on the micro units of society is intended to capture the key constituents of the marginalised micro unit cohort that could be excluded from development policy in all countries. The first phase of this research shows that a targeted approach to engage these constituents in addressing their capability deprivations is needed. Without ways to directly engage with those on precarious livelihoods and those living within cultural norms of FGM, forced marriage and stigma towards mental health, for example, will remain untouched by national and sub-national policy frameworks. The rich and growing literature within the capability approach (CA) on empowerment (Ibrahim and Alkire 2007; Clark, Biggeri, and Frediani 2019) as well as individual (Sen 1999) and collective agency (Ibrahim 2017) offers useful insights into shaping the targeted approach to LNOB.

In addition to contextualising SDG framework at the borough or ward to capture the capability deprivations of communities as the SDG targets, recognising these communities as stakeholders or actors to facilitate the process of overcoming deprivations is also critical. Key constructs grounded within the CA literature on empowerment and agency noted above highlight the importance of individual and community participation through bottom-up and people centred approaches to achieve the desired outcomes. Thus, with borough policy makers and state agencies as the macro actors, the individuals and community representatives will be the micro actors. Actor participation that leads to convergence in the pursuit of specific goals is shown to be an effective way of bringing the desired capability expansion and achievement in recent research (Tiwari 2021).

Conclusion

The first phase of this research to map the SDGs with its “LNOB” ambition in NWT indicated some borough level macro policy structures directly focusing to address capability deprivations in the boroughs. Mechanisms to engage with more community-specific engagements to address opportunity gaps were scattered and did not appear to be part of an official policy plan. The mapping process discussed in Section 3 indicated the potential for individuals and communities to remain untouched by any progressive approach the borough councils may adopt in several domains. The gaps include the siloed working of policies preventing community engagement such that people experiencing insecure tenancies unable to participate in environmental and wellbeing activities. Further non-inclusion of cultural norms and practices of specific ethnic group when rolling out policies prevents targeted approaches to overcome

capability deprivations, such as community led information campaigns on FGM and forced marriages. The second phase of this research will investigate if the actor participation agency led “convergence framework” can be deployed to address the community-specific deprivations in NWTN to achieve the “LNOB” ambition of the SDGs.

This study emphasises on a targeted approach, informed by cultural and social norms to address capability deprivations of communities. The empowered individuals and communities in turn can access the current opportunities to fulfil their aspirations and improve their wellbeing. This approach therefore has wider relevance to achieving the “LNOB” pledge of the SDGs. Globally, in both developed and developing countries, some marginalised communities living with intergenerational deprivations remain untouched by macro-level efforts. To include such cohorts in the progress of the SDGs, a more focused and nuanced framing maybe needed.

Notes

1. In the last year, ELBA helped place over 700 people into work, delivered over 16,000 business volunteers into the community, and worked with over 500 local organisations in east London.
2. The term BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) has been used in the UK to describe its non-white ethnic groups. In recent years, it has drawn much criticism for its basket approach by not recognising the vastness of what Black (African representing 54 countries, Caribbean) and Asian (South Asian, East Asian, South-East Asian) ethnic groups entail.
3. In recent years, a ward level data collection initiative has been started by one of the East London boroughs of Barking and Dagenham. In the next phase of this research, examining this data set within the capability deprivations of the communities is a key component.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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