

‘Left-Behind’ Places, Regional Inequalities and ‘Levelling Up’

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The term ‘left-behind’ places has emerged as a key leitmotif of international debates on regional inequalities since 2016. Left-behind acts as a shorthand label for places experiencing economic stagnation or decline, particularly post-industrial districts and rural areas marginalised by the concentration of skilled knowledge economy jobs in cities. This marginalisation has been compounded by a policy fixation with large cities as the main engines of economic growth, based on the economic theory of agglomeration, which emphasises the benefits of urban density and scale. In response to concerns about ‘left-behind’ places, the UK Government is rolling out new policy initiatives to ‘level-up’ growth across the country. Yet understanding of the development challenges and needs of different kinds of ‘left-behind’ areas is lacking. The approach of the UK Government thus far is characterised by centralisation, fragmentation and short-termism.

What are ‘left-behind’ places?

The idea of ‘left-behind’ became central to UK political discourse in the wake of the 2016 Brexit referendum. In the UK, the ‘left-behind’ thesis was developed by the political scientists Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin [in their work on the UK Independence Party](#).

The term originally referred to people not places: older, working-class white voters who lacked advanced qualifications and skills and were estranged from the cosmopolitan social values of liberal professionals and the mainstream parties. Following the Brexit referendum of 2016, this formulation was extended to the ‘left-behind’ places in which such voters were concentrated, and we have since seen the historical allegiance of post-industrial areas in the North and Midlands of England to the Labour Party fracture, leading to the Conservatives’ capture of so-called ‘Red Wall’ seats.

Yet, this political shift is part of a broader international trend as former industrial regions and rural areas have emerged as hotbeds of political discontent and populist support, evident in patterns of support for the Vote Leave in the UK, Donald Trump in the United States, the *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) and *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Vests) in France and the *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany. Different terms for disaffected and disadvantaged areas have gained currency in different countries: ‘left-behind’ places in the UK, ‘forgotten’ territories in France and Italy, *Abgehängte Regionen* (suspended regions) in Germany, and ‘legacy’ cities, ‘rustbelt’ and ‘frostbelt’ in the US.

The complex geography of ‘left-behindness’

The current debate on ‘left-behind places’ much be viewed in the context of long-standing regional inequalities. The UK has been described as “[almost certainly the most interregionally unequal large high-income country](#)”, with deep-rooted differences in prosperity and productivity between London and the South East, on the one hand, and the North and Midlands of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, on the other. While cities and towns are [increasingly divergent in political values and voting patterns](#), this is not the case economically, with [towns and rural areas in the South out-performing cities in the North over recent decades](#).

The conceptualisation of post-industrial towns and certain rural areas as ‘left-behind’ ignores large, multi-ethnic urban areas which have [larger concentrations of ‘left-behind’ people](#). These disadvantaged urban areas still tend to support Labour. This resonates with research indicating that [it is often the better-off people in ‘left-behind’ places who are most prone to voting for populist parties and movements](#).

‘Left-behind’ places has therefore become a rather loose, catch-all label, grouping together different types of disadvantaged areas. [Different types of ‘left-behind’ areas have been identified in the UK](#): large towns and some cities outside London and the South East, former industrial regions, coastal towns and districts and remote rural areas.

Rethinking Levelling-Up

While the term ‘left-behind’ remains controversial, it seems to resonate with many people and is focusing renewed political attention on disadvantaged areas beyond the major cities. This is reflected in the identification of ‘levelling-up’ as the UK Government’s overriding domestic priority, elevating geographic inequalities to the forefront of the national policy agenda for the first time in decades. As the recent controversy over the selection of particular areas for funding from the Towns Fund and Levelling Up Fund indicates, much of this is electorally-driven, rewarding places that vote Conservative and incentivising others to follow suit.

Yet the meaning and implications of levelling-up remain unclear, generating confusion within government. Whether it is about raising prosperity across all areas or closing the gap between richer and poorer areas has not been spelt out. Levelling-up policy incorporates several key elements: transport and infrastructure investment, research and development support, freeports, and the relocation of civil servants out of London. It is targeted upon both large regional cities and struggling towns. Support is channelled through a number of place-based funds, some of which are focused on growth and productivity rather than levelling up *per se*.

There is a pressing need for the Government to develop a more strategic, integrated and long-term approach to levelling up which is likely to take twenty to thirty years to achieve, reflecting [the depth and magnitude of UK regional inequalities and the lessons of international experience](#).

A revised approach should specify more clearly the targets of levelling up policy, identifying different types of ‘left-behind’ places and the different suites of policies required to support their development through more tailored place-based policies. This is the focus of [an Economic and Social Research Council \(ESRC\)-funded research project](#) being undertaken by a team at the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS), Newcastle University and University College London with partners in France and Germany.

Rather than the top-down allocation of centralised funding pots, levelling-up policy should promote bottom-up strategies designed to build local capacities. It also [needs to extend beyond the narrow emphasis on growth and productivity to incorporate investment in social infrastructures and assets](#). While urban and regional policy has long been fixated with competitive export sectors such as advanced manufacturing and knowledge-intensive business services, post-pandemic levelling-up policies must recognise the importance of the ‘foundational’ or ‘everyday’ economy comprised of essential goods and services which employ many people in economically lagging regions, supported by sustained investment in

public services. From a geographical perspective, this broadening of regional policy beyond high-value sectors is part of a place-sensitive approach concerned with the social and economic assets of different kinds of 'left-behind' places and their relationships with surrounding cities and regions.