

Do you know your basic global facts?

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By Alison Maitland

The devastating fire that destroyed the 24-storey Grenfell Tower in London in June, killing many residents, exposed the vast divide between the lives of rich and poor in one of the UK's wealthiest boroughs.

As initial news of the fire spread, people asked: How could such a thing happen here in Britain in 2017? We're all too familiar with avoidable disasters like this occurring in low-income countries, where shoddy standards and dangerous buildings are a sad fact of life.

But we thought our 'advanced economy' offered better protection. For most of us it does – but not for those at the bottom of the heap. A major investigation is looking into why the fire spread so quickly, including whether cladding materials were to blame and whether sprinklers should have been fitted in this tower block housing vulnerable, low-income families.

If we are ignorant about the everyday struggles and dangers facing people in our own neighbourhoods, what does that say about our knowledge of life in other parts of the world? What can we do, individually and collectively, to overcome our blind spots so as to influence policy-makers to close the divide?

The first thing is to be aware of those blind spots. We typically have a skewed view of the world, highlighted by an eye-opening presentation I attended recently in Stockholm by the Gapminder organisation: www.gapminder.org.

There's a test on their website to see how well you know your 'basic global facts'. Our audience of highly educated women, mainly from the US and Europe, was put to a similar test. We were asked multiple-choice questions, such as what percentage of the world's population lives in low-income countries, and what percentage of girls finish primary school in low-income countries.

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I highly recommend you try it, and share it around your company and local schools. Most of us in the audience, despite a supposedly high-level knowledge of global affairs, failed miserably.

Presenter Anna Rosling Rönnlund, vice president of the non-profit Gapminder Foundation, was not trying to shame us, but rather to show how perceptions are shaped by our experience of the world, and media coverage of extraordinary and exceptional events. We see disasters and conflicts, while steady positive trends, such as improvements in health, do not command attention.

'The media doesn't talk about the majority that are in the middle,' she says. 'What if we could have a better understanding of the world? Imagine how many decisions are wrong because of our misperceptions.'

The Foundation wants to take its campaign to cure ignorance with facts into companies, educating people about the reality behind the numbers in a human way. It would make a useful tool for Diversity & Inclusion teams. Its premise is similar to initiatives to tackle unconscious bias, that using data to address inequality or discrimination is not enough, and that people have to *feel* the need to change their behaviour.

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Inclusion work

Gapminder's latest project is [Dollar Street](#), a collection of 30,000 photographs of household objects belonging to 264 families in 50 countries. From make-up to menstruation pads, from toys to toothbrushes, it shows how everyday life is pretty similar on a similar income, regardless of culture and continent.

If you earn \$100-\$150 a month, you're likely to use a plastic disposable razor and shave outdoors with a makeshift shelf or table, whether you live in Nigeria, or Colombia, or Nepal. You'll have one pair of 'nicest shoes', and they are likely to be worn, scruffy and mud-splattered because of the amount of walking you do, and the condition of the paths.

If you earn over \$1,000 a month in Romania, or Thailand, or the UK, your nicest shoes will look new, clean and shiny, and they may well be for leisure rather than everyday use.

The project also illuminates relative poverty with its photos of life on different incomes within the same country. Click on 'teeth' in the US and there's a woman earning just \$604 a month with some of her teeth missing, alongside people earning \$4,000 with rows of perfectly white, straight teeth.

While absolute poverty matters, it is the degree of relative poverty that exacerbates or minimises social divides. Equality of income enhances economic performance, trust,

opportunity and wellbeing, according to the OECD.*

By contrast, income gaps as stark as the one highlighted by the disaster in London's North Kensington lead to alienation and neglect. Our common humanity is at risk when the lives of the poorest lose value and the rich find increasingly convoluted arguments to justify their good fortune.

* <https://oecdoscope.wordpress.com/2017/02/08/conquering-utopia-anew-income-inequality-in-sweden/>

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