UK: changing the message to prompt action on poverty

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A New Year message from a leading social change organisation calls on the UK government to take urgent action on poverty. Its message is a concrete example of a recent emphasis in the UK on the importance of "framing" poverty in relation to policy-making. The idea is that drawing on positive values held by the public, and using certain images to trigger different ways of thinking, could generate more support for pursuing anti-poverty policies. This Flash Report examines this communications strategy being adopted and promoted by some anti-poverty organisations.

Description

On 7 January 2021, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) called on the UK government to take urgent action on poverty (JRF, 2021). The language it used is an example of "framing" - i.e. a communications strategy which presents a certain interpretation of reality and which is often used, by social movements amongst others, to try to change the ways people see and understand issues (Benford and Snow, 2000). So JRF called on the government to "keep people afloat", saying it is "only right" to do something, and describing the coronavirus as a "storm … still raging". These messages arise from the JRF's in-depth work with the Frameworks Institute (from the US originally, now with a UK branch) to frame communications about poverty in a different way, to "tell a new story" (Frameworks Institute [FI], 2020). The aim is to change how people hear what anti-poverty campaigners and experts say, shift the debate, and prompt more effective and better supported anti-poverty policies (JRF, 2018).

This initiative is based on research into how the public sees poverty, and what messages chime with important underlying values (FI, 2018). Key findings include evidence about the failure of individual stories out of context, shocking statistics, or "myth busting" to change people's minds (such as about the undeserving behaviour of people in poverty, that "real" poverty does not exist in a country like the UK, or that nothing can be done against poverty). Instead, messaging should be pitched differently, to trigger certain ways of thinking and bypass others.

The aim is to show that society believes in compassion and justice; to convince people about why poverty matters, and the need to take action on economic causes such as low pay and high living costs that may threaten anyone; and to convey the belief that change is possible. A frequent phrase is "it's just not right"; the word "fairness", it is argued, may evoke negative responses.

The kinds of images that were found to work well include, for example, stormy waters or a rising tide threatening to drag people under (meaning powerful forces are at work, rather than individuals making bad choices); and policy measures being important in providing an anchor, or lifeline, to keep people afloat. The other image seen as powerful is that poverty restricts people's progress, locking them in so they cannot follow their choices in life.

Measures with a positive impact should be highlighted as proof that changes can be made. Public services are portrayed as something we all depend on. Social security benefits are seen as a risky starting point, however, because of their negative associations - though they can be brought in later as one policy solution.

Having messengers who align with these values is also important, especially if they are unexpected. Poverty debates should not be politicised, or use ideological language, as this can turn people off.

Many voluntary organisations in particular have been convinced of the need to "reframe" poverty and their staff have been trained. Communications by these organisations and others now frequently contain similar language and

images. There has been no evaluation of this initiative yet to our knowledge, though its proponents have said that it is changing discourse and influencing policy.

⭐ Outlook and commentary

JRF won the Think Tank of the Year 2018 award in recognition of its work with the Frameworks Institute.

The justification for "reframing" poverty debates is that poverty has not decreased in the past two decades. Yet this could be correlation rather than causation. And when a coherent strategy to tackle child poverty was pursued, poverty levels were policy responsive. Framing advocates tend not to distinguish between different groups, though we know unemployed people tend to be viewed most negatively by the general public.

The relationship between "framing" on the one hand and privileging the "lived experience" and right to a voice of people in poverty on the other is not straightforward, as they may want to choose their own words and stories and angle on poverty.

The images of stormy waters and lifelines, as well as being "locked in" to poverty, emphasise the idea of rescuing people, or "loosening poverty's grip", rather than preventing it in the first place. Some organisations are instead trying to promote a human rights approach to poverty, and linking it to inequality and discrimination. Others put more emphasis on the "security" in social security.

Lastly, the strategy proposed by advocates of "framing" assumes agreement amongst campaigners and experts concerned with poverty about its nature and causes; aims for consensus; and avoids phrases with ideological/political associations. The emphasis on low pay and high living costs as causes of poverty does not explain why these exist, and omits recent cuts to benefits and austerity policies as exacerbating poverty, because this is seen as politicising the debate.

Public opinion about social security benefits has already changed since this research was published. The situation is dynamic, and views differ. For those who believe public support is essential to a sustainable strategy to combat poverty in the UK, exploring whether a reframing of communications about poverty helps must be of interest (O'Hara, 2020). How important this is in influencing policy change is likely to depend in part on the power of those adopting it; and whether this particular initiative has got the messages exactly right is a separate issue.

Further reading

Benford, R.D. and Snow, D.A. (2000), Framing processes and social movements: an overview and assessment, *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 611-639.

Frameworks Institute (FI) (2020), Reframing in Action: Talking about Poverty to Solve Poverty in the UK; and (2018), How to Talk about Poverty in the United Kingdom

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), Talking about Poverty (a website with toolkits, guide for media etc.); (2021), Ten urgent actions government must take to keep people afloat in lockdown (blog by Mike Hawking, 07.01.2021); and (2018) How to Build Lasting Support to Solve UK Poverty

O'Hara, M. (2020), *The Shame Game: Overturning the toxic poverty narrative*, Bristol: Policy Press; and see Project Twist It: https://www.projecttwistit.com/

Sodha, S. (2017), Outrage makes you feel good, but doesn't change minds, The Guardian, 1 April 2017.

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