

# ARTICLE | HOW WE FRAME POVERTY REDUCTION AND WHY IT MATTERS

Written by:

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## Introduction

Poverty reduction is a global aspiration and has been included in world development goals such as the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDG 1) and their successor, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 1). Across sectors and jurisdictions, practitioners are working diligently to implement strategies to reduce and eliminate poverty but often don't pause to reflect on the framing and unintended consequences of these frames on the work. In an era also strategically focused on equity, diversity, inclusion, reconciliation and justice, it is imperative as practitioners that we consider how and why we frame poverty work the way we do.



The word “racism” appeared only nine (9) times throughout the reviewed articles while “poverty reduction” appeared 2,946 times.

## Methodology

As part of a Public Health Agency of Canada Intersectoral Action project focused on the interconnectedness between racism and poverty, the Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership (SPRP) analyzed 462 newspaper articles published in Canadian newspapers primarily in Saskatchewan to explore how we (through media) think and talk about poverty and the extent to which anti-racism is incorporated in poverty reduction work. **Very few articles**

**focused on poverty-reduction directly mentioned racism.** The word “racism” appeared only nine (9) times throughout the reviewed articles while “poverty reduction” appeared 2,946 times.

Based on the SPRP analysis, there are four main ways people talk about poverty reduction. Each one comes with some pitfalls.

## 1. The cost framing of poverty reduction:

Several media publications relied on a cost framing to justify the urgent need for poverty reduction in Saskatchewan/Canada. In a few cases, cost was also used to justify inaction. An article published in The Star Phoenix, highlighted that “when all the societal costs are tallied, poverty [costs Canada] \$8.2 billion meanwhile a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy has been assessed at less than \$4 billion a year”.<sup>1</sup> While these framings are advocated for by academics, community leaders, and others interested in poverty reduction, the framing places a price on poverty reduction and unintentionally creates a logical loophole: if poverty reduction ever becomes more costly than the cost of inaction then it can be justifiable not to try to reduce it. Indeed, some publications justified inaction on such cost-based grounds. One publication from The Canadian Press noted that “many of the ideas introduced in a poverty reduction strategy introduced this year won’t be pursued until the province can afford them”.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, just as the use of a cost framing might justify advocating for poverty reduction, cost may also be summoned to justify inaction.

## 2. The shame and embarrassment framing of poverty reduction:

Many publications focused on shaming those in authority into acting to reduce poverty. These publications revealed shocking statistics about poverty—typically among Indigenous communities in Canada—and concluded by asking policy makers to act on poverty since inaction constitutes a national embarrassment. While well-meaning, these publications often did not necessarily focus on the struggles of those dealing with poverty and rarely amplified the voices of those with lived experience but rather focused on those in power. One of these publications noted that “living conditions for Canada's Native people have been a national embarrassment for many decades and there have been countless pledges to deal with the problem”<sup>3</sup>. The publication concluded that “in fact, if the statistics for Canadian Aboriginal people were viewed separately from those of the rest of the country, Canada's Aboriginal people would slip to 78th on the UN Human Development Index—the ranking currently held by Kazakhstan”.<sup>4</sup> Although well meaning, this framing stigmatizes low-income countries and paints a stereotypical, often racist, picture comparing Indigenous people to other low-income countries that are “expected to be living in poverty.” This framing normalizes experiences of poverty for marginalized demographics

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<sup>1</sup> See Cooper, 2012 in Reference List

<sup>2</sup> See Graham, 2016 in Reference List

<sup>3</sup> See Canada & the World Backgrounder, 2006 in Reference List

<sup>4</sup> See Canada & the World Backgrounder, 2006 in Reference List

and while the shock value from this framing could engender political action, it also creates a narrative that reinforces the concept of “deserving and undeserving poor.”

### 3. The root cause of poverty framing of poverty reduction:

The framing demands that we look **beyond the individual** to understand the root causes of poverty.



Some articles also sought to reveal the root causes of poverty and to describe factors that entrench poverty among vulnerable communities. This discourse connects poverty to social determinants of health, arguing that poverty is not a choice. In one article with such framing, an advocate noted that while politicians may think “that really poverty is about either getting a job or pulling up your bootstraps and it's because of people's individual choices,” such assumptions are wrong because “there are systemic factors at play”<sup>5</sup>. In this framing,

poverty is explicitly described in relation to broader social and economic processes, with advocates not necessarily framing poverty reduction as a way of reducing costs but focusing instead on the complexity of poverty reduction. This framing reveals the need to focus on economic inequality, racism, and other root causes of disadvantages as a way to respond to the problem of poverty. In practice, this is often one of the most used framings, focused on system interconnectedness, public policy and community practices to respond to inequities facing communities as a way to eliminate poverty. In short, the framing demands that we look beyond the individual to understand the root causes of poverty.

### 4. The human rights framing of poverty reduction:

Finally, some media publications framed poverty reduction in human rights terms arguing that poverty ought to be reduced not because the cost of inaction is higher or because it is embarrassing to have high rates of poverty, but because high levels of poverty are an infringement on the human rights of those experiencing it. Explaining why poverty should be reduced among children, one such publication noted that: “[i]n fact, all children and youth do have rights and respecting these rights is fundamental to ensuring that we live in the kind of just, equitable and free society that Canadians value...that is why we are so concerned that two-thirds of status First Nations children in Saskatchewan are living in poverty.”<sup>6</sup> In practice, this framing emerges in language like “Poverty should not

<sup>5</sup> See Deibert, 2018 in Reference List

<sup>6</sup> See Pringle, 2014 in Reference List

exist. Period.” and focuses on human rights to basic needs to ensure health, well-being and inclusion in their community.

## Conclusion:

While each of these framings are susceptible to critique, and have positive and negative implications, the human rights framing can be quite powerful given its situatedness in international conventions. That is not to say that the other framings should not be used, but rather the unintended narratives of racism, trauma and harm should be both understood and managed, particularly in a political climate that undervalues poverty reduction efforts.

## References

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