



How We Talk about COVID-19, briefing 25 May 2020

Anti-Poverty Week supports the Australian community to have an increased understanding of poverty and to take action collectively to end it. We are a diverse network of individuals and organisations who share this purpose. Since 2002, we've been active every year in the week around the United Nations Day for the Eradication of Poverty on 17 October. In 2020, APW will run from 11-17 October.

Our key message is: **Poverty exists. Poverty hurts us all. We can all do something about it.** It is one of hope, not despair.

Last year we created a guide [How We Talk About Poverty](#) because it always matters how we talk to - and about - each other. We're in the process of updating it but meantime here is some great work specific to the COVID-19 pandemic from [The FrameWorks Institute](#) (with some adaptations we've made) plus some other framing resources they've recommended or we've sourced.ⁱ Effective and inclusive communication is especially important during this time of crisis. *Us-vs-them* framing is dangerous. It can evoke fear, inflame prejudices, and drive hostility.

Reframing the economyⁱⁱ

We shouldn't accept - or suggest - that our choices must always and only be in service of the economy. Instead, we need to lead a conversation about how to create an economy that serves everyone's needs. Don't position "the economy" as an end in itself or a force that operates on its own. Instead, show that the economy is a means to an end - meeting people's needs. Center the story on people's needs - for wellbeing, for security, for dignity - and talk about how economic decisions affect those outcomes.

"An economy that really works is an economy that works for people."

"Nobody wants to go into unnecessary debt but now is the critical time for governments to spend. Otherwise our downturn will be much deeper and take longer to climb out of. And that will hurt us all."ⁱⁱⁱ

Clearly connect government decisions to what happens. It's dangerous to reinforce the idea that the economy is disconnected from our decisions.

"The choices governments make now will have consequences for communities for years to come. If we delay the right amount of government stimulus and the right kind, we don't just delay recovery - we make it much harder."

"We face tough choices as we move through the COVID-19 crisis. But as we rebuild, we do get to choose. We can reprogram our economy to create secure employment, reduce poverty, and expand prosperity."

Talk about the people who make up our economy: When we talk about the economy as the thing we're trying to improve, we hide the people in it. This makes it hard to focus on how our collective choices affect people, and affect different people in varying - and often inequitable - ways.

Make people, not the economy, the subjects of sentences. Name specific types of people who participate in, and shape, economic activity (workers, investors, CEOs, company Boards, governments, regulators, researchers).

When possible, use down-to-earth vocabulary to discuss economic activities. Talk about interactions people recognise - *work, wages, buying, selling, saving, getting a loan, debt* – rather than expert terms like *labor markets* or *consumer activity*.

Put solutions first and equity needs front and centre as we move to the other side

We need a can do attitude and to convey we have the ability to solve this. We have the solutions, let's share them.

[Kirsty McNeill](#) says *"A pandemic of this size and speed is not something we have seen before, but the world has plenty of experience fighting disease. Whether it is eradicating smallpox, nearly wiping out polio, turning the tide against malaria or fighting back against Ebola, we know what can be done if people work together. All of humanity is facing a huge challenge now, but we can get through it together. We need the genius of the world's best scientists, the support of the world's biggest companies, the commitment to work together from the world's political leaders and for all of us individually to do our bit to stop the spread and look after others."*^{iv}

To come through this crisis, we need policies and relief measures that respond to varying (and inequitable) health, social, and economic situations. Our communications need to make it clear that the nonprofit sector is part of those calling for an equity-driven response. When we are careful to speak from a stance of solidarity, we activate a sense of shared purpose and common identity. That makes it less likely that people will dismiss or diminish the needs of communities facing disadvantage. **Instead of leaving disparities until the end, center the call for equity and inclusion:**

"The resources we allocate now must align with our vision for the future: a fairer, more just Australia. Our response will only be effective if it includes the places and the people left out by our current systems. To get this right, everything we do now must take into account the issues that communities were facing before the pandemic. The work we do as nonprofits - and our relationships with our communities - have taught us that a focus on equity must be front and centre."

When we activate a sense of shared purpose and common identity, we make it less likely that people will revert to their familiar ideological or partisan corners. This helps our ideas for change gain mainstream traction and broad support. *"As we move through this moment of acute crisis, we*

remember our shared values and use them as a guide for what's on the other side. Now is the time to choose to get this right. Every decision should take us to the future we want: a fair and just society."

Instead of now we can change everything try this is necessary and within reach:

"When leaders set and enforce smart policies, it saves lives and protects our wellbeing. We can apply this same principle now to redesign our economy and improve our systems. Let's set new standards and develop better mechanisms to make sure we consider people and the planet alongside profits."

Note the CEO of BP Bernard Looney has recently said: *"This cruel pandemic is showing us much about what really matters...this crisis has helped make clear that the world in which the sole objective of a company's purpose is to maximise profit is no longer acceptable."*

Instead of we've been getting it so wrong for so long try we're at a juncture where we can get it right-or get it wrong:

"This moment calls us to reflect on the kind of Australia and world we want to build as we move ahead. We have seen that effective government plays a vital role. We've seen how deeply we all need each other, and how our safety net fails to meet the needs of too many of us. Let's choose the path ahead that leads to the future we want."

Talking about COVID-19 and Government

When we invest in government, we invest in us. The choices our government makes now to help us weather the outbreak of this virus can also set a better course for the future of our communities. Now is the time for us to unite across our differences and make policy choices that help every-day people for a safe and thriving nation.

Emphasise that we need and deserve a robust public response to this crisis. Instead of starting and ending with government failure, hold government accountable. Call leaders to action:

" Be clear that government action has a distinct role - different from the things businesses, nonprofits, or individuals can do. Instead of calling for others to fill in the gaps, emphasise the roles and democratic ideals that only government can fulfill:

"We are all relying on our public institutions to protect us from physical harm and economic hardship during this pandemic. Businesses, nonprofits, and individuals can all play a part, but only government can channel public resources into the things we all need like vaccines and ventilators. Only government can set and enforce the rules that keep us all safe and well. We need action that makes the biggest difference for everyone and this must be led by government."

Don't play the individual blame game. Instead, call leaders to action. Instead of talking about personalities, politicians, or politics, focus on the actions that citizens should hold government accountable for:

"We all need our governments to respond swiftly to new information about the virus and act quickly to protect us. Governments need to deploy every tool at their disposal - and to do it now. Citizens need to do what they've been asked to do, stay informed and engaged, and hold their representatives accountable for doing the right thing."

Make an explicit moral argument for addressing specific populations' needs

Our ideals and principles - and our sense of right and wrong - are powerful motivators. Use language that activates shared values early and often in communications. This will have more impact than just bleak facts or upsetting stories.

"The right thing to do is ensure we all have what we need to be well - regardless of who we are."

Use common good framing

Look for opportunities to talk about the positive aspects of interconnection. Instead of connection as threat, try connection as strength:

"We're being reminded just how connected we all are - and how much we depend on one another. And it's not just the spread of the virus. Now, more than ever, we need to pull together and be kind to one another."

Connect individual action to the common good by using a broad 'us.' Instead of how to behave, try how this affects us all:

[COVID-19 Messaging Guide from US Anat-Shenker-Osorio:](#)

Our own health depends on the health of the person next to us, and the person next to them. Ensuring others can access care is how we take care of ourselves.

Now more than ever, this virus has shown us that we are dependent on each other and no matter where we come from, what we look like, or how much money we have, we know it's time to pull together. We're getting through this by coming together.

We are all better off when we are all healthy -- especially the most vulnerable among us. Any one person's wellness depends on everyone else's. Whether it's people with chronic health conditions or people without shelter, people living in detention, people providing vital services or those who can't forgo their pay to stay home, we need to ensure all of us can access the care we need and make the best choices for everyone's health.

Uplift in Ireland suggest this messaging: *"No matter who we are or where we come from, we are all in this together. If each one of us makes a change to protect ourselves, our families, our neighbours and communities, we will protect each other."*^{vi}

NZ academic Suze Wilson has cited the Mayfields' research-based model which highlights "direction-giving", "meaning-making" and "empathy" as the three key things leaders must address to motivate followers to give their best. Being a public motivator is essential for leaders — but it's often done poorly. The Mayfields' research shows direction-giving is typically over-used, while the other two elements are under-used. She also cites the work of another leadership scholar, the UK's [Professor Keith Grint](#) who says leadership involves *persuading the collective to take responsibility for collective problems*.^{vii} No more is this more evident than with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tell stories

Ella Saltmarshe says there is an opportunity to tell stories that bring us together, that generate empathy, that activate agency, highlight inequality and help support a more just, caring world. *"Craft messages that evoke care, agency, the common good, solidarity and interdependence, NOT messages that evoke fear, division, passivity, fatalism and individualism."*^{viii}

Annie Neimand says you can build empathy, support, and even action for your cause by [telling stories](#) that transport your audience into the experiences of those affected by the issues. To reach people who are otherwise skeptical of your data, it is useful to tell stories that [resonate with your audience's deeply held beliefs](#) and highlight the [local impact on their communities](#).^{ix}

Metaphors matter

As Ella Saltmarshe^x says: “*metaphors enable cognitive short-cuts in our brains that help make sense of complexity. They can also inadvertently trigger unhelpful values and behaviours.*” Her article includes a list of metaphors to embrace and avoid written by The Workshop in New Zealand.^{xi} These include embracing **journey, navigations and challenges** metaphors as there is a destination in sight and the real question isn't whether we'll get through this but how: “*How do we make sure that nobody is left behind.*” **#Leave no one behind.** Science, creativity and kindness will help steer us through this crisis.

One to avoid is the war metaphor which brings to mind fear and individualism: “*Plague is a standalone horseman of the apocalypse – he doesn't need to catch a ride with war*” says Marina Hyde in The Guardian.^{xii} Our own Sean Kelly has also written eloquently on this in [Boris Johnson's illness is not a metaphor](#).

Arundhati Roy^{xiii} has used the metaphor of pandemic as portal: “*Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.*”

Talking about COVID-19 and the non-profit sector

Instead of the non-profit sector needs relief, try the nation needs the non-profit sector: “*In crafting our relief packages and designing our response plans, we can't afford to overlook the non-profit sector. Right now, people, cities and states are relying on non-profit partners as a buffer against the worst impacts of the outbreak. And we all will continue to rely on the expertise and experience of these community-based institutions in the recovery effort that lies ahead.*”

Be clear that NGOs have a distinct role - different from what businesses and government can do. Talk about the sector's distinguishing feature: a mission-driven approach. We take on essential work that isn't necessarily profitable, but it is purposeful - and benefits us all. We have specialised expertise that often includes a deep understanding of community assets and needs. We have the ability to be nimble and creative to achieve community goals. **Instead of non-profits are as important as business and just like government, talk about the unique role and contributions of non-profit organisations:**

“Non-profits are our country's only institutions solely focused on making communities stronger. In the toughest times, we do the toughest work. When it's time to restore and repair our wellbeing, we are equipped to do that as well. We measure success in terms of shared benefits, not private profits. To weather the worst and rebuild, we need this kind of community-minded perspective.”

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ⁱ Unless specifically cited, assume source is The FrameWorks Institute [Framing COVID-19](#). See also Isaac Chotiner, [How to Talk to Coronavirus Skeptics](#), The New Yorker, 23/3/20.

ⁱⁱ [FrameWorks Institute COVID Topic #11: Reframing the post-pandemic economy](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Toni Wren, APW

^{iv} Kirsty McNeill, [This is a Love Story: thinking globally during COVID-19](#), 30/3/20.

^v Kelly O'Shanassy, [How rural Australia can bounce forward after coronavirus and create a resilient future](#), Canberra Times, 8/4/20 citing Bernard Looney.

^{vi} Ella Saltmarshe, [8 Tips for Framing COVID-19](#), 3/4/20.

^{vii} ABC, [Three reasons why Jacinda Ardern's coronavirus response has been a masterclass in crisis leadership](#), Suze Wilson, 7/4/20 and originally on [The Conversation](#)

^{viii} Ella Saltmarshe, [8 Tips for Framing COVID-19](#), 3/4/20.

^{ix} Annie Neimand, [To Win Against False Information, We Must Play Offense](#), Stanford Social Innovation Review, April 2017.

^x Ella Saltmarshe, [8 Tips for Framing COVID-19](#), 3/4/20 and New Zealand The Workshop, [COVID-19 Framing Guide](#)

^{xii} Marina Hyde, [The horror of coronavirus is all too real. Don't turn it into an imaginary war](#), The Guardian, 8/4/20

^{xiii} Arundhati Roy: [The pandemic is a portal](#), Financial Times, 4/4/20