Safefood

How to talk about food poverty

A practical guide

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with FRAME WORKS UK

Contents

About this guide

This guide has been created by FrameWorks UK to help anyone communicating about food poverty on the island of Ireland to frame their communications consistently and effectively. FrameWorks UK is a not for profit communications research organisation that helps mission-driven organisations communicate about social issues in ways that create progress, through practical guidance underpinned by framing research.

Research commissioned by Safefood[i] in 2023-24 identified the need for a shared way of talking about food poverty among advocates on the island of Ireland. This guide introduces tools and evidence-based recommendations to help advocates build understanding and support, and avoid triggering unhelpful ways of thinking.

Recommendations in brief

1. Spell out what 'food poverty' really means

We need to be explicit and clear, whenever we communicate about food poverty, that it is about people not being able to access and afford enough healthy food. This will ensure we are not assuming knowledge or asking people to interpret for themselves.

2. Make a moral case for action

When we appeal to deeply held values of compassion and justice, we establish a shared reason to care and show why addressing food poverty matters. This combination of compassion and justice is about calling out what is not right, and naming the systemic changes we need to address inequalities. Grounding our case in compassion and justice allows us to tap into more collective, 'can do' thinking.

3. Explain how food poverty happens

How we explain problems sets up the solutions to them. Explaining the systemic causes of food poverty sets up the case for systemic solutions. While the existence of poverty – and food poverty – is widely accepted, we need to build public understanding of how poverty happens, and the shortcomings in our food system that both cause and exacerbate food poverty.

4. Show how food poverty impacts people's lives

We need to build understanding that the impact of food poverty goes beyond hunger and show how it impacts people's physical and mental health, and other aspects of life. Instead of just 'telling' people that food poverty impacts people's lives in these ways, we need to use explanation to 'show' people how. When we explain in this way, it leaves no space for food poverty to be minimised.

5. Embed solutions into communications

For people to get behind change, they need to believe that it is possible as well as necessary. To achieve this, we need to spell out the solutions to food poverty that we are advocating for – from upstream measures and changes in policy that would prevent it from happening in the first place, to support in our communities that can alleviate food poverty now. We need to share examples of what works, and name who has the power to make these changes. We need to do this upfront and often.

Introduction

To improve health across the island of Ireland, we need a holistic approach to reducing food poverty – including upstream solutions that address root causes and enable people to access enough nutritious food.

To build understanding and support for this holistic approach, we need communications to highlight what is causing food poverty, how it impacts people's lives, and what can be done about it.

This guide draws on insights from FrameWorks UK's research on framing poverty[ii], children's health and food[iii], and the wider determinants of health[iv]. The research was conducted in the UK, including participants from Northern Ireland. We have observed comparable communications challenges in Ireland – and similar framing strategies to those

found to be helpful in the UK are likely to be helpful here. Further research in Ireland would be helpful to further develop our recommendations for application in Ireland.

The guide is also informed by research[v] led by Dr Elena Vaughan, which was commissioned by Safefood and identified the need for a shared way of talking about food poverty. FrameWorks UK also consulted with stakeholders from the All-island Food Poverty Network to identify specific communications challenges and openings.

Communications challenges

Before we can frame an issue effectively, we need to understand how people think about it. Mindsets are deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how we see the world and how we act within it. Mindsets are shared – and activated by what we see and hear. At FrameWorks we've identified three dominant mindsets that influence how people think about a wide range of social issues including poverty and health. When these mindsets are triggered, they can be significant barriers to change.
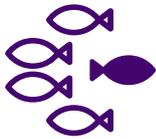
Individualism

This is the idea that our outcomes – our failures and successes – are the narrow and exclusive result of our choices, effort and willpower. Thinking in this way can normalise inequality (because it leads people to think you get out what you put in) and make it harder to see the role and impact of our systems and surroundings on our lives. In the case of food poverty, it can also lead to stigma, as people blame those of us experiencing food poverty for 'bad choices'.

Fatalism

This is the idea that the problems we're facing are too big and too complex to solve. Fatalism normalises the idea that taking action is pointless, and makes it much harder for us to recognise that solutions exist, or that they could make a difference.

Othering

This is the 'us and them' mindset that can lead us to see our world as one of zero-sum competition – where all outcomes must be win or lose situations for one group vs another. When this mindset is active, more for 'them' means less for 'me and mine'. This means people are less likely to endorse targeted support for people affected by food poverty.

Further ways of thinking we have identified in our research into talking about poverty in the UK include:

Poverty is here and now

People acknowledge that poverty exists here and now – it is not something that only happens elsewhere or affects other people[vi]. But people's understanding of poverty is limited. People do not tend to see how poverty happens and who is most at risk.

'Basic' needs

People also tend to define poverty in narrow terms – as a lack of the absolute basics: food, warmth, shelter. In this way of thinking people reason that what matters is having a full stomach – and that the quality and nutritional value of that food are a 'want', rather than a 'need'. This can limit the scope of solutions and government action that people are likely to support, as governments are widely seen as responsible for meeting needs, but not for things we consider 'wants'.

Stakeholders from the All-island Food Poverty Network also identified further communications challenges and opportunities including:

– The hidden nature of food poverty can lead to people underestimating the scale of the issue, and who it impacts

– The need to build understanding of how an unexpected change in someone's circumstances can pull them into food poverty

– Building understanding that food poverty is a symptom of inequality – inadequacy of incomes, high living costs, unemployment, and welfare not in line with inflation

– Communicating the impact on people's health – mentally as well as physically – and impact on life outcomes

– The need to make the case for not just any food, but healthy food

– We can't take for granted that people know what 'food poverty' means

– Food poverty can't be reduced to one experience

– Tools are needed to talk about more preventative, upstream solutions. Food banks are part of the answer (short term) but more joined up systemic action is vital.

In this guide we introduce tools and suggestions which will help to address these communications challenges – to build understanding and support, and avoid triggering unhelpful ways of thinking.

Recommendations

To build understanding and support for a holistic approach to food poverty, we need communications to highlight what is causing food poverty, how it impacts people's lives, and what can be done about it. We also need to show why it matters.

Using a shared set of communications principles allows multiple individuals and organisations to communicate consistently, without needing to stick strictly to the same messaging.

The recommendations in this guide are not a fixed set of messages. They are ideas. They can be applied in different ways, dialled up or down and tailored to suit an organisation or individual's voice.

1. Spell out what food poverty really means

Different terms and phrases are often used to talk about people not being able to access and afford enough nutritious food – such as 'food poverty' and 'food insecurity'. But spelling out what we really mean helps build understanding better than relying on the term alone.

By spelling out what we mean, we establish what food poverty is really about and bring people onto the same page, rather than assuming knowledge. This gives us a stronger starting point to build understanding and support for solutions.

This also gives us an opportunity to begin to establish that we are not talking about just any food: quality matters.

What to do

– Rather than relying on terms like 'food poverty' **spell out what we mean** by this: such as, people not being able to access or afford enough healthy food.

– Explicitly talk about the **quality of food**, not just the lack of it.

– **Avoid technical terms or jargon** – spell these out and bring them to life by explaining them well.

How to do it

Instead of...	"Too many people across the island of Ireland are experiencing food poverty."
Try...	"Too many people across the island of Ireland are struggling to access and afford enough healthy food. This is often described as food poverty or food insecurity."
Why?	Instead of relying on people knowing what 'food poverty' or 'food insecurity' mean, the second example first spells out what these terms refer to, and then introduces the terms.

Instead of...	"Approximately 9% of people in Ireland are not getting enough food to eat."
Try...	"Nearly 1 in 10 people in Ireland can't afford enough healthy food where they live."
Why?	The second example explicitly mentions 'healthy food' rather than just any food, to avoid triggering the 'basic needs' mindset which can obscure this important element of food poverty. Mentioning ideas like where people live helps to spell out the concept of being able to access healthy food. Simplifying 'Approximately 9%' to 'Nearly 1 in 10' makes this figure easier to comprehend. While there are some circumstances where the specificity of the percentage will be necessary, consider simplifying data for public audiences.

2. Make a moral case for action

When we establish why an issue matters – a shared reason to care – we can open up people's thinking about what we as a society should do to address a problem.

People tend to think that poverty is too big or entrenched a problem to solve – or that it is up to individuals to try harder and work their way out of poverty. But when we appeal to deeply held values of compassion and justice[vii], we bypass these patterns of thinking, and tap into more collective, 'can do' thinking.

Appealing to people's shared sense of compassion and justice helps to reduce the tendency to see those of us living in poverty as 'other' or to blame for their circumstances. It reminds us of our moral obligations to each other and our shared responsibility to people in our communities. Importantly, this combination of compassion and justice is not about invoking a charitable response – it's about calling out what is not right, and naming the systemic changes we need to address inequalities.

What to do

– **Use collective terms** such as we, us and our to collectivise the issue.

– **Talk about how things could or should be** to paint a picture of a better future that we can aspire to, and work towards, as a society.

– Invoke the values of compassion and justice in **different ways** to suit your communications.

How to do it

"All of us **should be** able to access healthy, affordable food where we live."

"Together, we can **do the right thing**: we can redesign our food system so that affordable, healthy food is the norm."

"**We can't stand by and let this happen.** Together we must address the root causes of food poverty, and offer a lifeline when people are struggling to stay afloat."

"We're working towards a more **compassionate and just** future, where all of us can eat and live well."

"**It isn't right** that buying nutritious food has become unaffordable for so many of us."

"Nearly 1 in 10 people in our communities can't afford enough healthy food. **We can do better than this.**"

More measured ⟵⟶ **More strident**

A note on rights framing

Arguments are sometimes made that emphasising adequate and appropriate access to food as a fundamental right could be a valuable communications strategy for talking about food poverty.

FrameWorks research to date has found that tapping into the values of compassion and justice are the most effective ways to make the moral case for addressing poverty.

However, if we do instead choose to make a rights-based argument:

– spell out why ensuring all of us have access to healthy food we can afford matters, and is the just thing to do

– spell out why food is a right – because it's something we all need – rather than relying on the language of 'rights' as a shorthand

For example:

Instead of...	"We must take action to protect everyone's right to food."
Try...	"We should all be able to afford enough healthy food to live well. But too many of us are being let down and denied this right. We can't stand by and let this happen."

Better still, you could expand on how people are being denied their right to food, and what can be done to fix this. Collective language like 'we' and 'too many of us' also helps to position this as an issue that should matter to us all.

3. Explain how food poverty happens

How we explain problems sets up solutions to them. Explaining the systemic causes of food poverty sets up the case for systemic solutions.

By explaining how food poverty happens rather than just asserting it exists, we can build trust and understanding. Effective explanation ensures that we're filling in the gaps for people, rather than leaving holes in our story, which might be filled in with less helpful mindsets or stereotypes about those of us experiencing poverty.

Also, if we talk about poverty increasing without explaining how this happens, it leaves room for people to turn inwards. People will tend to focus first on their own and loved ones' risk of poverty, and may reject support being targeted towards people who are most affected by poverty.

While the existence of poverty – and food poverty – is accepted, we need to direct our efforts towards building public understanding of how poverty happens; and so what we can do about it. We also need to explain how shortcomings in our food system both cause and exacerbate food poverty.

What to do

– **Try showing rather than telling** – add context and give examples to show how food poverty happens.

– **Use step-by-step explanation.** This means simply and explicitly making the connection between causes and outcomes. Use language like 'Because', 'So', and 'As a result' to make the connections.

– Consider using a **tested metaphor** to help show how people are pulled into food poverty, or to illustrate our imbalanced food system (see page 14).

How to do it

Metaphors can be an effective tool to build understanding. By comparing complex concepts to something more immediate and easily understood, we can paint a picture and 'show' rather than just 'tell'. Two metaphors, from our research into framing poverty, and framing health and food, could be used to help explain the causes of food poverty, and set up how we can talk about solutions:

The 'currents' metaphor

This metaphor makes outside forces and their impact an unavoidable feature of poverty. It was designed to counteract people's belief that solving poverty is simply a matter of individuals working harder and making better choices. In the same way that an individual can't simply swim against strong currents, we need to look beyond individuals for the solutions to poverty – and in this case, food poverty.

We can use this metaphor to talk about both the underlying causes of food poverty and the unexpected changes in people's lives which can quickly pull people into food poverty.

The metaphor can and should be flexed and used in a variety of ways. For example:

– "Our economy creates **currents** that can **pull people into** food poverty, like low wages and increases in living costs. And sometimes things can happen that threaten to **pull us under**, like losing a job, or coping with illness"

– "When people are already **struggling to stay afloat**, a change in circumstances can **pull people into** food poverty. Food budgets are often the first thing people need to cut in order to pay for other vital living costs such as rent and fuel"

– "Food banks can be a **lifeline** for people who have been **pushed into** food poverty. But we also need to **work upstream** to make healthy food more affordable"

Some words and phrases you could use:

Pulled into/under

Swept up

Stay afloat

Upstream

Channels

Tide

Pushed into

Lifeline

The 'rivers' metaphor

We can compare the food environment to an unbalanced system of rivers to explain how the areas people live in often make it harder to access and afford healthy food. When we're communicating about food poverty, we need to build the picture that this is not only about quantity, it's also about quality. It's about whether people have access to enough nutritious food – not 'just any food'.

Again, this metaphor can be used in different ways. For example:

– "Too often, our neighbourhoods are **flooded** with cheap unhealthy food, but there's **barely a trickle** of affordable healthy options"

– "We need to **stem the flow** of unhealthy food and open up more access to affordable nutritious food"

– "The places we live and work can make it much harder to afford enough healthy food. Many of our high streets are **saturated** with junk food, but healthy options are in short supply, and much more expensive"

Step-by-step explanation: an example

Wages and welfare are not rising in line with living costs like fuel, rent and healthy food. **This means** that many more of us are struggling to stay afloat. **So** an unexpected change like getting ill and not being able to work can quickly pull people into poverty. **And because** cutting down on food budgets is often the only option families have, we are seeing many more people in food poverty. While supports like food banks are a vital lifeline, we need upstream solutions like adequate wages and social security to stop people from being swept into food poverty in the first place.

4. Show how food poverty impacts people's lives

We can also harness explanation to build the understanding that the impact of food poverty goes beyond hunger: that it impacts people's physical and mental health, and life outcomes.

Again, instead of just 'telling' people that food poverty impacts people's lives in these ways, we need to 'show' people how. For example, instead of just talking about children experiencing food poverty, we can talk about what it holds children back from doing – how not having enough healthy food impacts their ability to learn well at school, play with their friends, or have them round for tea.

We can talk about how, in this way, food poverty risks children falling behind their peers at school, makes it harder to build vital relationships, and embeds inequality from an early age.

When we 'show' the impact in this way, it leaves no space for food poverty to be minimised as a temporary problem.

What to do

– **Give examples** that show how food poverty impacts people's lives – including, but not limited to, their physical and mental health.

– Consider using the tested **'restricts and restrains' metaphor** to show how food poverty acts on people's lives: restricting the options and opportunities that are available.

– **Zoom out from individual stories** to show context and scale (see page 19).

How to do it

The 'restricts and restrains' metaphor

This metaphor helps to explain how food poverty shapes people's lives. We can talk about how it **restricts** options and opportunities, and how people can get **locked in** to food poverty.

The metaphor can be used in a variety of ways. For example:

– "Food poverty **restricts** people's options. People are **constrained** by what is cheap to buy and prepare, rather than free to choose healthier options"

– "People can become **trapped in** food poverty – just trying to survive, rather than being able to thrive"

– "Food poverty **holds us back** in so many aspects of life – from the lack of healthy food to support our physical health, to the ongoing mental strain, and the **constraints** it puts on our work and social lives"

This metaphor both communicates what it is like to experience food poverty, and also how people cannot simply try their way out of it. Instead, we need solutions that help to release or unlock the constraints people are under:

– "Targeted support could help to **release** people from the **constraints** of food poverty"

– "Free school meals **unlock opportunities** for children to learn and thrive"

– "Making healthy food more accessible and affordable would help to **loosen poverty's grip**"

Instead of...	"Food poverty impacts many facets of people's lives – from health to work and social lives."
Try...	"Not being able to access and afford healthy food doesn't just take its toll on our physical health. The constant stress and uncertainty weigh heavily on our mental health too. And when even simple things like sharing a meal with friends is no longer an option, it can cut us off from vital social connections."
Why?	Instead of just stating the impacts of food poverty, spell out how these impacts show up in people's lives. It's OK to focus on just one or two impacts and explain them well. The second example could also be elaborated on further with more step-by-step explanation. Note: '**cut us off**' – again, collective terms like this help to reduce stigma and othering.

Tips for telling stories from people's lived experience:

Telling people's stories can also be a powerful way to connect with audiences and build understanding. But we need to be mindful of how we frame stories from firsthand experience so that we don't unintentionally trigger unhelpful mindsets.

Individualism can be triggered by stories that focus on a single person – their specific choices and circumstances. Whether this inadvertently fuels blame, or feeds into a 'hero' narrative of striving against the odds, this unhelpfully zooms in on the individual. This makes it harder to see the role of systems in people's lives – and our collective responsibility for solutions. We also need to be mindful of not reinforcing stereotypes or a view that food poverty only affects certain groups of people.

There are several things we can do to address this, and do people's stories justice.

– **If working directly with people with lived experience of food poverty, and collecting their stories to use in communications, ask questions that draw out context and scale** – such as:

- What has made it easier/harder to access healthy food?

- What options/opportunities did you have then/do you have now?

- What support did you have/should you have had?

- What would have helped you?

- What barriers made it harder for you to get the food/support you needed?

- Are there other people in the same situation as you?

- Does this affect a lot of people? Why, or why not?

– **Consider topping or tailing stories** with a few sentences to add context or further detail that supports the story. And think about where you start a person's story. Rather than starting at a crisis point, allow space for how they were first pulled into poverty.

– **Tell diverse stories** of people's experience of food poverty to show scale and avoid stories being written off as exceptional.

5. Embed solutions into communications

Addressing food poverty requires a range of solutions – from upstream measures and changes in policy that would prevent it from happening in the first place, to support in our communities that can alleviate food poverty now.

Front of mind solutions tend to be strongly linked to individual choice. For example, education and cooking classes focus on changing people's habits in ways that make it easier to eat well on low incomes, but do not address the underlying causes of food poverty. And the onus is on individuals to draw on the support of food banks if they choose to.

While these solutions are an important part of the picture, they are not the whole picture. So, if we want people to support other solutions too, we must include them in our communications and explain them well.

Explaining the nature and scope, and especially the causes, of food poverty (as per recommendation 3) is essential to solving it. But balancing problems with proposed solutions – in level of emphasis as well as detail – is key. It is not enough to highlight how big and urgent the problem of food poverty is. We need to match the scale of our solutions to the scale and complexity of the problems we are explaining.

Research on framing a wide range of issues shows that crisis framing frequently fails to deliver the hoped for effects[viii]. Crisis framing typically leads to one of two things. People either dismiss the claim outright or conclude that the problem is too big or complex to solve.

So we need to embed solutions into our communications – and do it often, and balance urgency with efficacy. Instilling communications with a sense of efficacy can help to boost support for solutions, and avoid triggering the fatalism mindset.

For people to get behind change, they need to believe that it is possible, as well as necessary.

To achieve this, we need to spell out the solutions that we are advocating for, examples of what works, and name who has the power to make these changes.

What to do

– **Offer solutions that match the scale of the problem.** Show how solutions would address the causes of food poverty you are highlighting and explaining.

– **Get specific:** explain how solutions would work and who has the power to make them happen. Share stories of what is working, and how these solutions could be scaled up or built upon.

– **Talk about solutions early and often** – they don't need to be held back until the end of a document.

– **Try a 2:1 ratio to balance efficacy and urgency.** For every dose of urgency (we need to act now) we should add two doses of efficacy (we can fix this). This applies to both content – like explaining solutions – and tone.

How to do it

Instead of...	"Bold action is needed to reduce food poverty. We cannot allow this crisis to continue."
Try...	"We can end food poverty. And to do so we need to be bold. A range of solutions are needed – like ensuring everyone has a living wage."
Why?	The second example ditches crisis language and balances urgency with a 'can do' efficacious tone. It also offers something tangible by spelling out a specific action that could be taken.

Instead of...	"Sticking plaster solutions like food banks are not enough."
Try...	"Solutions like food banks are a lifeline for people who cannot afford enough healthy food. But we need to also look at the big picture. We need to look at ways to make healthy food more accessible and affordable in the first place, as well as working to support people now."
Why?	We can make the case for more preventative solutions without dismissing the importance of supports like food banks.

About FrameWorks UK

FrameWorks UK is a not-for-profit, mission-driven organisation, specialising in evidence-based communication strategies that shift hearts and minds. We help charities and other organisations communicate about social issues in ways that create progress, through practical guidance underpinned by our framing research.

We're the sister organisation of the FrameWorks Institute in the US, which has been conducting framing research for more than 25 years. FrameWorks started working in the UK in 2012. And we established FrameWorks UK in 2021.

Change the story. Change the world.

Learn more at frameworksuk.org

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Notes