



# **The Role of Leadership in Poverty Reduction: What Works?**

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## The Role of Leadership in Poverty Reduction: What Works?

### Introduction and Need for Research

Leadership plays a crucial role in addressing poverty and promoting sustainable development (Chanda & Chitondo, 2024). Poverty is shaped by multiple factors that place financial strain on low-income families (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2023). In 2023, Virginia's poverty rate was 10.2%, and it remains a persistent issue (Statista, 2023). This study explores the leadership strategies employed by civic organizations and identifies the factors contributing to their success or failure in poverty reduction efforts. Effective leadership not only guides teams but also establishes structures that ensure accountability and informed decision-making (Omoyibo, 2013). The research aligns with the AAAE (2023) research value of "Examining Social Dynamics in Human and Life Sciences" as it explores how leadership influences social and economic dynamics to drive effective poverty reduction.

### Conceptual Framework

Collective leadership can strengthen community resilience and enhance organizational performance (Arkedis et al., 2023). However, if not managed properly, it can also lead to setbacks (Shirk, 2022). As uncertainty grows, there is a need to shift from coercive leadership (hard power) to more collaborative and adaptive approaches (soft power) (Grint, 2005). Unlike hierarchical leadership models, humble leadership encourages shared decision-making and uses empathy as a strength (Schein & Schein, 2023). Humble leaders acknowledge their limitations and can effectively work together with their teams, which leads to better outcomes for the organization (Cable, 2018). In today's interconnected world, humble leadership is increasingly recognized for its role in countering self-serving leadership styles and promoting ethical solutions to global challenges like poverty (Council & Sowcik, 2020).

### Methodology

The research process began by validating online information to identify Virginia-based organizations working to reduce poverty. A stratified sampling method was used to include organizations with various approaches and strategies for poverty alleviation. A total of fourteen organizations with ten different primary areas of focus were selected. Interviews were conducted with each organizational representative via Zoom, with each interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. The semi-structured format allowed for open-ended discussions. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. Open coding was applied to identify key themes, followed by categorization to explore connections between leadership practices and poverty reduction efforts. To maintain confidentiality, participant identities were anonymized, with direct quotes referenced using alphabetical codes.

### Results/Findings

Analysis of the interviews revealed three overarching themes:

#### 1. Poverty as a systemic challenge

Interview participants noted that poverty often stems from systemic inequities, generational cycles, and economic mobility challenges. There are numerous factors that act as barriers, such as limited access to education, healthcare, work opportunities, and economic systems that impact the "working poor." They mentioned that leaders need to treat poverty not simply as the result of

individual decisions but rather as a systemic issue. This supports the notion that the people living in poverty should not be viewed in isolation as “us” versus “them.”

“When relationships and systems don't work how they're supposed to... it creates layers and layers and layers of things that aren't working right, poverty is a result of those things.” (Participant A)

## **2. Participatory leadership**

Participants noted that actual community participation is about reshaping how organizations function based on their input. This represents a deeper form of engagement, where the community is not just an object of service; they are leaders in the process. Effective leadership involves continuous learning and adaptation, where community members are knowledge sources that inform both the immediate needs and long-term strategies. Participants also emphasized that addressing complex social issues like poverty requires a multi-sectoral approach and navigation of invisible leadership within the sector.

“I think some of the most influential and impactful leaders that I've met in this space are individuals who've had lived experiences with poverty.” (Participant B)

## **3. Humble leadership as a way forward**

Interviews revealed that effective leadership for poverty reduction requires selflessness. Leaders must be willing to set aside their egos and be open to new ideas. Empathy and compassion were central to the leadership model discussed by participants. Humble leaders care deeply about their community and understand that poverty impacts people in multiple ways. Active listening and communication were identified as important leadership characteristics. Effective leaders are described as those who understand the needs of the people they serve rather than making assumptions about their circumstances.

“Our organization has many different denominations involved in it, and all of them have that one key ingredient, which is the compassion that they need to see so many different sides of an issue, not just one.” (Participant G)

## **Conclusions**

Through this research, we have identified the leadership characteristics and strategies that can be most effective in tackling the system of poverty. In our research, humble leadership stands out as an important leadership framework in poverty reduction efforts. Humble leadership has been found to build trust between leaders and their followers in an organizational setting (Cho et al., 2021). Our research emphasizes how it can be leveraged by the organizations and leaders working to address poverty.

## **Implications/Recommendations/Impact**

Comparative studies across different states or regions can provide insights into the contextual factors that influence leadership strategies in poverty reduction. The findings of this study offer practical implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers alike. We recommend the following steps moving forward:

1. Provide training and resources for organizational leaders to learn about the evolving research and educational initiatives in this field, including humble leadership.
2. Support community leadership initiatives by creating local decision-making spaces and partnerships among community leaders and organizations.
3. Strengthen the network of leaders working for poverty reduction through regular knowledge exchange via workshops, mentorship, and other platforms.

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