Framing COVID-19

Topic #11: Framing the post-pandemic economy

The pandemic has created an opening to change the public’s perspective on what it means to have a good economy—and what role government must play in getting there.

This means that the way we talk about the economy has never mattered more.

We are all immersed in a running stream of messages about "the economy." The sheer repetition of this phrase makes it easy to think of "it" as an overarching goal that deserves our exclusive attention and can command whatever measure of pain or sacrifice "it" requires.

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. We need ways to engage people in thinking about arranging our society and its resources in a just, inclusive way.

The pandemic is a moment when change is inevitable—for better or for worse. We can and should use our communications power to shape this change. Here are three ways we can match our story to the moment.

1. Make the story about what people need, not what "the economy" needs.

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.

Don't position "the economy" as an end in itself. Instead, show that the economy is a means to an end—meeting people's needs. Center the story on people's needs—or wellbeing, for security, for dignity—and talk about how economic decisions affect those outcomes. In particular, emphasize how economic policy decisions affect what people or organizations can or can't do.
When possible, use down-to-earth vocabulary to discuss economic activities. Talk about interactions people recognize—work, wages, buying, selling, saving, loaning—rather than expecting expert terms like labor markets or consumer activity to carry meaning for the public.

Avoid passive-voice phrasing; it suggests institutions and trends move on their own. Make people, not the economy, the subjects of sentences. Name specific types of people who participate in, and shape, economic activity (workers, investors, leaders, company owners, lobbyists, lawmakers, researchers, regulators).

**Instead of centering “the economy’s” needs**

"The economy is well-managed when the pandemic is well-managed. A pandemic is so destructive that, ultimately, any policy to slow the spread is going to be good for the economy. Reopening by decree won’t work. If tens of millions of people become sick and millions of people die, the economy suffers, and not just because the workforce is being depleted. Widespread fear is bad for business: consumers won’t flock back to restaurants, book air travel, or spend on activities that might put them at risk of getting sick."

**Try centering people’s needs**

"We’re seeing how the things we truly value—from people’s physical safety to the vitality of community life—are intertwined with the economy. We have all been reminded how important it is to know that our income will be stable and that we’ll be able to access the things we really need. As policymakers craft ways to respond to the pandemic, they should design measures that put these kinds of needs first. The hallmark of an economy that really works is that it works for people."

2. **Highlight the impact of policy choices.**

People think of the economy as a natural system - evolved over time, indifferent to human concerns and outside of human control. With this comes the idea that “free markets” can’t, and shouldn’t be, influenced by policy. This makes it hard to see that governments, through intentional policies, already and always shape economic activity.

During this pandemic, there are certainly events that are beyond our collective control. Yet, in this moment, it is dangerous to reinforce the idea that the economy is disconnected from our decisions.

Avoid language that suggests that the economy is a force that operates on its own. Natural metaphors like cliffs, waves, and aftershocks are likely to reinforce the idea that what’s happening in the economy is wholly beyond our control.

Take care, too, when translating economic data visualizations into language. Most people can’t picture—or don’t understand—graphs that advocates take for granted. For the public, talk of spikes and plunges bring a roller-coaster to mind. This undermines the idea that we can actively manage the economy.
Instead of highlighting the unpredictability of the system, emphasize the power of our response. Talk about what we can do, through policy, to manage disruptions to economic activity and to meet people’s needs. Explain how government decisions about the economy affect people.

**Instead of “out of control natural forces”**

"The wave of unemployment unleashed by stay-home measures will soon crash into state budgets, which are utterly dependent on income and sale taxes. With revenue in free fall, many states will be forced to slash budgets in areas like education and health care. Absent significant federal aid, the aftershocks will reverberate across the economy, causing a massive recession. The last thing we need in the middle of an economic crisis is dozens of states sliding into bankruptcy—right at the moment when the need for services spikes."

**Clearly connect government decisions to what happen**

"The choices the federal government makes now will have consequences for communities for years to come. With businesses closed, states are collecting less sales and income tax revenue—funds which mostly go toward education and health care. Federal supplements to states will keep states from having to lay off teachers, cancel contracts with businesses, or make other choices that will deepen the recession. If we delay federal aid, we don’t just delay recovery—awe make it much harder."

**3. Connect past decisions to the present and a redesigned future.**

The past is very much present right now: we’re experiencing the consequences of both recent government errors and decades of misguided economic policies. The stance and tone we take when offering critiques will affect how we are heard.

We shouldn't ignore history altogether, but we also shouldn't dwell on how wrong we've gotten it for so long. If we fail to acknowledge the harms of the past, we risk alienating communities and partners who have long been advocating for change. If we condemn the past in blanket terms, we risk seeming out of touch in a moment when, given our current problems, many people would happily go back to the way things were.

Talk about past, present, and future in equal measure—and connect them tightly. Show how past economic policy decisions are creating problems now, leaving more people more susceptible to harm than if our set-up had been different. Link economic decisions firmly to people’s lives and experiences. Explain, in clear, step-by-step fashion, how policies being considered now would help to create an economic system that better meets people’s needs going forward.

To make the case for major policy change, talk about redesign in terms that put it within reach. Use words like *remaking, remodeling, redesigning, or reprogramming.*
Instead of "we just can't go back"

"For too long global capitalism has failed us. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed the vulnerabilities of its approach: it drives inequality; and it is fragile because of those very same inequalities. This is why, while we are all longing to reconnect with loved ones, few of us want to go back to 'normal.' Debates about unsustainable growth have become louder, with concerns not only about the rate of growth but also its direction. Instead of returning to business as usual, we need to radically and rapidly transition to a new economy."

Look back—but frame forward

"Our main priority now should be meeting everyone's needs and preventing harm. But the way we've set up our economy has meant living costs have risen while wages have fallen, pushing too many people to the brink. From this position, the pandemic has pushed many people over the edge into hardship and harm. It doesn't have to be this way. 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."

These strategies were distilled from Framing the Economy and other FrameWorks studies on economic issues like housing, economic segregation, and poverty. FrameWorks has launched a major research project to track changes in public perceptions of the economy and related social issues in the era of COVID-19. Stay tuned: we will share findings and recommendations from this research as they emerge.

About this series

In this uniquely challenging moment, we need to connect people to the bigger picture. We need ways to explain health, enhance community, and offer hope.

We're pulling guidance from twenty years of framing research and practice to help advocates and experts be heard and understood in a time of global crisis. Every week, we'll share a few ideas that can help us all amplify the values of justice, inclusion, and interdependence.

To suggest topics, share ideas, or ask questions, talk to @FrameWorksInst on Twitter. You can review previous topics or share the sign-up link with a friend.