

Module

12

How can change be created?

Our final module explores how do we as a society, and how do we as individuals, create the kinds of social change that will allow us to effectively understand and alleviate poverty? We should start by noting that during the past 10 years there has been a growing awareness and concern regarding the issue of economic inequality broadly defined. Beginning with the Occupy movement in 2011 and 2012, considerable discussion has taken place around the concept of the 1 and 99 percent. This rising tide of inequality discourse has also washed into mainstream political debates across the country. Presidential candidates on the progressive side of the aisle routinely discuss the alarming trend of growing income and wealth inequality in the United States.

The Black Lives Matter movement has cast a further spotlight upon racial inequality in the United States, while the Fight for \$15 has been garnering support for lifting the wages of fast food workers. In addition, cities and states around the country have been raising their minimum wages in recognition of the need to assist those in low paying jobs

So the good news with respect to changing the country's understanding of poverty and inequality is that we have made a solid start in the last 10 years. There is a growing recognition that poverty and inequality are problems rooted at the structural or policy level, rather than solely at the individual level. As such, there is a push to consider more fundamental change in our policy approaches to solving poverty. Nevertheless, there are many miles to go before such a realization becomes a consensus. How might we move further in such a direction?

Raising Awareness and Connections

One key factor to shifting the status quo is for more people to feel a personal connection to the issue of poverty. This has been true for many, if not most, social movements in the past. To take but one example, the rise and growing support of the environmental movement over the past 50 years has been based upon the realization that we all have a personal stake in the health and well-being of the planet.

Furthermore, we have come to recognize that in one way or another we all impact and are impacted by the environment. It has become painfully clear that each of us has a serious stake in halting both the acceleration of climate change and the degradation of our planet.

Such is the case with poverty. As we hopefully demonstrate throughout this website, poverty is an issue that in one way or another, affects us all. In addition, more Americans are feeling a sense of economic insecurity. Yet they may not be aware of the source of this insecurity. Consequently, there is a need to raise an awareness regarding the connections that each of us have to the issue. How might we accomplish this?

Social media provides a particularly powerful outlet for getting the word out regarding social issues and problems. The #MeToo movement is a prime example of how social media has been used effectively in order to spread awareness, experiences, and action toward sexual harassment and assault. The use of social media can also be harnessed to get the word out regarding the impact of poverty.

Beyond being active on social media, there are many other ways for us to begin to take action in confronting poverty and creating change. For example, we can continue to learn

about the dynamics of poverty and share this newfound knowledge with others. We can get involved in our community with those organizations that are assisting low-income families. We can mobilize a group of our friends and acquaintances to begin to consider the ways in which they might stand up to poverty and injustice. We can make our voices heard to legislators and policy makers in our community, state capital, and Washington D.C.

In short, there are many ways in which each of us can work towards being proactive in creating a positive change. Such change can begin with conversations in our daily lives. The well-known phrase, “Think globally, act locally” epitomizes the idea that when thinking about widespread change, it is helpful to put it into the context of our local environment.

Change Does Occur, Sometimes Quickly

Yet often times it can feel as if social change is glacial—that nothing really happens over the course of decades. That the problems of yesterday, are the problems of today, and the problems of tomorrow. And in fact, it is true that significant change often does take a considerable amount of time. Yet change can also occur quite rapidly.

Over 130 years ago the damaging effects of American poverty were documented in Jacob Riis’ landmark 1890 book, *How the Other Half Lives*. Riis detailed in both words and photographs the impoverished conditions of tenement families in an area known as “the Bend” in New York City. He wrote about the difficulty of eliminating the wretched conditions of those living in that neighborhood. There were times when it appeared very little was being accomplished. Yet as Riis observed regarding such feelings of discouragement,

When nothing seems to help, I go and look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it—but all that had gone before.

Often times we may feel as if little is being accomplished, when in fact we have been laying the foundation for a profound shift to occur.

We would encourage you, our visitors, to use this information as a valuable tool in creating the kind of changes we have been discussing throughout. Diagnosing the scope and cause of a problem is a first step toward addressing that problem. A second step is using that diagnosis to shift the prevailing status quo mentality to one of social action. A third step is building the momentum to leverage a change in how we address the problem.

Ultimately, such change begins with each of us. As Margaret Mead once poignantly remarked, “Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” As we look into the future, let us create a community and a country that are transformed by the knowledge that poverty can and must be eradicated, once and for all. ★