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Poverty Reduction Through Partnership: The Role of Collaborative Civic Leadership

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Despite national efforts to address poverty, it remains a significant challenge in the United States. This study focuses on leadership strategies employed by civic organizations in Virginia to address poverty. Using a qualitative approach, the research explores how leadership influences poverty reduction. It studies the existing systemic barriers, organizational dynamics, and leadership approaches that can be most effective in addressing poverty in the communities. Interviews with 14 representatives from various civic organizations reveal three key themes: poverty as a systemic challenge, progress through participatory leadership, and humble leadership as a way forward. Findings suggest that effective poverty reduction requires collaborative efforts, active listening, selflessness, empathy, and community-driven leadership. These insights contribute to understanding how leadership can be leveraged to address complex social issues of poverty and provide a framework for applying these strategies in similar contexts.

Keywords: Leadership, Poverty, Systems

Introduction

Despite significant national efforts, poverty remains a persistent issue in the United States (Parrott, 2022; U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). Leadership is critical to poverty reduction and sustainable development (Bunch & Sulamoyo, 2016; Burns, 2004; Chanda & Chitondo, 2024; Oliphant, 2016; Shields, 2014; Sowcik et al., 2015; Worthy et al., 2019). However, more research is needed to understand the characteristics of effective leadership for reducing poverty (Bigelow, 2025; Brennan, 2014; Briscoe, 2022). Virginia has experienced decreasing poverty rates, better than the national average (Kutner, 2024), making it a relevant case for examination. In 2023, Virginia's poverty rate was 10.2%, approximately 2% lower than the national average, and the state's income inequality in 2022 stood at 0.475, just below the national figure of 0.478, with both trends declining since 2017 (Statista, 2024; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Egholm et al. (2020) note that civic organizations help to strengthen social bonds, encourage civic engagement, and uphold public welfare. Civic organizations are nonprofit, voluntary groups that operate independently from the government and focus on promoting community welfare, social causes, or public interests through citizen engagement and collective action (Salamon et al., 2003). The stakeholder approach in civic organizations reflects the role of relationships and how Poudel, S. & Kaufman, E. K. (2025). Poverty Reduction Through Partnership: The Role of Collaborative Civic Leadership. *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs*, 11(2), 150 – 167.

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different groups influence value creation, leadership, and management challenges (McIntyre et al., 2024). Understanding these dynamics can provide valuable insights into strategies that can be applied in other regions facing similar challenges.

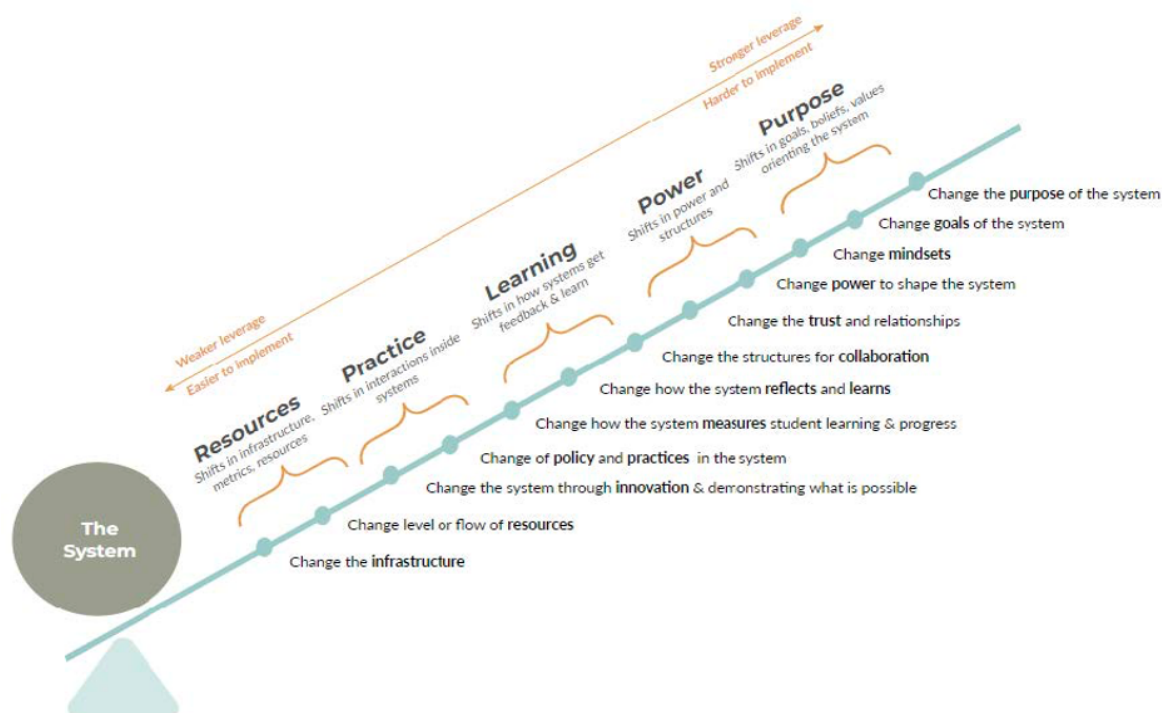
The purpose of this study is to explore the leadership strategies employed by civic organizations in Virginia, identifying the key factors contributing to their success or failure in poverty reduction efforts. By exploring the contextual factors contributing to successful poverty reduction, the research seeks to identify leadership practices that can be applied to similar initiatives in other regions. The study also explores how the dynamics of organizational leadership influence the effectiveness of poverty reduction efforts. The major questions that the research addresses are:

1. What factors affect the poverty reduction efforts by civic organizations in Virginia?
2. What are the key considerations for effective leadership in alleviating poverty?

Literature Review

In Virginia, poverty is caused and influenced by several factors (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2023). Beyond unemployment issues, increasingly high rent levels have created financial strain for low-income families (Cebula & Davis, 2022). While 10.2% of Virginia's population currently lives in poverty, the rate has been declining (Statista, 2023). Research suggests the recent success may be due to collective leadership, which is known to enhance community resilience through improved group performance (Arkedis et al., 2023). The collective leadership framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Collective Leadership Framework

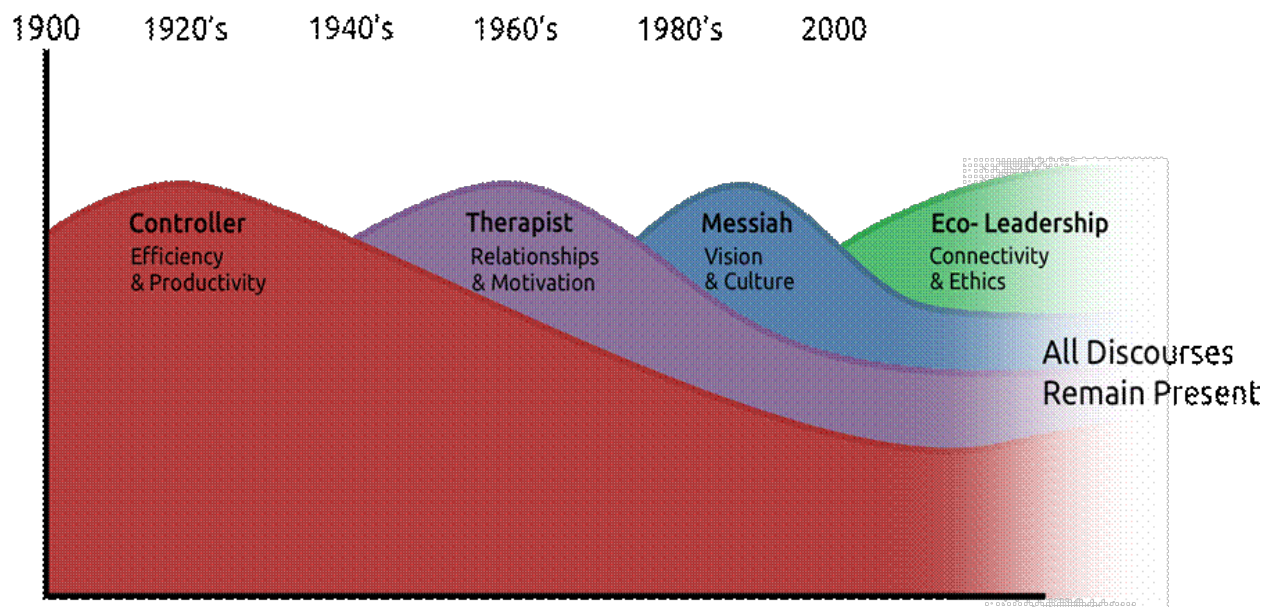


Note. From Arkedis et al. (2023, p. 21).

As noted by Van De Mierop et al. (2020), leadership is a product of ongoing interactions, meaning that understanding it requires studying contextual elements in which these interactions occur. Effective leadership helps communities recognize challenges, find solutions, and take action (Allen & Lachapelle, 2015; Israel & Beaulieu, 1990; Ridzi & Prior, 2023). Leadership plays a vital role in promoting economic sustainability and investing in essential services like education, healthcare, and affordable housing (Mkapa, 2008). However, collective leadership can falter and lead to setbacks if not managed properly (Shirk, 2022). This supports the need to understand the role of civic organizations in alleviating poverty through different strategies, such as building networks that support underserved communities (Cordeiro, 2024).

Perceptions of leadership are evolving as they adapt to tackle the complex and persistent challenges we face in society (Grint, 2022; Western, 2019). Grint (2005) suggests that as problems become increasingly uncertain, there is a need to transition from coercive methods of leadership (i.e., hard power) to more collaborative and normative approaches (i.e., soft power). Western (2019) categorizes leadership into four distinct discourses: Controller, Therapist, Messiah, and Eco-Leadership (Figure 2). Leadership theory has progressed from control and charismatic transformation toward more relational and reflective approaches, with a growing emphasis on leadership styles that value shared purpose over individual heroism (Justino Alves et al., 2025; Zhang, 2014). Eco leadership has emerged as a response to shifting social landscapes, and the need for leadership approaches that are more adaptive and collaborative (Cletzer & Kaufman, 2020; Kaufman et al., 2019).

Figure 2. The Discourses of Leadership

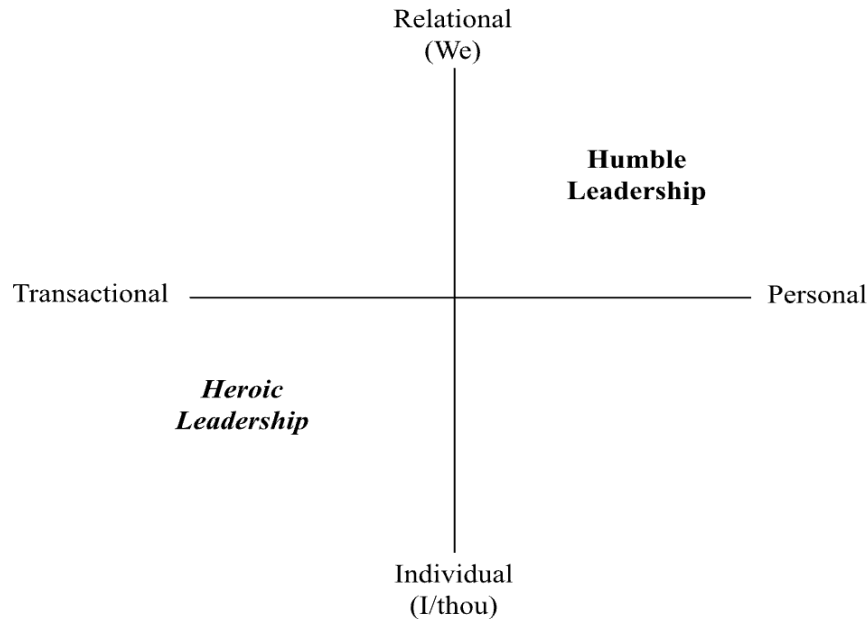


Note: From Western (2013).

In today's interconnected world, humble leadership is increasingly recognized for its role in countering self-serving leadership and promoting ethical solutions to global challenges (Chandler et al., 2023; Council & Sowcik, 2020; Kelemen et al., 2023). Morris et al. (2005) define humility as "a personal orientation founded on a willingness to see the self accurately and a propensity to put oneself in perspective" (p. 1331). Schein and Schein (2023) note that humble leaders (Figure 3) focus on building trust, developing relationships, and embracing empathy as a strength. Leaders who show humility can work together with the team to improve the organization, and this can lead to exceptional outcomes (Cable, 2018). When followers perceive their leader as humble,

they regard the leader, team, and themselves as modest, united, and focused on development (Davis et al., 2023). Narcissistic leaders, characterized by self-serving attitudes and low empathy, may be harmful to both organizations and employees; and this has increased the interest of practitioners in exploring humble leadership characteristics (Luo et al., 2022). Local civic leaders practice humble leadership by creating spaces for new leaders and raising awareness in the communities regarding civic opportunities (Kaufman, 2018); however, their contributions are often undervalued (Vlahos, 2023).

Figure 3. Humble Leadership: Leader's Perspective



Note. Adapted from Schein and Schein (2023).

According to Magzan (2012), complex social issues require bringing together communities and stakeholders to leverage collective knowledge and wisdom. Effective leadership is not about having all the answers; moreover, creating a participatory environment where team members can share ideas leads to greater progress (Minnesota Management and Budget, n.d.). Similarly, Osei-Kufuor and Koomson (2014) found that community participation has positive outcomes for poverty reduction through skill development and enabling the members to take group initiatives. Table 1 summarizes the definitions and relationships among the humble, participatory, and collective leadership approaches that form the theoretical foundation of this manuscript.

Methodology

The research process began with the validation of online information to identify organizations within Virginia that are actively working to reduce poverty. It involved reviewing publicly available data and directories through organizational websites. A stratified sampling method was employed to include various organizational leadership styles and strategies. The organizations were selected from ten primary areas of focus: Economic Development, Education, Food and Hunger, Grantmaking and Philanthropy, Housing, Legal Assistance, Mental Health, Regional Planning and Collaboration, Violence and Assault, and Youth Development.

The study involved interviews with 14 representatives of civic organizations working within the state. Each interview was conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions designed to encourage detailed responses and exploration of the challenges and opportunities faced by the participants. Some examples of questions include: “*As you think about the type of leadership that is most effective in addressing poverty issues, what characteristics come to mind?*” and “*In your experience, what difference does leadership make in the success or failure of efforts to reduce poverty in a community or region?*” The qualitative data collected from these interviews provided insights into the personal and professional experiences of the participants.

Table 1. Relationship and Comparison Among Collective, Humble, and Participatory Leadership Styles

Style	Definition	Relationship to other styles
Collective Leadership	Characterized by an approach where one or more leaders leverage the abilities and knowledge of members within a network, and responsibilities are distributed and adjusted as circumstances demand (Friedrich et al., 2009).	More fluid and decentralized than participatory leadership. Like humble leadership, it requires trust and respect but emphasizes distributed responsibility over individual humility.
Humble Leadership	Characterized by a leader’s ability to assess their own strengths and weaknesses, recognize and value contributions of others, and remain open to learning and accepting feedback (Owens et al., 2013).	Closely related to participatory and collective leadership through its emphasis on valuing team members. However, it is distinct in focusing on the leader’s self-awareness and teachability.
Participatory Leadership	Characterized by an approach where leaders actively involve members of a community or organization to achieve a common goal or shared responsibility (Suherni et al., 2023).	Shares common ground with collective leadership in involving others in decision-making, but the final decision is typically made by the leader. It is more structured than collective leadership.

The verbatim transcripts of the interviews were first examined and coded. In the initial step, open coding was used to identify keywords, phrases, and concepts related to leadership and poverty reduction. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a widely used method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved several rounds of coding to refine and categorize the themes to ensure that all relevant aspects of leadership in poverty reduction were captured. To reduce personal bias, we read and reviewed the interview transcripts multiple times and discussed them together. Additionally, we documented detailed records of analysis steps to be transparent about how the

conclusions were reached. As the analysis progressed, themes were grouped into broader categories to understand the connections between leadership actions and poverty alleviation. We checked themes across different participants to confirm the validity and reliability of our findings. Throughout the process, special attention was given to how leadership practices influenced poverty reduction strategies and the experiences of different stakeholders. The findings were synthesized to understand the leadership dynamics in tackling poverty. Similar qualitative studies have employed interviews and thematic analysis to explore related areas such as leadership for community change (Folta et al., 2012), rural poverty experiences (Pitt, 2021), poverty-related stress among youth (Hall et al., 2019), and school leadership in high-poverty contexts (Woods & Martin, 2016).

Table 2 illustrates the organizational representatives who participated in the interview and their focus. To make sure that the identities of the participants are protected, the direct quotes of the participants are referenced through alphabets.

Table 2. Organizational Foci of Interview Participants

Participant	Organizational Focus
A	Youth Development
B	Economic Development and Education
C	Violence and Assault
D	Economic Development
E	Economic Development, Food, Housing and Mental Health
F	Legal Assistance
G	Economic Development, Food, and Housing
H	Economic Development, Food, Housing, and Education
I	Housing
J	Regional Planning and Collaboration
K	Food and Hunger
L	Housing
M	Economic Development, Education, Housing, and Violence and Assault
N	Grantmaking and Philanthropy

Note. The table represents the alphabetic codes for the civic organizations' representatives and organizational foci. The codes are also used in the results section of this manuscript.

Results/Findings

Analysis of the interviews revealed three overarching themes: (1) Poverty as a systemic challenge, (2) Progress through participatory leadership, and (3) Humble leadership as a way forward.

Theme 1: Poverty as a Systemic Challenge Interview participants noted that poverty often stems from systemic inequities, generational cycles, and economic mobility challenges. Numerous barriers were revealed, such as limited access to education, healthcare, work opportunities, and economic systems that impact the working poor. The sub-themes that emerged include Structural Barriers, the Benefits Cliff, and Stigmas Related to Poverty.

Structural Barriers - Access to safe housing, transportation, and food emerged as concerns for both urban and rural communities. Participants mentioned that reliable transportation is essential for accessing jobs and services. Beyond these immediate needs, they also discussed the deep-rooted and generational nature of poverty. Poverty can be caused by economic stagnation, limited job opportunities, and restricted educational pathways. As one participant noted,

“Stagnant wages or stagnant wage growth... and a lack of educational opportunities” (I) are the factors that perpetuate financial hardship.

The conversations further explored how systemic inefficiencies contribute to poverty. One participant described how dysfunction within relationships and institutions compounds over time:

“When relationships and systems don't work how they are supposed to, it creates distorted and messed-up relationships and systems. And as those things create layers and layers and layers of things that aren't working right, poverty is a result of those things.” (A)

This perspective reflects how poverty is not merely an individual struggle but a structural issue that can be reinforced by long-standing barriers. Additionally, the participants also mentioned that official poverty measurements may not always be able to measure the struggles of people living in poverty. One participant pointed out: “There are many, many more hundred, if not thousands, of Virginians in poverty than the Federal poverty guidelines would indicate” (F).

Benefits Cliff - Participants discussed the challenges of the “benefits cliff,” where even a small increase in income can trigger the sudden loss of public assistance. They mentioned that this can make it harder for individuals to achieve financial stability. This abrupt cutoff discourages economic progress, as individuals may find themselves struggling despite earning more. As one participant explained:

“There's a threshold of income which they can make before they start to lose those benefits, and they don't just lose them gradually—they're losing them. It's called a cliff for a reason because, literally, if you go, you know, half a dollar more over a certain threshold, you suddenly lose all of your benefits. That's a really big discussion right now in the workforce development space.” (B)

Participants also noted that poverty does not simply disappear once individuals surpass the eligibility thresholds for assistance programs. In the words of a participant:

“Many of our programs serve individuals under 200% of federal poverty. And so, you know, [including] extreme poverty. But poverty still exists for those families once they get past that 200%; and so especially, I would say, the working poor who are working, but experiencing poverty still, struggling to maintain their basic necessities.” (H)

To address these challenges, participants suggested policies that provide a more gradual transition out of poverty rather than abrupt benefit cutoffs. A more graduated approach may allow individuals to adjust as they increase their earnings. For example, one participant described a priority to “reward working and trying to get a leg up, but [a program that] doesn't snatch the

In addition to stigma, poverty is sometimes mistaken for neglect. One participant described how financial hardship can be unfairly used against parents:

“Poverty is used as a weapon, particularly against parents. And, you know, there are oftentimes cases where cases of quote, unquote, ‘abuse’ are reported; and it's really a case of poverty and lack of housing, [which] is used as the reason for removing a child or children from the home.” (C)

This expresses how struggling families may face punishment instead of receiving the support they need. Participants also emphasized that poverty should not be seen as a personal failure but as a

safety net out from under you very quickly; but it's graduated just so that people can adjust to bringing in their own income" (G).

Stigmas - Participants discussed how the stigma surrounding poverty affects both individuals and entire communities. When poverty is concentrated in certain areas, it can lead to social isolation and fewer opportunities, making it harder for people to improve their circumstances. One participant mentioned that "there's also the stigma that accompanies being in poverty and the effect that has on communities; [like] if you have a high concentration of poverty, it could have really negative impacts" (I).

more significant issue that affects communities as a whole. They pointed out that economic hardship is often linked to emotional and mental stress, not just a lack of money. As one participant explained:

"It's spiritual, emotional, mental—all of that is included, not just the physical aspect of lacking something. There's always something else that might be lacking that's causing that lack. So, we try to come at it from a different point of view by asking about their emotional state, their stress state, and all of that." (G)

The participants pointed out that leaders need to recognize that a better way to address poverty is by treating it 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" vs. "them."

Theme 2: Progress Through Participatory Leadership

The participants mentioned that a participatory approach involves actively engaging community members in decision-making. They shared that it is not just about involving people in the process but about how organizations function based on their input. The following aspects emerged under this theme: Community-Driven, Adaptive Learning, and Collaborative Reciprocity.

Community-Driven - Participants discussed that if organizations can involve those with lived experience on the organizational board or in leadership roles, it helps make the decisions more practical. In this way, decisions and strategies are grounded in the actual needs and challenges faced by the community. In the words of a participant:

"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. So, even if it was not them directly who experienced poverty at some point in their life, they've had a close family member, they've had a best friend, [or] they've had some interaction with the individuals that we're talking about." (B)

Another participant added that many organizations already integrate lived experience into their advisory structures: "Most of these organizations that I am familiar with have advisory groups that are led by and deeply informed by people who have lived experience in spaces, either economically or health-wise" (J).

They also emphasized that while knowledge and expertise are valuable, leadership benefits from directly engaging with the communities affected. There is a growing recognition that leadership in the anti-poverty movement centers the voices of the people who are actually experiencing poverty in real-time:

“I think it's particularly important for leaders in the anti-poverty movement to prioritize the ideas and priorities of people living in poverty right now. You know, theory is not enough. It really needs to be a community. Any good leader in the anti-poverty movement has to be following the community that they serve.” (F)

This encourages a shift in traditional hierarchical structures, where leaders are often external from the realities of the people they aim to serve. The priority is for a deeper form of engagement, where the community is not just an object of service, they are key stakeholders in the process of organizational growth and development. This approach can be helpful in addressing the systemic nature of poverty, as the context-specific solutions can be used to address root causes of poverty and not just the symptoms.

Adaptive Learning - Participants mentioned that continuous learning and adaptation helps a leader to be more effective in addressing the challenges associated with poverty. Structural barriers are often embedded and vary across communities. So, community members were mentioned as essential knowledge sources that informed both the immediate needs of the community and long-term strategies. This learning process is not a one-time exchange; it is an ongoing relationship where the community provides feedback, and organizations use that feedback to adjust and evolve their strategies. This learning and reflection can help leaders recognize the interconnected systems—such as education, healthcare, and employment—and better understand the barriers within them. In the words of a participant:

“There's leadership with a capital ‘L’ that I see, and then I see leadership, maybe with a lowercase ‘l’.... The capital ‘L’ leadership is leaders of organizations who are moving and trying to move big agendas forward. I mean, they are critical, and certainly, their focus is on realizing there's an end game—that there's going to be bumps in the road and that you've got to keep fighting through those critical elements of that leadership. Then I think there's the lowercase ‘l’ leadership, where families—who really are the experts on what they're going through—help them understand their roles as leaders, which may be lowercase ‘l,’ but as leaders in telling the stories of their family and families like them. [They] are critical in helping, whether it be local administrators or legislators at the state level, even at the federal level—helping them understand the value of the services that we often talk about, or they see on paper—in abstract—what this means to a family, and how it affects them.” (C)

This idea of leadership as a two-way process was further supported by another participant, who emphasized the importance of openness to change:

“For me, the mindset changes, the power changes—that's going to be a door that swings both ways. It's not just saying, ‘Hey, I work with under-resourced youth.’ It's not just ensuring that a teenager from a low-income home on the autism spectrum gets to have a say in how our organization runs—like we bring him onto the board, right? That's one thing. It's another thing to be willing for our whole board to be changed by him. So, our mindsets change. We're not just trying to change his mindset. We're willing for him to change our mindset.” (A)

These perspectives explained the different dimensions of leadership. The organizational leaders who drive large-scale change and individuals of the community who advocate for their needs play a symbiotic role in helping one another. Effective leadership requires continuous learning and the ability to adapt, which relies on this partnership. A participant noted that “participating in various

initiatives, being collaborative, and working with different types of entities” (L) are some of the characteristics of an effective leader.

Collaborative Reciprocity - Participants emphasized that addressing complex social issues like poverty cannot be done in isolation. They mentioned that no single organization can solve these challenges alone, and a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach is necessary. This calls for the navigation of invisible leadership within the sector and collaboration among various organizations, stakeholders, and community groups. In the words of a participant:

“You know, one of the things that I find—day in and day out—is you've got [to have] collaborative reciprocity, well-working partnerships, and collaborations. Then, when there is a need, you can pick up the phone because you already know who your peer is at the [certain organization]. And I think from a CEO or chief leadership perspective, I think that is probably one of the most important roles for leaders to have would be developing those trusting relationships.” (M)

Another participant explained the value of understanding the broader ecosystem of services: “Do we know who works on housing, who works on food insecurity? Do other organizations know that we deal with employment and training to help people get better jobs?” (D). This implies that effective leadership in the poverty reduction space involves building strong, trust-based relationships across different organizations and sectors. By doing so, leaders can more efficiently mobilize resources and expertise. The partnership across sectors can also be helpful in implementing the systemic solutions to poverty that single entities may not be able to solve alone. As explained by one participant, there is importance in “understanding that a single organization can't tackle it—[that] all individuals in that leadership space know who needs to be at the table, or which table” (B).

Although the leaders are working in different organizations and sectors, they are connected by a common goal of poverty reduction through community service. Thus, the findings reflect that it is important to recognize the common goal and work in collaboration.

Theme 3: Humble Leadership as a Way Forward

Humble leadership stood out as an effective leadership approach to address poverty. This leadership style is characterized by a leader's ability to be open to different perspectives, appreciate others' contributions, and prioritize serving others over personal recognition. The following sub-themes emerged: Active Listening, Selflessness, and Compassion in leadership.

Active Listening - A major subject that came through in discussions was the importance of active listening as a component of effective communication. Participants mentioned that, according to their experience, effective leaders in poverty reduction are those who take the time to understand the needs of the people they serve through active communication. As one participant noted, an effective leader is “somebody who listens to what people need rather than assumes what people need” (E).

They mentioned that this approach requires closely engaging with individuals and families, which allows leaders to develop a better understanding of the complex, systemic challenges they face. Humble leaders recognize they do not have all the answers and that one-size-fits-all solutions may not work in all cases. One participant illustrated this perspective:

“They're not just solving a math problem, but they're serving individuals. They're serving human beings—people who have real needs and, you know, real complicated lives. And

not everybody is the same, right? Everybody has unique needs when they're experiencing poverty.... And as long as we are seeing people that we're serving for who they are, you know, then we can do better to serve them.” (K)

Another participant supported this perspective that leaders who effectively communicate with families over time gain valuable insights into their stressors and can help them access services in a more effective way:

“To be able to see the broad picture of issues that families face and not trying to be myopic in focus [are some characteristics of an effective leader]. So oftentimes, particularly with our home visiting programs, the home visitors talk with their families and, over time... uniquely figure out and understand what their stressors are and what services or what help they need, and then work with them to find those, or get access to those services rather than just being a one size fits all.” (C)

Selflessness - Effective leadership in poverty reduction also requires selflessness. Participants described effective leaders as those who prioritize the well-being of the people they serve over their personal interests. Selfless leaders are more likely to build trust and encourage collaboration because they focus on the collective good. One individual emphasized this, stating that an effective leader demonstrates "selflessness... openness to new ideas, willingness to work with other people, willingness to listen, [and the] ability to set one's ego aside" (F).

The discussions revealed that this sense of humility can enable leaders to recognize the systemic nature of poverty instead of attributing it solely to individual choices. When leaders can set aside ego and personal bias, they can view poverty as changeable rather than a fixed personal failure, and they are more likely to reduce the blame and shame associated with poverty. Because they are less ego-driven, humble leaders are more willing to question existing systems and mindsets. A participant explained that financial instability is often shaped by broader societal factors:

"An attitude of humility and unity, a recognition that—'Hey! You know your lack of financial instability isn't really just about you making great decisions, right? Maybe you made a bunch of great ones, but you have made bad ones, too; we all have.'" (A)

Moreover, many leaders who work in poverty reduction are motivated by a sense of purpose rather than financial gain. As one participant observed:

“Those of us that choose to work in this field—it's not because we want to be independently wealthy; it's because we are able to recharge our batteries and get up the next day to fight another battle, because we do see on an individual or a family basis how what we do is impacting their lives positively.” (M)

Compassion - Compassion was identified as an essential quality for effective leadership in poverty reduction. Participants mentioned that leaders who genuinely care about their communities recognize the different ways in which poverty might impact individuals. They are able to put themselves in the shoes of these people and recognize the best set of actions. In the words of a participant: “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” (G).

It was discussed that beyond addressing material needs, leaders must also be able to challenge misconceptions about poverty. Participants explained the importance of moving beyond a purely

transactional approach. They stated that leaders should not view individuals as problems to be fixed but instead develop an understanding of the ways poverty affects people's lives:

"I think people need to really be able to not look at individuals and go, 'Oh, gee! We're here to fix you,' but really have a sense of how poverty may be impacting their lives in a variety of other ways rather than just, you know, 'Do I have housing? Do I have clothes?' So, I think that empathy is one of those key strengths." (D)

Additionally, participants noted that poverty is often misunderstood, as public perceptions can be shaped by classism, racism, and ignorance. One individual emphasized the need for leaders to actively listen, empathize, and challenge these biases:

"I guess an issue is that people have misconceptions about the reason that people are in poverty. And I think that, too often, a lot of that is based on classism, racism, and ignorance. And so, an important thing to do is to listen, empathize, and understand that people don't choose to be in poverty." (I)

The statements reflect that leaders who are compassionate and genuinely care about the people that they serve recognize that poverty extends beyond material needs. This is an important characteristic in poverty reduction efforts as they do not view poverty as a problem to be fixed; they attempt to see the bigger picture of the challenges the people face and offer relevant help.

Discussion and Recommendations

Through this research, we have identified the leadership characteristics and approaches that can be most effective in tackling the system of poverty. Sklaveniti (2020) mentioned that leadership is a continuous process driven by relationships and collective action, which can play a key role in addressing wicked problems like 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., 2020). Our research emphasizes how it can be leveraged by the organizations and leaders working to address poverty.

According to Kostrzyńska and Littlechild (2024), the stigma around poverty comes largely from how society views people in need, not from poverty itself, which often leads to exclusion and ineffective support. This calls for leadership approaches that can challenge these negative perceptions, and address the barriers to poverty alleviation (Hauer, 2020). For instance, having a growth mindset and an ability to view the problem from different perspectives in leadership can help reduce this stigma by decreasing blame and negative views about the people living in poverty (Hoyt et al., 2022). Similarly, Ugoani (2025) mentions that selflessness in leadership is important for resource management within organizations working to serve communities. In terms of practical approaches to poverty alleviation, Lade et al. (2017) explain three poverty escape strategies: (1) material support, (2) systemic changes that remove barriers, and (3) deeper transformations that integrate sustainable, culturally rooted practices. These perspectives align with our findings that poverty is a multi-dimensional, complex issue, and it cannot be solved with simple asset provision. The leadership characteristics identified in the study (e.g., active listening, selflessness, and compassion) are central to humble leadership and can be helpful in guiding civic organizations to address poverty—not only at the surface level but through its systemic roots. Building on this, understanding how individuals and communities across multiple scales can collaboratively adapt to changes is also useful for building long-term resilience in poverty-affected

contexts (Bashir et al., 2022; Béné et al., 2012; Bunch & Sulamoyo, 2016; Dudley-Marling & Dudley-Marling, 2020; Hauer, 2020).

Based on the findings of the research, we recommend the following steps moving forward:

1. *Integrating Humble Leadership Principles into Leader Development*

We recommend providing necessary training and resources for organizational leaders to expose them to the evolving research and educational initiatives in this field. Given the proven benefits, organizations working in poverty reduction may want to explore incorporating related concepts of humble leadership such as self-awareness and openness to feedback into their leadership training (Bunch & Sulamoyo, 2016; Remy & Sané, 2024).

2. *Encouraging Community Participatory Decision-Making*

The research findings indicate the potential impact of community members in advocating for their own needs. We recommend supporting community leadership initiatives and encouraging people to participate actively in decision-making regarding poverty reduction efforts. This may be done by creating local decision-making spaces and partnerships between community leaders and organizations (Cletzer & Kaufman, 2020; Kaufman et al., 2019).

3. *Facilitating Collaboration Among Leaders*

We recommend strengthening the network of leaders working for poverty reduction so that they can collectively support one another in achieving the common goal. To achieve this, regular knowledge exchange through workshops, mentorship, and online platforms may be helpful (Bigelow, 2025; Brennan, 2014).

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on leadership and poverty reduction. It can offer practical implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers alike. In the future, comparative studies can be done across different states or regions. This can be useful in gaining valuable insights into the contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of leadership in poverty reduction. Future research can identify best practices that can be scaled and adapted to different settings. The findings of this study also have implications for public policy. Policymakers can leverage the results of this research to adopt policies and strategies that promote effective leadership approaches and address systemic barriers to poverty reduction.

Limitations of Research

The following limitations have been identified:

- *Regional Focus:* The study is limited to the civic organizations in a selected state, so it may not reflect the challenges and leadership styles found in other regions. This limitation could be addressed in future research by conducting similar studies in other states or regions for comparative analysis.
- *Dynamic Nature of Poverty:* Poverty changes with economic, political, and social shifts. Thus, the relevance of findings may also change over time. Future research could explore

how civic organizations adjust their leadership strategies as the issues related to poverty evolve.

- *Subjectivity of Qualitative Data:* The data from the interviews reflect the personal views and experiences of the participants, which may be affected by external factors. Future studies could adopt a mixed-methods approach to better document and control for variables not reflected in this study.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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