Info sheet: How to write a policy brief?

What is a policy brief?

Policy briefs are communication tools aimed for informing decision-makers from various spheres, such as officials, politicians, policy analysts, development practitioners, donors, ecosystem users and managers, community leaders, extension agents, etc. They contextualise the findings of research projects through a) *identifying the problem* relevant to the target audience, b) *citing new research evidence* that informs policy on the matter, and c) *proposing specific policy recommendations* on courses of actions. A typical policy brief must be absolutely concise in conveying the importance and urgency of the issue. They are therefore rather short documents, typically 2-4 pages for a general audience but can even reach up to 10 pages for a specialist audience. Although a policy brief is an effective communication tool, it should always be combined with other tools for engaging with stakeholders (see below).

Sections of a policy brief

A policy brief contains various essential and optional elements that establish a clear and logical presentation of problems, evidence and recommendations:

- *Title*: is brief, telling, attention-grabbing.
- *Executive summary*: provides the whole overview of the problem, its political relevance, key research results, and key policy recommendations – all on the first page.
- *Context*: describes the social/environmental/practical problem, the political/legal relevance and delivers the essential facts that convinces the audience that the problem requires attention and action. It may also include the guiding research questions.
- *Research results*: illustrates and summarises the research results in short sections that are complemented by strong and meaningful figures and boxes. The results serve as a bridge between the problem-recommendation divide, and every result must lead to a policy recommendation for creating a coherent argument.
- *Pre-existing policies* (optional): describes past, present, or alternative ways to address the problem. This section may evaluate (dis-)advantages of policy options and can thus create stronger arguments towards specific course of action.
- *Policy recommendations*: argues for preferred policy options by providing convincing arguments and imperatives for action that derive from the research results. Each recommendation must be backed by research evidence to avoid loose ends.
- *Further reading*: embeds links and a small selection of central reading, ideally from the author itself, to the original research material that elaborates the contents of the policy brief.

Suggestions for writing a policy brief

In order to increase the impact chances of policy briefs, there exist several elements that can be considered when preparing and writing the brief:

- *Cooperate*: Writing a policy brief is by no means only researcher's business but requires in-depth cooperation with partners and experts as co-authors. In case of ZMT partners include the research partners abroad and national policy experts from the partner country. Such cooperation a) improves the text quality greatly, b) identifies target groups and policy processes, c) incites interest, and d) improves outreach.
- *Adapt to the target audience*: Each audience has its own background, expertise, and skills. For example, policy briefs for generalists (e.g. politicians, ministers) are short and focus on wider contexts, issues, and causal relationships with political significance, while skilled policy advisors and analysts prefer more detail and complexity. Sometimes English might not the best language for the policy brief.
- *Focus*: Less is more when it comes to policy briefs. The purpose of a policy brief is ultimately fulfilled in the policy recommendations, and target audiences want to get there quickly. Previous sections should therefore build a coherent and sufficient knowledge basis but lead to the recommendations expediently. Not all details of the research project are relevant in practical terms and should in such cases be avoided.
- *Deliver*: Even an excellent policy brief may have no impact, if it is not delivered to the right persons, in the right ways, and at the right timing. Therefore, a sound strategy to prepare target audiences (or individuals) and to hit specific stages in the policy-making process improves the potential impact of the brief. A policy brief can best be transferred via personal meetings, but also via e-mail, mail, or websites.
- *Write with style*: The text is plain, professional and adapted to the language and tone of the target audience without any technical terms or acronyms. Sentences are succinct (short, active voice, few to no adjectives) and shun strong or vague terms.
- *Be coherent*: Good argumentation requires coherence, which involves linking all parts of the policy brief transparently and logically so that an overall and complete picture emerges. This can be achieved through clear and descriptive section titles, opening sentences for each section to drive the argument, and effective use of paragraphing. Coherence also requires a clear division between evidence and recommendations.
- *Be specific and practical in your recommendations*: The recommendations should not be vague or theoretical but include as much practical detail as possible. This may include answering the five W's: **w**ho does **w**hat, **w**hen, **w**hy and **h**ow.
- *Layout*: An attractive yet subtle layout is key. This includes prudent use of font-size, sub-division of short paragraphs, illustrations, colours, boxes, and simple figures.

Suggested reading

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (2011), Food Security Communications Toolkit, pp.138-169, available at: *www.fao.org/docrep/014/i2195e/i2195e.pdf*

Young, E. and L. Quinn (2002), Writing effective public policy papers, Budapest: Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative, 121pp., available at: www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/sites/icpa/files/downloads/writing_effective_public_policy_papers_young_quinn.pdf