

Guide to Developing a Policy Brief



AFRICAN COLLABORATIVE
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SOLUTIONS

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge translation is a process of making research results intelligible and user friendly for politicians, practitioners, general public, etc. Policy briefs are a widely used modality for translating scientific knowledge into a tool to facilitate a dialogue between researchers and those who implement the research. It is a concise summary of the scientific knowledge on a particular issue, an outline of policy options, and recommendations on the best option. This guide builds on the literature review for which a guide is available.

Frequent criticism of knowledge translation literature mentions the excessive length of such products, the overly scientific language and research-specific jargon that limits the understanding and use by broader audiences. This guide is designed to provide practical guidance on how to develop a policy brief and avoids the above-mentioned pitfalls.

TARGET AUDIENCE

This guide is specifically intended for policy dialogue organizers and facilitators; technical working group participants addressing health system issues; and knowledge brokers. This document can be used by anyone wishing to deepen their knowledge translation skills, to develop an evidence-based advocacy approach, or to initiate policy actions that are informed by research evidence.

There are three steps to developing a policy brief.

Step 1: Understanding users' expectations

For a policy brief to inspire action, it is important to understand users' needs, expectations, values and even preferences for making use of scientific information. To do this, regular interactions between researchers and users must be established; they can take different forms – from the most passive (e.g. filling out questionnaires, observations of professional practices) to the most active (interviews, workshops, etc.) The constant back and forth between researchers and users facilitates mutual understanding.

Step 2: Structuring the policy brief

Policy briefs can take a variety of formats but should not exceed 2-4 pages and 1500 words. Recommended structure of a policy brief follows on next page in Box 1.

Step 3: Validating the relevance of the policy brief

Once the first draft of the policy brief is ready, it is useful to share the content with the intended users to ensure the results as presented will trigger the desired action process. In reality, this should be an interaction between researchers and users rather than one-way communication. The exchanges should enrich the policy brief until it reaches a degree of maturity where the needs of the recipients, their expectations, and the knowledge synthesis that is presented to them are aligned.

Box 1: Recommended structure of a policy brief

Headline: The headline is the showcase of your policy brief. It is the first element that will determine whether or not it will be read, like the slogan of an advertisement. The headline's purpose is to grab the reader's attention, stimulate interest, and inform them.

Summary: Briefly presents the key information to convince readers to read on.

Highlights: Highlights are the key take-away information for readers. Using a boxed format allows readers to access them easily.

Introduction: The introduction sets the stage for the note by introducing the problem. It states the objective and announces the recommendations.

Methodological approach: This section briefly outlines the study design, data collection, and analysis techniques in one or two sentences. Note that the policy brief is intended to inform and lead to action, as such, this section should be concise.

Results: Using easy-to-understand figures, graphs, or tables, this section highlights the results expected to be useful to decision makers in a direct and accessible language. Factual data and/or concrete examples can further support the results.

Conclusion: This section restates essential information using strong statements.

Recommendations: This is where the policy change proposals that can improve the original problem should be laid out. To move the target audience to action, the recommendations must be clear and consistent while remaining realistic and contextualized. The persons expected to implement the changes must be clearly identified.

BEST PRACTICES

Throughout the policy brief development process, keep in mind that its primary use is to inform an exchange for the purpose of decision making to solve a health system problem. As such, it should facilitate the policy dialogue among stakeholders, including how to define a challenge and co-create potential solutions. To develop a policy brief:

- It is important to understand the knowledge needs of the participants in the policy dialogue and have a clear expression of their demand to develop an appropriate policy brief for action.
- The policy brief should be sent to recipients in a timely manner to be useful at the appropriate time in the decision-making process.
- Greater involvement of users during preparation and dissemination improves the impact of the policy brief. This involvement not only allows for a better understanding of their knowledge needs, but also facilitates the implementation of recommendations and, above all, builds the trust necessary for collaboration between researchers and users.
- Use clear language that favors simple and short sentences that facilitate the understanding of the conveyed messages.
- Avoid "just sharing" the policy brief. Communicating a policy brief is only one step in, not the end of the process of turning it into action. Maintain an active (including physical) dialogue with recipients to ensure they truly understand the brief's content. This interaction should be an opportunity to support them in adopting the recommendations made and to provide them with the knowledge that will constitute the foundations for decision-making. Finally, it is important to ensure that practitioners who implement the policy guidance also receive the evidence used for the brief to facilitate full ownership of the recommendations for their use in professional practice.

CHECKLIST OF CRITICAL TASKS

Tasks	Complete
Policy brief is tailored to the target audience	
Importance of content to the target audience is clear	
Policy brief target audience is regularly consulted during the process	
Recommendations are relevant and appropriate for the target audience	
Length of the policy brief is tailored to the needs and preferences of the target audience	
Strategies for disseminating the policy brief are articulated	
Content and the argument are solid	
Objective is well defined and clearly stated	
Recommendations are clear and specific	
Recommendations are contextualized and realistic	
Recommendations flow logically from the data presented	
Data is presented efficiently	
Highlights of the results are presented at the outset	
Methodological and statistical details are limited	
Data is presented in appropriate formats	
Graphs and tables are easy to understand for non-specialists	
Data is needed to make the case for recommendations	
Language is clear and simple	
Technical terms and scientific jargon are limited	
Language is tailored to intended audience	
Paragraphs are short and tight	
Sentences are simple and not cluttered with unnecessary words	
Text stimulates interest: uses active voice, clear language	
Document is visually attractive and professional	
Text is well structured and divided into small paragraphs	
Paragraphs are identified by clear and appropriate subheadings	
Paragraphs and visual elements are spaced to avoid cluttering the policy brief	
Important facts are easily identifiable (in bold, in boxes)	
Graphics, images, photos are used intelligently	



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