



Guidelines for Writing Policy Briefs

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1. INTRODUCTION

Successful and effective communication depends on, amongst others, effective writing skills for the targeted audience to understand the intended message. As part of a broader knowledge management, research and learning strategy to support technical teams in sharing their work internally and to other stakeholders, TMEA is now striving to ensure consistent and effective sharing of knowledge, research and learning within and outside the organisation. These brief guidelines¹ are meant to provide general guidance for the technical teams to help them when developing or preparing policy briefs. The guidelines are not exhaustive of everything but provide the minimum expectations for useful policy briefs writings.

Section 2 of these guidelines define a policy brief and provides a brief description of the types of policy briefs. The section also provides brief explanations of what constitutes an excellent policy brief in addition to links with examples of different policy briefs written by other International development organisations like TMEA. Section 3 concludes these guidelines by proposing the structure of a policy brief. This section also provides references where TMEA staff can read to get more detailed tips on preparing policy briefs and practical examples of the available relevant policy briefs.

2. WHAT IS A POLICY BRIEF?

A policy brief is a concise neutral summary of what we know about an issue or a problem, the policy options to deal with it, and some recommendations on the best option. The primary purpose is to evaluate policy options regarding a specific issue, for a specific policy-maker audience, i.e., government policymakers, management of organisations, and practitioners who are interested in formulating or influencing policy.

A policy brief distils or synthesises a large amount of intricate detail, so the reader can easily understand the heart of the issue, its background, the players (“stakeholders”) and any recommendations, or even educated guesses about the future of the issue. It may have tables and graphs; and usually, it has a short list of references, so the reader knows something about the cited sources, and where to go for more information.

In short, “the purpose of the policy brief is to convince the target audience of the urgency of the current problem and the need to adopt the preferred alternative or course of action outlined and therefore, serve as an impetus for action.”

2.1 TYPES OF POLICY BRIEFS

There are two basic types of policy briefs;

- i) **An advocacy brief** argues in favour of a specific course of action.
- ii) **An objective brief** gives balanced information for the policymakers to make up their minds.

2.2 WHAT SHOULD A POLICY BREIF DO?

¹ The guidelines draw heavily on comprehensive notes on policy briefs prepared by United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

A good policy brief should:

- i) Provide enough but brief background for the reader to understand the problem;
- ii) Convince the reader that the problem must be addressed urgently;
- iii) Provide information about alternatives (if an objective brief);
- iv) Provide evidence to support one alternative (if an advocacy brief); and
- v) Stimulate the reader to make a decision.

2.3 WHAT CONSTITUTE A GOOD POLICY BRIEF?

To achieve its objectives, a good policy brief must:

- i) *Be short and to the point*: A good brief must focus on a specific problem or issue and must provide enough information for the reader to understand the issue and come to a decision.
- ii) *Evidence-based*: A good brief is a communication tool produced by technical teams or policy analysts and therefore all potential audiences not only expect a *rational argument* but will only be convinced by *argumentation supported by evidence* that the problem exists and the consequences of adopting certain alternatives.
- iii) *Focus on meanings, not methods*: Readers are interested in what you found and what you recommend. They do not need to know the details of your methodology.
- iv) *Relate to the big picture*: The policy brief may build on context-specific findings, but it should draw conclusions that are more generally applicable.

3. STRUCTURE OF A POLICY BRIEF

Normally a good policy brief should not be more than **four pages long (inclusive of references)**. However, the structure of a policy brief can vary depending on one's needs and whether it is *an advocacy* or *an objective policy* brief. Regardless, generally, a policy brief should contain items detailed in the box below.

Box 1: Policy brief structure

1) Title

The title should be short, catchy (grab the reader's attention), and to the point.

2) Executive Summary

The executive summary aims to convince the reader further that the brief is worth in-depth investigation. It is especially important for an audience that is short of time to clearly see the relevance and importance of the brief in reading the summary. As such, a 1 to 2 paragraph executive summary commonly includes:

- i) A description of the problem addressed;
- ii) A statement on why the current approach/policy option needs to be changed;
- iii) Your recommendations for action.

3) Introduction

This is the first part of the main body of the text. Think of it as a statement of the issue or problem. The introduction does four things:

- i) It grabs the reader's attention;
- ii) It introduces the topic;

- iii) It says why it is important; and
- iv) It tells the reader why he/she should do something about it.

The introduction must cover the following:

- i) The problem (What is the problem? Why is it important?);
- ii) Background, context (What happens, where, who is involved?);
- iii) Causes of current situation (Why? Give evidence or examples.); and
- iv) Effects of current situation (What effects does it have? Give evidence or examples.)

4) The body

Ensure text to has a logical flow easily understandable by the reader. Some ways to do this:

- i) Keep the paragraphs short and restricted to a single idea. Consider putting this idea into a single phrase or sentence and printing it in boldface at the beginning of the paragraph;
- ii) Use more headings and subheadings than you would do normally; and
- iii) Re-read each paragraph and ask yourself "so what?" If it is not obvious what the paragraph is trying to say, rewrite it or delete it.

5) Conclusion

A conclusion is normally **not** necessary in a policy brief. The summary (at the beginning) and the recommendations section (also probably at the beginning) often take over the role of the conclusions section in a policy brief.

6) Policy implications

Here is where you focus on the policy options and implications. Some items to consider including:

- i) Suggested revisions in policy. What are the policy options?
- ii) Effects of the revised policy or policies. How will the policy changes improve the situation? Give evidence or examples if possible;
- iii) Advantages and disadvantages of each policy option. What are the potential benefits?
- iv) What will it cost? What side-effects might there be?
- v) If you have not given the recommendations at the beginning of the policy brief, you can put them here.

In addition, a policy brief may contain the following:

- i) Boxes and sidebars
- ii) Cases studies
- iii) Tables
- iv) Graphics
- v) Photographs

REFERENCES

For more on policy briefs including samples of policy briefs please visit:

- i) Centre for Global Development (CDG) at <https://www.cgdev.org/section/publications>
- ii) Overseas Development Institute (ODI) at <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/1630.pdf>
- iii) Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations: at <http://www.fao.org/3/i2195e/i2195e03.pdf>
- iv) International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) at <http://www.ifpri.org/publications>