

Guideline for Policy Briefs

How to write a policy brief: getting started, writing your policy brief, and best practices

The Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development (r4d programme) comprises inter- and transdisciplinary research partnerships between researchers at Swiss institutions and their partners in developing countries. Policy briefs represent one way in which r4d researchers can disseminate their research findings, approaches and tools to stakeholders from policy and practice. This short guide provides advice for writing policy briefs, some best practices and links to additional sources.

Some 79% of policy makers say that policy briefs are their preferred tool for accessing information.
Photo: European Commission

WHAT IS A POLICY BRIEF?

- A policy brief presents findings and recommendations from a research project to a predefined policy audience.
- Short, attractive texts (less than 1500 words or 4 pages) written in jargon free, clear language, accessible to non-specialist audiences.
- Focus on one specific, topical issue and provide balanced policy advice or advocacy, based on new evidence and insights.
- Infographics can provide supporting facts which convince the reader while maps can also provide background on location and context.
- An interesting title catches attention while also including key words most relevant to the topic.
- Links to sources and evidence are provided to support the argument.



What do you want to communicate?

Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research projects, given their focus on real world challenges, make a large number of findings which are relevant to non-academic stakeholders, such as policy makers. However, there are many obstacles to the uptake of scientific information by policy makers and it is important to keep these in mind. Policy makers are under time pressure to deliver policies with rapid and visible impacts. This means that recommendations must be actionable and preferably connected to specific moments in time in the policy-making cycle.

In deciding on the focus of your policy brief, it is important to identify the key debates and policy arenas to which your findings and recommendations will contribute. And then decide on one key issue which has the potential to have the greatest impact.

There are two main types of policy briefs but, depending on the focus of your research, either may be applicable.

- Objective briefs contribute to the debate by providing neutral analysis and related recommendations. These tend to be used by think tanks, such as the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), both experts in using policy briefs to communicate to policy audiences.
- Advocacy briefs promote a new approach to a specific issue because previous approaches are not consistent with new evidence. Civil society organizations, such as for example Oxfam International, are more likely to use this approach to point out injustice and inequalities.

And to whom?

After determining your main message, it is important to decide on your audience. Are they local, national or global policy makers? Are they within bilateral agencies, such as the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), or multi-lateral organizations like the European Commission? Your target audience may be even broader – for example, a wide range of policy makers dealing with a specific issue.

Putting pen to paper

When you have identified the main issue you aim to address and the main target audiences, it is important to apply a spotlight to this issue by:

- Focusing on a single topic
- Defining your purpose
- Identify salient points that support the aim
- Distil points to essential information
- Limit yourself to 1,500 words

In the case of the r4d policy briefs, there is a clear format with character counts to aid you in your efforts [here](#).

A policy brief must be easy to read. Structure is important but it is also important to ensure that everything the reader really needs to know is on the first page. The structure should be as follows:

- An interesting title which is both intriguing and informative.
- An executive summary on the first page which sums up the entire brief.
- Although the text should aim to be jargon free, recognizable buzzwords can emphasize the relevance of the research to policy to draw the policy actor's attention to read on.
- In the introduction, explain the policy issue and why it is particularly important or current. Put the research into context. Here a map might be useful to highlight the location.
- Present the research/project findings in an accessible way for a non-specialist. Explain the methodology used to reach the results, such as a synthesis of existing research/literature or new research data. A policy actor wants to see robust results that are repeatable or corroborated by others. Here infographics can be very useful.
- The conclusions should reinforce the key message to take away from the policy brief.
- Try and make only one feasible policy recommendation. If you are making more than one recommendation, differentiate them clearly e.g. in bullet points and keep it to three maximum.
- Use references sparingly and suggest a few additional sources at the end to give either background or more detail to the policy issue.
- Provide authorship information – including a photograph – and detail any funding used for the research. This should also include the author's current positions and contact details.
- A policy brief should also include an institutional disclaimer.

Best practices

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has much experience of producing policy briefs, having produced more than 1000 to date, and has also done a considerable amount of research on how to communicate to policy audiences (see for example Jones and Walsh 2008). With SciDevNet, ODI has also looked at how policy makers perceive policy briefs:



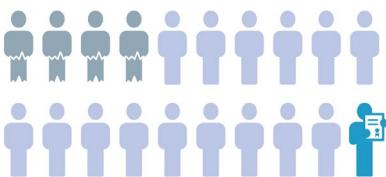
There are 1.8 billion young people aged 15–29 in the world today



Young people in Africa and Asia and the Pacific will comprise 77% of the world's youth labour force by 2030



600 million new jobs are needed over the next 15 years to maintain current employment rates



19 out of 20 young workers in developing countries are in informal employment
Nearly 1 in 5 live below the extreme poverty rate

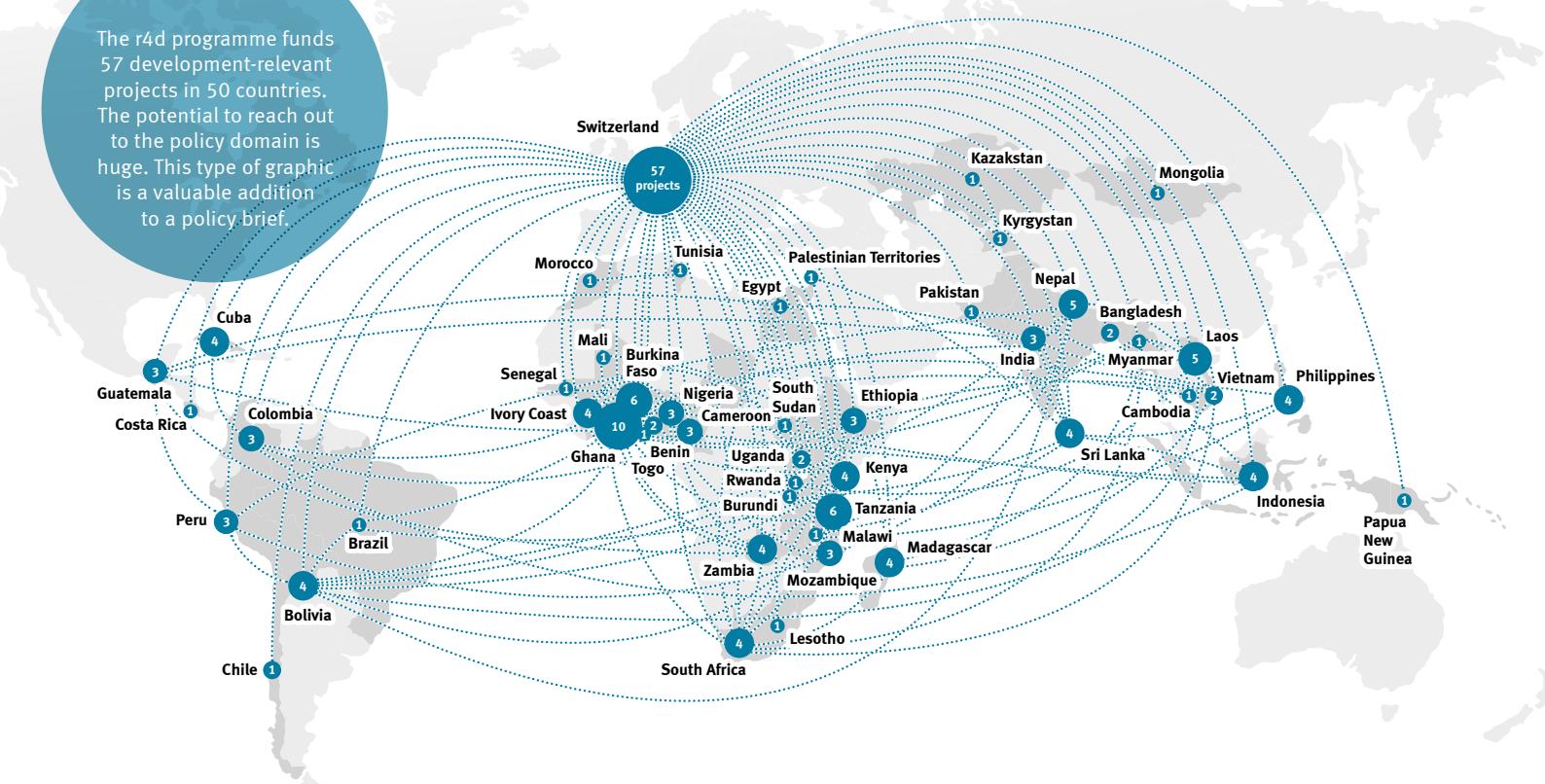


A young person is 3 times more likely than an adult to be unemployed



Only 5% of youth entrepreneurs actually succeed

The r4d programme funds 57 development-relevant projects in 50 countries. The potential to reach out to the policy domain is huge. This type of graphic is a valuable addition to a policy brief.



'Policy briefs provide valuable information in an understandable format...when I read policy briefs I look for the quality of the information, adequate tables and figures, and connection of the evidence to policy processes.' (Sub-national level policy maker, Brazil)

'Briefs should be inspiring. They should be practical, realistic and relevant to the local contexts.' (President of local-level government body, Kerala State, India)

Some recent examples of ODI policy briefs include:

[How DFID can better manage complexity in development programming](#) by Samuel Sharp, Craig Valters and Brendan Whitty, May 2019

[Creating opportunities for young women in Ghana's construction sector: what works](#) by Alexandra Löwe, April 2019

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) also makes use of short briefings, having almost 400 to

date, which can be seen as best practices in terms of length (4 pages), style and use of infographics. A full list can be found [here](#).

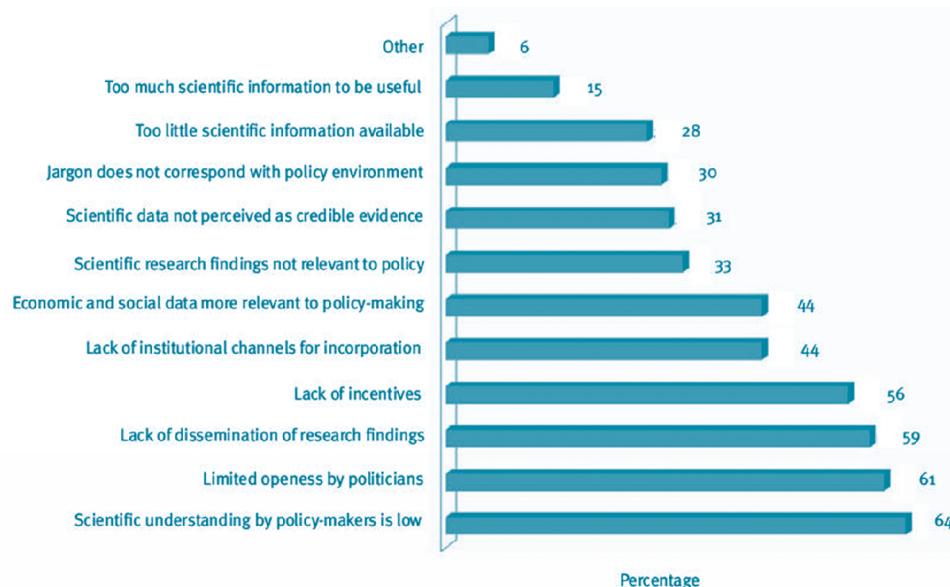
Some recent examples include:

[Using forest ecosystems to build resilience in Chile](#) by Hannah Reid and Karen Podvin, April 2019

[From monitoring goals to systems-informed evaluation: insights from SDG14](#) by Zenda Ofir and others, April 2019

Dissemination

The challenge of producing a policy brief does not conclude after a good brief has been developed. Dissemination to the right policy audiences is also an important part of the job. This should involve putting the policy brief on your website, mailing key policy makers, but also using social media, such as Twitter, to communicate about the briefing. LinkedIn is also a good place to promote your policy brief with large groups such as [Devex](#), for example, having almost 90,000 members. Development-related groups can be found on the groups search field [here](#).



YOUR HOMEWORK BEFORE THE WEBINAR

1. Provide a draft working title of the policy brief (max. 80 characters including spaces).
2. What is the anticipated relevance in the policy context, including links to existing policies and specific policy documents (3 sentences)?
3. Please describe the specific target groups in as much detail as possible incl. URLs of institutions/organisations/policy fora etc. and potential individuals from the target groups (3–5 sentences).
4. Please describe the distribution of your policy brief until now, in case of an earlier version.
5. Find one policy brief which you see as an example as the type of policy brief that you are planning to write. This can include examples from other policy briefs or from the ones included in this guideline.
6. How are you planning to disseminate this policy brief? Please list three channels which you plan to use.

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References and further reading

Jones and Walsh (2008), ‘Policy Briefs as a communication tool for development research’, ODI
www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/594.pdf

Lavis, J.N., G. Permanand, A.D Oxman, S. Lewin and A. Fretheim (2009) Preparing and using policy briefs to support evidence-informed policy-making. *Health Research Policy and Systems* 2009, 7(Suppl 1):S13.
<https://health-policy-systems.biomedcentral.com/track/pdf/10.1186/1478-4505-7-S1-S13>

Masset, E., M. Gaarder, P. Beynon & C. Chapoy (2013) What is the impact of a policy brief? Results of an experiment in research dissemination, *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 5:1, 50-63, DOI: [10.1080/19439342.2012.759257](https://doi.org/10.1080/19439342.2012.759257)

SOURCES AND OTHER INTERESTING LINKS

International Development Research Center (IDRC) guide to designing and writing a policy brief:
<https://www.idrc.ca/sites/default/files/idrcpolicybrieftoolkit.pdf>

Research to Action collection on Policy Briefs:
<https://www.researchtoaction.org/howto/policy-briefs-2/>

On how to plan, write and communicate with policy briefs
<https://www.researchtoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/PBWeekLauraFCfinal.pdf>

Oxfam International’s 249 Briefing Notes:
<https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications>

ODI’s publications, including policy briefs:
<https://www.odi.org/publications>

NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development, Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) guide to writing policy briefs:
<https://knowledge4food.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/nwo-wotro-writing-policy-brief.pdf>

DISCLAIMER

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