

# How to communicate research for policy influence

## Toolkit N°2

## Policy briefs

*This toolkit is part of a series addressing different aspects and tools on research communication for policy influence.*

### What is a policy brief?

This toolkit introduces the definition and features of policy briefs, one of the tools most widely used by policy research institutes (hereinafter, PRI) to influence public policies.

**Policy briefs are short documents that refer to a public problem associated with governability.** They are addressed to people related to the government who may know little or nothing about the topic, but need to have a general background quickly in order to express an opinion or make decisions. **Policy briefs summarize a large amount of complex detail, so the reader can easily understand the heart of the issue,** its background, the players (“stakeholders”) involved and any recommendations or educated guesses about the future of the issue. These briefs can include action proposals (recommendations) or they can summarize what is known about the specific topic or problem, and the possible ways to approach it (analysis)<sup>1</sup>.

**The policy brief is a kind of report designed to facilitate the use of research or evidence in the public policy process.** This tool comes from the premise that policy makers move in restricted contexts for decision making

—especially regarding time— and that is why this aims to bring them, in a brief and simple manner, evidence and action recommendations to help them in the decision making process.

### Scope of a policy brief

First, it is necessary to stress that a policy brief is usually part of a **longer and more complex influence** process, that is to say, it is one of the many tools that researchers have to promote their research among public policy makers. Usually, it is advisable to combine its preparation with other forms of research communications, such as panels in events or personal meetings with government officials related to the issue. Also, the brief must be accompanied by different communication actions, such as an effective coverage in the press, to give the problem addressed in the brief and the perspectives proposed in it more visibility in the political agenda.

In order to choose the communication actions that accompany the policy brief, and thus increase its influence potential, it is very important that the author be clear about the possible policy influence objectives of such brief<sup>2</sup>:

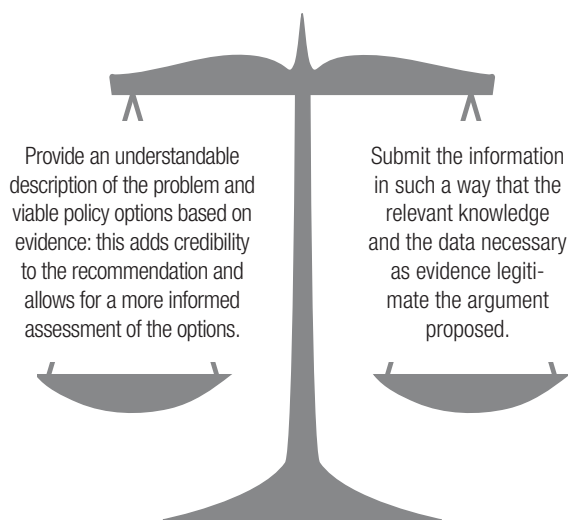
1 Idea inspired by *The Policy Issue Brief 1* ([https://www.courses.psu.edu/hpa/hpa301\\_fre1/IB-Instructions\\_fa02.PDF](https://www.courses.psu.edu/hpa/hpa301_fre1/IB-Instructions_fa02.PDF))

2 CIPPEC, based on Jones, N.; and Walsh, C. (2008). *Policy briefs as a communication tool for development research*. Consulted on July 16th, 2012, by Overseas Development Institute: <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/594.pdf>

1. Define and explain an urgent political issue included in the present discussion.
2. Schematize the largest amount of viable policy options that could address the issue being discussed and its possible consequences.
3. Produce information about the possible outcome of the implementation of certain courses of action by means of a research evidence analysis.
4. Recommend a policy alternative and state the reasons why it is better than other alternatives.

## Characteristics of policy briefs

It is a practical rather than academic document (Young and Mc Quinn, 2002; own translation), for this reason it is essential to find the balance between two competing needs before beginning to prepare it:



This tension tends to disappear as the author gains experience. Also, the **collaboration of a communication team that knows the policy players better and the most appropriate way to address them will allow the strengthening of the scope and influence of the brief.**

To reflect on how to contribute to the solution of the problem helps to solve this tension: some channels will be chosen if the brief aims to analyze or state the existing arguments on the topic, and some other channels will be chosen if it aims to influence the decision makers through specific recommendations.

### Who is our audience?

There are many tools to contribute to the identification of players that make up the policy arena to which the brief is addressed: the key players' analysis, the social media analysis and the Alignment and Interest Matrix, among others. (More information about this matrix in the Weaving global networks handbook. Weyrauch, 2010:88) The "obvious" audiences are not necessarily the most strategic ones. To have a well-defined influence objective will help to better aim the players' analysis focus and reveal the most relevant players due to their importance, power of influence and interest on the topic.

### Analysis or recommendation policy brief?

The type of policy brief will depend on the specific **context** in which the problem to solve develops<sup>3</sup>, on the **policy influence objectives** established for the research itself<sup>4</sup>, on the **messages** to be spread, on the audiences

3 More information: Weyrauch, V. and Echt, L. (2011) How to design a policy influence plan? *Toolkit No.2: The public policy making process. Analyze the context for an effective influence planning.* Buenos Aires. CIPPEC. Available at [www.vippal.cippec.org](http://www.vippal.cippec.org)

4 More information Weyrauch, V.; and Echt, L. (2011) How to design a policy influence plan? *Toolkit No. 4: What we desire. Define influence objectives.* Buenos Aires. CIPPEC. Available at [www.vippal.cippec.org](http://www.vippal.cippec.org)

to which they are addressed<sup>5</sup> and on the rest of the **communication activities** planned. For this reason it is important to establish what **type of change**<sup>6</sup> is to be promoted in the short, mid or long term. By answering these questions, we will be able to define the policy influence objective and the type of change sought:

- In which stage/s of the public policy process do we seek to influence through the policy brief?
- What key players are or were entailed in each stage of the process?
- Was a problem to be solved clearly identified? Is it possible to summarize it in a few lines?
- Is there enough evidence to back up the relevance of the problem stated and the possible ways to address it?

The **analysis briefs** are used to provide the decision makers with a summary of the diagnosis and the principal positions on the problem addressed.

The **recommendation briefs** summarize the core of the problem to make a recommendation on public policy, either their own or distinguished.

## What is an effective argument?

Once the questions proposed in the previous section have been answered, we will be in the right position to define the policy brief

argumentation strategy. This argumentation must be based on practical or theoretical knowledge, and be effective.

An effective argument is one that establishes clearly **what** is meant to say and to whom. In order to be credible, the argument must be consistent and coherent. It can be built on values, metaphors, experiences, narratives or comparisons. It is important that the argumentation be short and easy to understand.

When building the central argument to be conveyed, the following questions may serve as a useful guidance:

- Why is this issue important or urgent? What is the problem?
- What information is necessary to understand the issue? What should the players involved in it know?
- How does the analysis made and/or the proposal submitted influence the different players?
- What stances are they expected to take regarding the analyzed situation and/or the proposal submitted?

With the answers to these questions, the main argument will be clear, and it will be the time to sit down and write the policy brief. In order to do that, the following section suggests the typical characteristics of each of the components of a policy brief.

## Which are the components of a policy brief?

The possible components of a policy brief with its corresponding key features are listed below:

5 More information: Weyrauch, V.; and Echt, L. (2011) How to design a policy influence plan? *Toolkit No. 5: Who we should work with. Define players and alliances*. Buenos Aires. CIPPEC. Available at [www.vippal.cippe.org](http://www.vippal.cippe.org)

6 More information: Weyrauch, V.; and Echt, L. (2011). How to design a policy influence plan? *Toolkit No.2: The public policy making process. Analyze the context for an effective influence planning*. Buenos Aires. CIPPEC. Available at [www.vippal.cippe.org](http://www.vippal.cippe.org)

<p><b>Attractive title</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>It must describe the content of the brief concisely and attractively (for example, describe the issue in question and its relevance).</b></li> <li>• It has to be as clear as possible.</li> <li>• Concise.</li> <li>• Interesting and relevant for potential readers.</li> <li>• For example: <i>National Electoral Code Reform: comments to the bill passed by the Chamber of Deputies</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Executive summary</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>It is the synthesis of the entire brief.</b></li> <li>• It must allow the reader to have a complete and fair understanding of the content of the entire brief.</li> <li>• It is an opportunity to attract the interest of the audience.</li> <li>• It is advisable to make use of executive summaries from other areas and organizations to improve the quality of your own executive summaries.</li> <li>• It is very useful for it to clearly reflect the objectives of the brief, define and describe the problem addressed, and concisely evaluate the alternatives and submit the main conclusions or recommendations.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Introduction</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>It introduces the content of the brief.</b></li> <li>• It is the opening of the brief and contributes to enhance the readers' interest.</li> <li>• It can include both the context and nature of the public policy problem and the basic background of the research carried out.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Context</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>It “establishes the political scene” on which the brief is based.</b></li> <li>• It can center on the direct context of the problem analyzed, that is, focus on the national, provincial or local levels.</li> <li>• The situation can be described in relation to those affected by the problem being analyzed.</li> <li>• Another approach to the context description can be given by the stage of public policies on which the analysis or the recommendation is centered.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Definition of the problem</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>It is the specific topic on which the brief is based.</b></li> <li>• It is essential to convince the reader that there is an urgent problem and that this document will provide possible solutions.</li> <li>• It identifies, defines and explains the nature of the problem.</li> <li>• It is necessary to show that the issue requires government action; so it is important to relate the problem and solutions to the political landscape of the time.</li> <li>• A theoretical framework should be developed consistent with the public policy options that will be introduced later in the brief.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Options and evidence</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>It schematizes, evaluates and compares the possible policy alternatives.</b></li> <li>• It provides convincing arguments to the alternative chosen.</li> <li>• It is focused on reporting the decision promoted.</li> <li>• It builds a clear and consistent bond between the conclusions and recommendation elements included subsequently in the brief.</li> </ul>

<b>Proposal / Recommendation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>It reveals the author’s position and is in line with the definition of the problem.</b></li> <li>• It can adopt the form of conclusions, recommendations and/or implications.</li> <li>• This is a key part of the document because it is what the reader is looking for.</li> <li>• It includes a concise synthesis of the most relevant findings based on evidence.</li> <li>• A set of recommendations can be included to introduce the practical steps necessary to implement a policy option.</li> <li>• The feasibility of the proposal must be shown and it must determine who should promote the initiative.</li> <li>• It clearly describes what should happen afterwards.</li> <li>• It can be presented in a scalable manner (short, mid, and long term).</li> </ul>
<b>Implications</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>To what type of change of policy or actions is the recommendation aimed to?</b></li> <li>• It is possible to use evidence from other provinces, countries or regions.</li> <li>• They are less direct than recommendations.</li> <li>• They are very useful when the guidance was not requested or is not welcome.</li> </ul>

Source: CIPPEC, based on Mendizabal and Weyrauch (2011).

## Format and design of policy briefs

**Content design is a key factor to attract the readers and improve their access to the information provided in the policy brief:** it is desirable that the organization develop an institutional format that allows identification by means of an array of colors and other editorial decisions to provide for the creation of an identity.

- Pictures, first-person statements, diagrams and statistics help to visualize the problem.
- Highlighting the core information or key points of the policy brief and creating clear and concise titles help to the understanding of the brief.
- Graphs and tables are useful to show real data or comparisons, but it is necessary to keep a balance between aesthetics and legibility. Also, it is important to find original ways to present the evidence to strengthen the policy brief content, especially for those who do not have technical knowledge about the topic, so that the information has a high degree of recollection.

- Text boxes are used, for example, to include statements that relate the reader to the central topic of the policy brief. They are very useful when in the main body of the brief there is only space to refer to the topic in general.
- As for bullets, they are useful to emphasize a list of features or elements. They help to organize information and make it easier to remember it.

It is also possible to include information outside the text box (where the content of the publication is included): these side bars, for example, are useful to include contact, legal or formal information –such as the project description, organization or publication– that is not part of the argumentation but is necessary for the institution.

## Some criteria to bear in mind

- **Understandable:** use a clear and simple language (avoid academic or technical jargon) and provide well-explained and easy to follow arguments, even for a reader who is not an expert in the field.

- **Concise:** in general, the policy brief audiences have little time and are reluctant to read thoroughly. So, it is very common (and desirable) that information be summarized in an average extension of six to twelve pages (between 5000 and 20000 characters without spaces).
- **Accessible:** the use of the published brief should be made easier, for example, by means of a clear and intuitive arrangement (titles, subtitles, charts, graphs).
- **Practical and viable:** a policy brief is a tool oriented to decision makers in order to encourage action. It must provide arguments about the current situation, what needs to be improved and the possible solutions through viable recommendations.
- **Focused:** every aspect of the brief (from the message to its design) must be strategically aligned to reach the influence objective planned. For example, the public policy proposal must be based on what is known about the problem, provide information unknown to the audience and be written in a language that reveals the author's and/or institution's values.
- **Professional, but not academic:** in general, policy brief readers are not interested in the research or the analysis of the procedures to generate evidence. But in fact they are very interested in knowing the author's perspective on the problem and the possible solutions proposed based on their research.
- **Based on evidence:** it must stand out for providing a reasonable argument based on research that proves the existence of the problem and supports the consequences of adopting one or several solutions.
- **Visual appeal:** it must attract the audience attention and help to develop a favorable image of the organization. Colors, pictures, slogans, illustrative statements, logos, etc., enhance attributes such as dependability, professionalism, innovation, etc.



## To continue exploring!

### Recommendations from CIPPEC

In Spanish:

- Mendizabal, E., and Correa Aste, N. (2011). *Vínculos entre conocimiento y política: el rol de la investigación en el debate público en América Latina*. Lima, Perú. CIES and Universidad del Pacífico. Available at: <http://www.odi.org.uk>
- Moro, J. (2000). Problemas de agenda y problemas de investigación. En C. Escolar, *Topografías de la investigación. Métodos, espacios y prácticas profesionales*. Buenos Aires, Argentina. EUDEBA. Available at: <http://biblioteca.universia.net>
- Jones, N.; y Walsh, C. (2008). *Policy briefs as a communication tool for development research*. Overseas Development Institute. Available at: <http://www.odi.org.uk>
- Young, E; and Quinn, L. (2002). *Writing Effective Public Policy Papers: A Guide to Policy Advisers in Central and Eastern Europe*. Open Society Institute. Available at: <http://lgi.osi.hu>

In English:

- Weyrauch, V. and Díaz Langou, G. (2010). *Sanas expectativas: de las evaluaciones de impacto al cambio en las políticas*. Buenos Aires, Argentina. CIPPEC and 3ie. Available at: <http://vippal.cippec.org>
- Knezovich, J. (2012). *Should think tanks write policy briefs? What an RCT can tell us?* Available at: [www.onthinktanks.org](http://www.onthinktanks.org)
- International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) (2010). *Information Literacy for Policy Makers and Influencers*. Available at: <http://www.inasp.info>

## Next Toolkit: Engage with media

If you want to quote this document:  
Weyrauch, V., and D'Agostino, J. (2012).  
How to communicate research for policy influence.  
*Toolkit No.2: Policy briefs*. Buenos Aires. CIPPEC

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