



**biodiversa**

The ERA-NET promoting European research on biodiversity

# Annex 1

Practical method note 4  
How to write a policy brief



# PRACTICAL METHOD NOTE 4

## HOW TO WRITE A POLICY BRIEF

A policy brief can take many forms, and there is no single 'correct' way to create one. There are some simple guidelines that can help increase the impact of the brief and adapt it to the needs of your audience.

There is often an assumption that all that is needed to have an impact on policy is a good policy brief. However, it is what is done with the good policy brief that matters, as well as how good it is. An effective policy brief may never reach the policy-maker who can make a difference. Very often, policy makers feel more comfortable listening to advice from researchers they have an existing relationship with and know that they can trust. Investing time in developing relationships with people in the policy community most closely aligned with the research is of crucial importance. The policy brief can then become a visual aid for meetings or seminars attended by those interested in the research. Passing on the policy brief after a face-face discussion gives greater credibility to the project and enables decision makers to interrogate the evidence base behind the work if necessary.

Here are a few tips for writing an effective policy brief:

- \* **Identify the audience:** there are many types of policy audience that can be targeted. To target policy audiences, the policy brief must be understood easily and quickly by non-specialists. Typical audiences for policy briefs may include:
  - \* Members of specific Government agencies, who are likely to have a relatively focussed interest in the topic, with a relatively high degree of technical competence.
  - \* Policy analysts within Government departments who advise Ministers. These people should be targeted in a focused manner and briefs should include some technical detail.
- \* Politicians and Government Ministers are often generalists who are unlikely to have a high degree of technical competence in the area of research, and will be interested in links to wider issues of political significance.
- \* **Set a target length:**
  - \* Policy briefs for specialist policy audiences should ideally be between 6-12 pages long, or 2000-3000 words, but it is best for briefs to be concise.
  - \* Policy briefs for more generalist policy audiences need to be much shorter – typically 1-2 pages maximum. They may however link to a longer version or online resources.
- \* **Identify key messages:** rather than just taking the key points from the conclusion of a published paper, it is necessary to think about what the key messages of the research are *from the perspective of policy makers*. To do this, familiarity with on-going policy debates and upcoming policy processes and decisions is required, as well as existing policy frameworks. Most Government departments have email lists to alert people about forthcoming consultation exercises, utilising this communication avenue can be a useful way to find out about new policy developments in advance. Alternatively, try to establish relationships with relevant policy advisors, where possible arranging face-to-face meetings about the research. Rather than simply telling your audience about the research, it is useful to take time to find out what they're working on, and how they think the research might be able to make a contribution. If efforts are made to do this at the start



of a project and to work with members of the policy community to adapt research to their needs, then it should be possible to identify key messages that are likely to be of interest to the policy community.

- \* **Be specific and practical:** try to formulate specific recommendations or actions that could arise from the research findings, and avoid vague, theoretical or methodological conclusions. Avoid dictatorial language such as telling a policy maker they ‘must’ or ‘need’ to change policy as they will view the brief as a lobbying document; impartiality can be important to gain credibility. In making recommendations or actions, be sure to clarify the benefits of these in a way that will be relevant to the chosen policy-maker audience.
- \* **Think beyond the facts:** don’t just present statistics and facts – think about what they mean for policy makers, put them in context and interpret them for readers.
- \* **Headline key information:** make it easy to see what the key messages and recommendations are at a quick glance. For example, consider headlining the most important key message on the front page and provide an information ‘box’ with recommendations on the back page.
- \* **Don’t overstretch the findings:** there can be a temptation to try to make concrete recommendations for the purpose of a policy brief that link only tenuously to the research findings. If the findings are not of relevance to the policy community, it is better to leave the policy brief until there is something more substantive to say.
- \* **Be precise:** avoid terms such as ‘large’ and ‘mostly’ without qualification (e.g. offer easy to understand

statistical evidence and cite sources of information). Present findings as precisely as possible so that decision-makers have access to key evidence that they can use to build upon. Discuss interpretation of results in terms of ‘certainty’ to help policy makers understand what is known and what is not known about the subject, but try to avoid statistics jargon.

- \* **Get help with the language:** try to avoid technical jargon wherever possible, even when writing for more specialist members of the policy community. Where jargon is unavoidable, make sure terms are defined using simple language. Of course, distinguishing what is, and what is not, jargon can be difficult for researchers. So it is important to get someone who is not familiar with the field to proof-read the document. If affordable, employing a science writer can be an effective way of getting messages across, with relatively little effort. Alternatively the ‘Up Goer Six’ text editor ([www.splasho.com/upgoer6/](http://www.splasho.com/upgoer6/)) colour codes words according to how commonly they are used, to help identify jargon and simplify wording. If writing in a second language, for example for EU policy-makers, then try to have the brief edited by somebody who speaks the language or languages that are required.
- \* **Don’t put in too much:** ‘less is more’ in policy briefs so as not to overwhelm the readership with peripheral details – edit the text down, and then edit it down again, cutting it back to only the most important points. Make sure there is plenty of white space and photos. People are far more likely to read something that looks attractive and easy to digest than something that is presented in very small font sizes, is cramped, and not illustrated. Use sub-headings to break up any blocks of text so people can easily skim through the key points if they are in a hurry. If using graphics, make sure they are simple, labelled clearly with simple explanations and have short, meaningful titles; simply

pastoring a graph from a journal publication into a policy briefing will probably not work.

✳ **Get feedback:** from colleagues and if possible from contacts in the policy community, especially advisers who have plenty of experience of writing briefs for the national policy-makers who they work with. Developing policy briefs in collaboration with the people who are likely to read them can be a particularly effective way of tailoring language and messages to their needs.

✳ **Get the timing right:** find out if there are key policy processes, decisions, events or debates coming up that the policy brief could be linked to, or launched at. Listen to the news and be responsive to opportunities to adapt findings to the latest breaking news story in the research field (as long as the link is clear).

✳ **Provide links:** make sure those who read the policy brief can get in touch with the researchers, and can easily get access to the evidence that underpins the arguments in the policy brief, such as via a 'further reading' section at the end of the brief with links to a project website.

BiodivERsA produces policy briefs that are designed with EU and national policy makers in mind – they are available to download from the BiodivERsA website<sup>1</sup> and provide a useful template.

1 <http://www.biodiversa.org/501>

## CASE STUDY

### EXPERIENCES FROM BIODIVERSITY RESEARCH

#### THE BENEFITS OF CO-WRITING A POLICY BRIEF WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Policy briefs have been regularly used within the INVALUABLE project (see [Appendix 1](#) of the *Handbook*) to disseminate research findings discussing and proposing new market-based instruments for biodiversity conservation. In advance of the conference of the parties for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in 2012, the researchers wrote a policy brief in partnership with a government agency responsible for the strategy on biodiversity in France. This had the advantage of increasing the visibility of INVALUABLE at the conference; however researchers felt that much earlier collaboration would have resulted in a more synthesised and insightful policy brief and suggested beginning the writing process six months prior to such an event is necessary.

Policy brief written in collaboration with INVALUABLE project stakeholders

http://www.iddri.org/Publications/

Annex 1 of “*The BiodivERsA Stakeholder Engagement Handbook*. BiodivERsA, Paris (108 pp). © BiodivERsA, Paris, 2014”

The BiodivERsA Stakeholder Engagement Handbook is available online at <http://www.biodiversa.org/577>



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