



Developing policy briefs as a knowledge engagement tool to mobilize research towards implementation or translate knowledge to action

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Policy briefs are powerful tools that help to narrow down complex issues into action-oriented summaries, intended to inform, engage and provide clear options for moving forward. This paper provides a quick overview of their usefulness, some examples of policy briefs, a step-by-step guide on the development of one, and a description of a policy brief's various parts. Prior to discussing the five steps, some examples of policy briefs on different topics and by different organizations are also discussed to help the reader visualize how various requirements can influence the development and end result of this process. The intended audience of this paper includes both those looking to create policy briefs themselves or those who wish to better engage with written ones.

Keywords: knowledge engagement, knowledge translation, tools, policy brief, research.

INTRODUCTION

Policies are developed by policy or decision-makers within government or non-governmental institutions in response to an issue of their interest where actions are needed to be planned¹. For example, if one wishes to address a social issue, they can develop policies to guide actions with the purpose of addressing a specific component of the issue. In needing to compare different choices of policies, a policy brief can be very helpful in informing the various partners, stakeholders, and decision-makers about the issue.

WHAT IS A POLICY BRIEF?

Policy briefs are powerful tools to communicate the synopsis of current understandings of an issue to various policy actors. Policy briefs can be used to change an existing policy or to raise awareness

of an issue that requires a solution². Policy briefs are especially useful in emergency situations that require a quick response in a short period of time. Some other common names used for policy briefs are 'technical brief', 'research summary' and 'briefing note'³. Table 1 presents various definitions of a policy brief.

Source	Definition
International Centre for Policy Advocacy ⁴	"... policy document produced to support an advocacy campaign with the intention to engage and persuade informed, non-specialist audiences."
Research to Action ²	"It presents research or project findings to policy actors, highlighting the relevance of the specific research to policy and offering recommendations for change."
International Development Research Centre ⁵	"A medium for exploring an issue and distilling lessons learned from the research."

Table 1. Various definitions of a Policy Brief

The International Centre for Policy Advocacy highlights some key points (Figure 1) to remember while constructing a policy brief⁴:

- It should be **engaging** with the target audience
- It should be **relevant and focused** on the issue
- It **should not contain details** of the research procedures since is not an academic paper
- It must be **short, concise and ideally limited** to no more than four pages – a very common litmus test is the 'breakfast test' which requires that an ideal policy brief be read and understood in the length of time it takes to drink a coffee over breakfast
- It must be **easy to read and understand**. This requires the use of simple non-academic but professional language and sentences

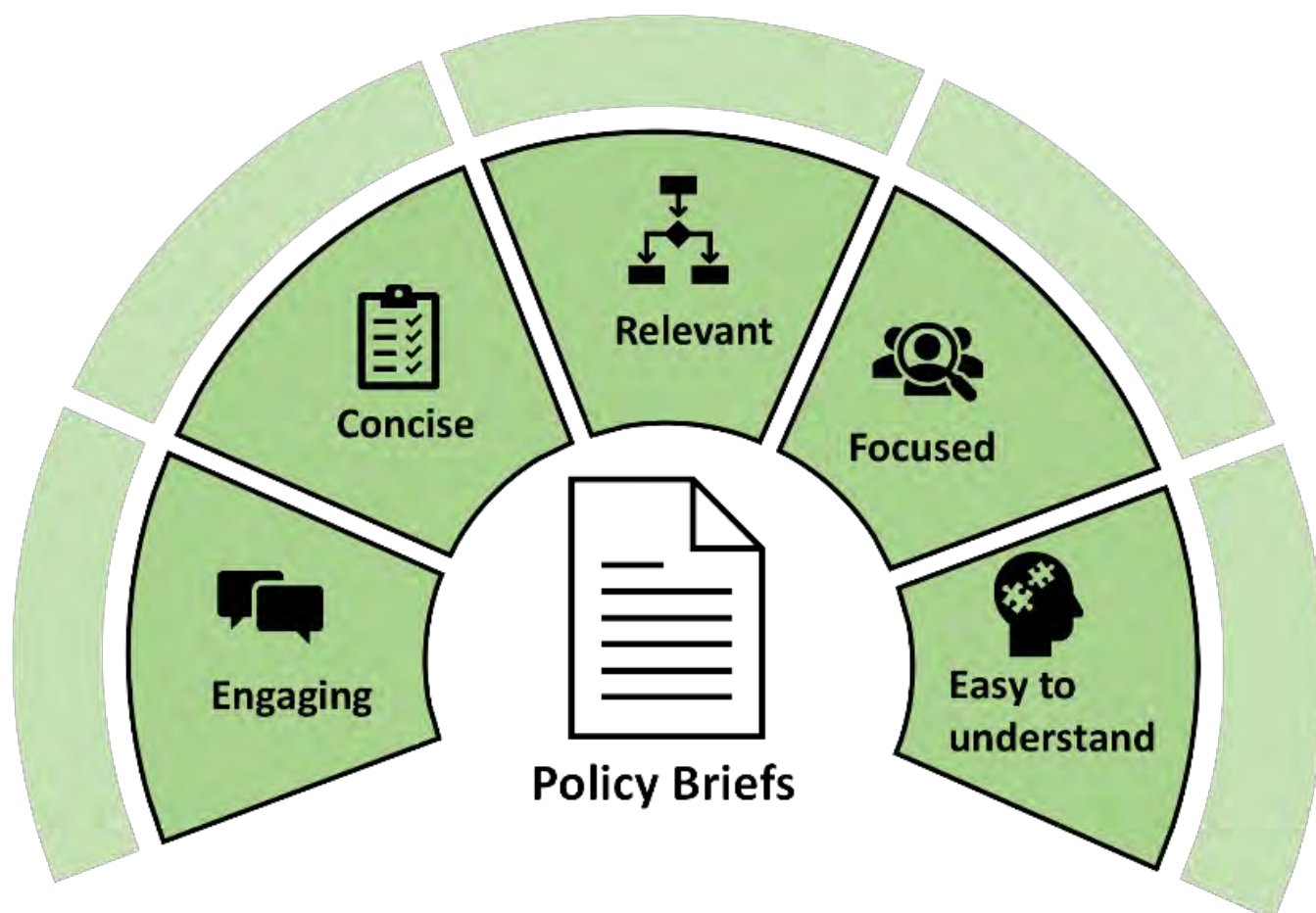


Figure 1. Key points of a Policy Brief

WHY ARE POLICY BRIEFS EFFECTIVE?

In order to understand how policy briefs can yield positive results, it will be good to understand where policy briefs conceptually fit into the 'Theory of Change' framework⁶. Figure 2 is a simplified illustration of the Theory of Change for a policy brief. According to this theory, when a policy actor is presented with policy recommendations grounded in evidence-based research, their level of knowledge about a particular topic increase. This encourages policy actors to engage with both the topic and the researcher, which translates to changes in policy or programme, that ultimately improve quality of life. Newer programs and policies further feed into newer research and refined recommendations.

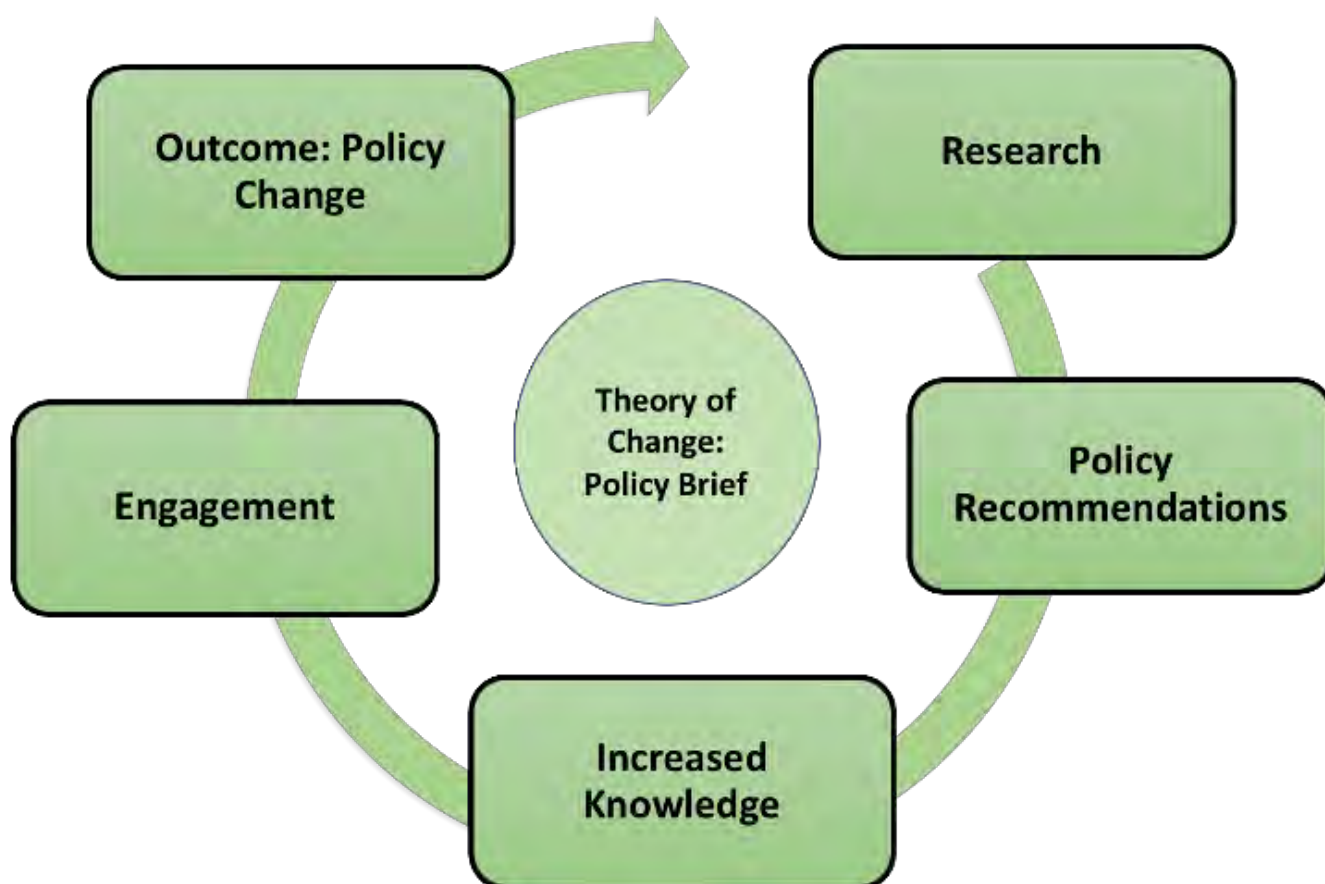


Figure 2. Simplified illustration of the Theory of Change for a Policy Brief

Understanding this theory can create synergies between policy actors and researchers and help “design more realistic goals, clarify accountabilities and establish a common understanding of the strategies to be used to achieve the goals”⁷. An effective policy decision needs to be based on firm research evidence. However, there are a number of other factors which influence policy creation besides evidence⁸. These include the judgement, experience and expertise, pragmatics and contingencies, resources, policy content, habits, values and traditions of policymakers, as well as influence from lobbyist and pressure groups⁹.

EXAMPLES OF POLICY BRIEFS

Policy briefs can be used for a wide range of issues. Following are four examples of policy briefs. Press et al. presented a policy brief titled: “Trauma Informed Approaches and the Opioid Epidemic.”¹⁰ The purpose of this brief was to highlight the opioid epidemic in light of evidence showing a link between trauma and adverse childhood experience to opioid addiction in adult life. The paper highlights primary and secondary prevention strategies along with policy implications.

Holt-Lunstad issued a policy brief titled “Social Isolation and Health”¹¹, stating social isolation as a contributor to morbidity and mortality in the population. Along with providing substantial evidence supporting the claim, various recommendations are provided which include increasing awareness, education and the role different sectors can play to effectively address the issue and minimize detrimental health consequences.

Skye wrote a policy brief titled “Colonialism of the Curve: Indigenous Communities and Bad Covid

Data”¹² for the Yellowhead Institute. This brief was a short summary of the issues that exist around the reporting of COVID-19 cases among First Nations, Metis and Inuit people by Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), along with providing provincial/territorial gaps between a number of cases reported by the federal government and the Yellowhead institute team, which used non-governmental data sources.

Lastly, a policy brief that was submitted to the Federal government by Wilson and Stinchcombe for the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health (HESA) was titled “Policy legacies and forgotten histories: Health impacts on LGBTQ2 older adults”¹³. As this brief outlines, although there has been some progress on health outcomes and subsequent policy initiatives of the aging population in Canada, one subgroup - the aging LGBTQ2 population - has been largely neglected, as seen through a lack of both health outcomes data and policy initiatives focusing on this population. This brief provides seven recommendations to provincial/territorial governments on policy initiatives that can be initiated, after looking at the little data that exists.

HOW IS A POLICY BRIEF DEVELOPED?

In order to develop an effective policy brief, it is crucial to follow a systematic approach like the one summarized in Figure 3. These steps are flexible and can be adjusted according to the circumstances. For example, Step 2 “Engage Key Stakeholders and Partners” can either be decided earlier on or decided at the end.

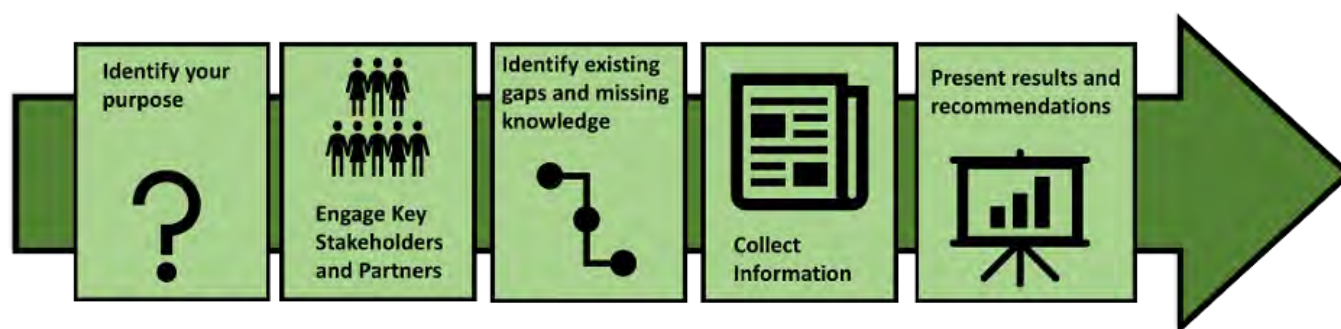


Figure 3. Policy brief development process

Step 1: Identify Purpose: In order to understand why and when a policy brief is needed, a few key steps should be considered as highlighted in Figure 4. The issue or the problem can be identified by asking simple questions, for example, “What do you think is the cause of problem X?” These questions can be brainstormed alone, with peers or discussed in a group. Coming up with questions can help develop a deeper understanding of the issue and ultimately lead to a focused and more efficient research process.

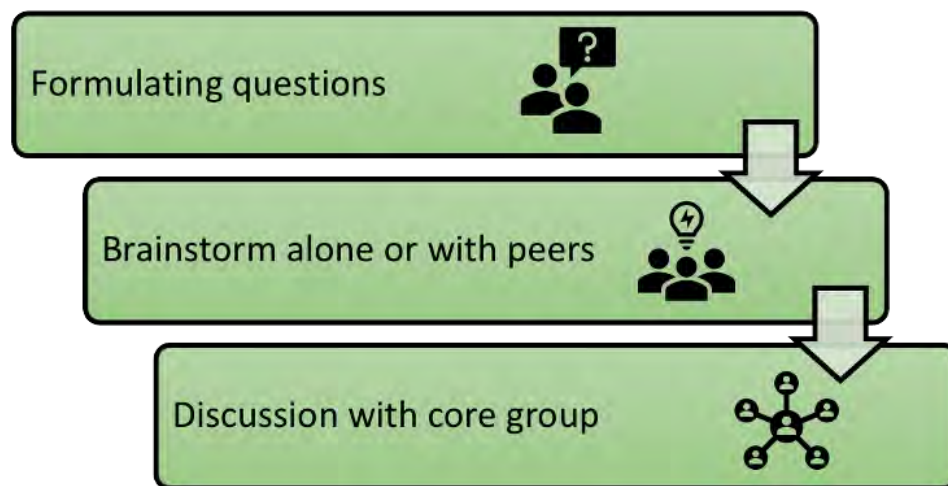


Figure 4. Define the purpose of the Policy Brief (Step 1)

Step 2: Partner and Stakeholder Engagement: Figure 5 provides an approach to identifying the target audience for the policy brief. Decisions related to public policy are rarely in the hands of a single person or group; in fact, it involves players working in diverse sectors¹⁴. Stakeholders in public policy can include people with a shared interest in the issue or people impacted by the issue such as members of parliament, politicians, heads of the state, advisors to government, lobbyists, trade unions, advocates and civil servants². Stakeholders also may include formal and informal leaders working at a local, regional or national level. The target audience, also known as policy actors, have access to, or are involved in, the policymaking process.

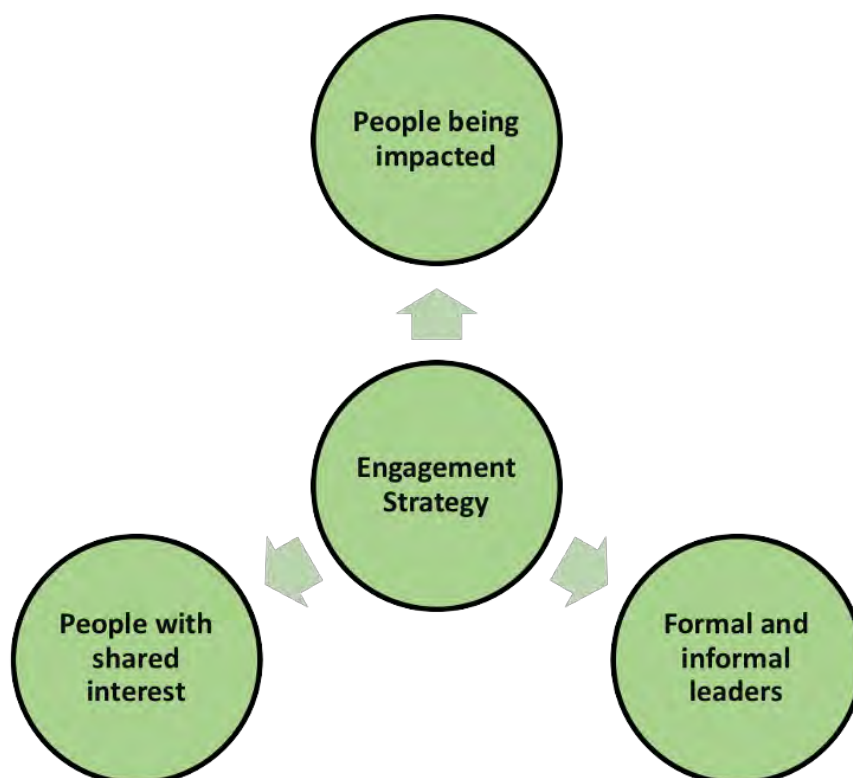


Figure 5. Identify stakeholders to develop engagement strategy (Step 2)

Step 3: Identify Gaps in Knowledge: Answering “What are you trying to find out?” involves identifying gaps in existing policies or identifying recent health or social crises. This step requires looking at external sources for inspiration or ideas. According to the SURE guide¹⁵, to ensure that the policy brief will be read, some pointers to consider while choosing an issue are summarized in Figure 6:

1. Importance: Selecting important issues especially related to health promotion, inequities, barriers to accessing basic needs are more likely to raise the interest of policy actors.
2. Availability of options: As we will later see, one of the components of a policy brief document includes “Policy Options”. Therefore, the topic or issue selected should have at least two feasible options because policy actors are genuinely interested in the options for the issue.
3. Opportunity for change: Preparing a brief and advocating for an issue is useful only if visible and measurable change is possible in the policy process.

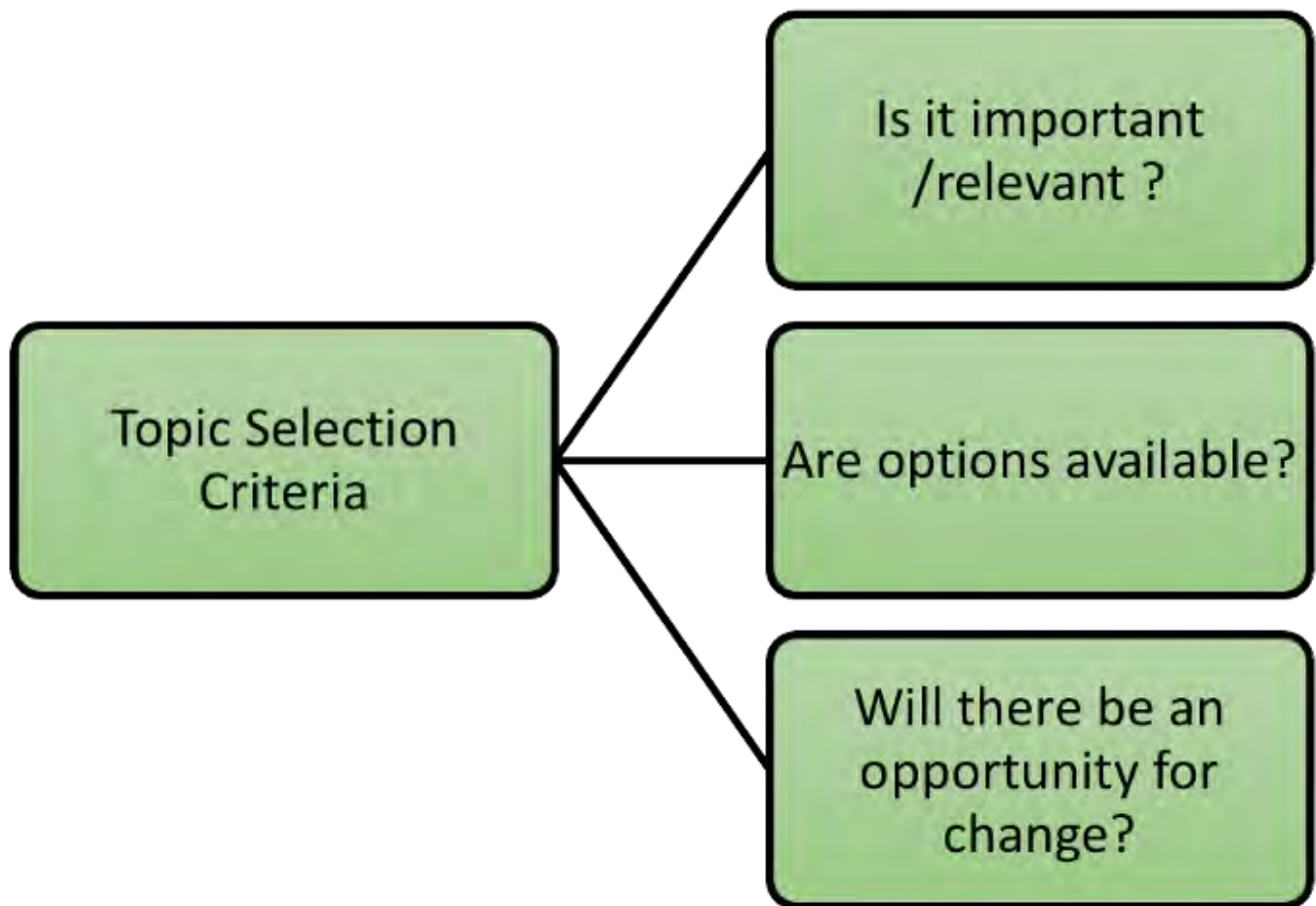


Figure 6. Create overarching guiding questions for the policy brief (Step 3)

Step 4: Collect and Process Information We are living in an era where a vast amount of information is easily available and accessible. Extensive research needs to be conducted and information needs to be filtered so as to suggest the best course of action and prevent suboptimal decisions by policymakers. Step 4 involves extensive research using multiple sources: literature, online, media, conducting polls/surveys or using results of previous surveys, case studies and even active community engagement. Sources of evidence are summarized in Figure 7.

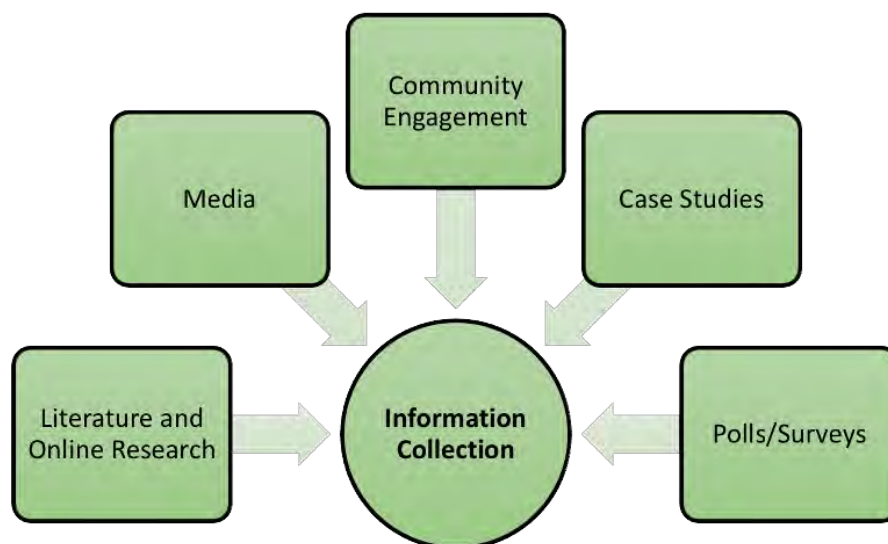


Figure 7. Sources of evidence for Policy Brief (Step 4)

Step 5: Present Evidence Providing evidence-based information and clearly stated recommendations is the most critical part of the writing process. Information should be presented in a concise way, and jargon should be avoided to ensure that the policy brief is easily understood by a diverse audience. Once a policy brief is ready, there are a number of ways to spread the message. Some of the suggestions include emailing or mailing the policy brief to policy actors, presenting the policy brief in relevant meetings or conferences, creating a video and uploading on social media, or even preparing the policy brief's message as an information sheet or brochure². This process of dissemination has been highlighted in Figure 8.

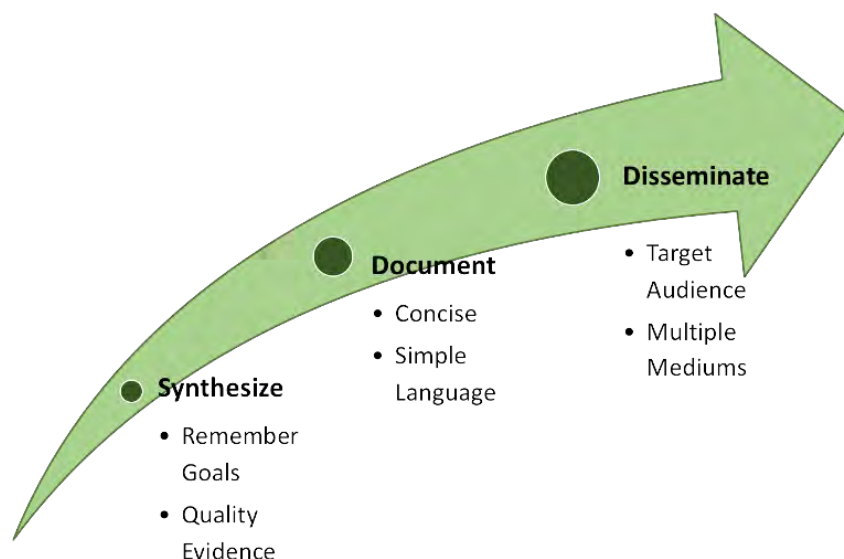


Figure 8. Dissemination of Policy Brief (Step 5)

PARTS OF A POLICY BRIEF

There are a number of formats for writing a policy brief. Irrespective of the format used, it should be logical and easy to follow. Most organizations or individuals develop a template for their briefs to ensure their message is consistent and clearly visible. Before submitting the brief, it must be proofread for any spelling or grammatical errors, unnecessary or missing information, etc. There are no hard and fast rules for how large a policy brief can be. We have seen policy briefs ranging from 2/3 pages to 8-10 pages. The decision is probably made based on the topic context and the target audience. Generally, policy briefs contain heading & subheadings and they are composed in short sections. Some important headings are shown in Figure 9.

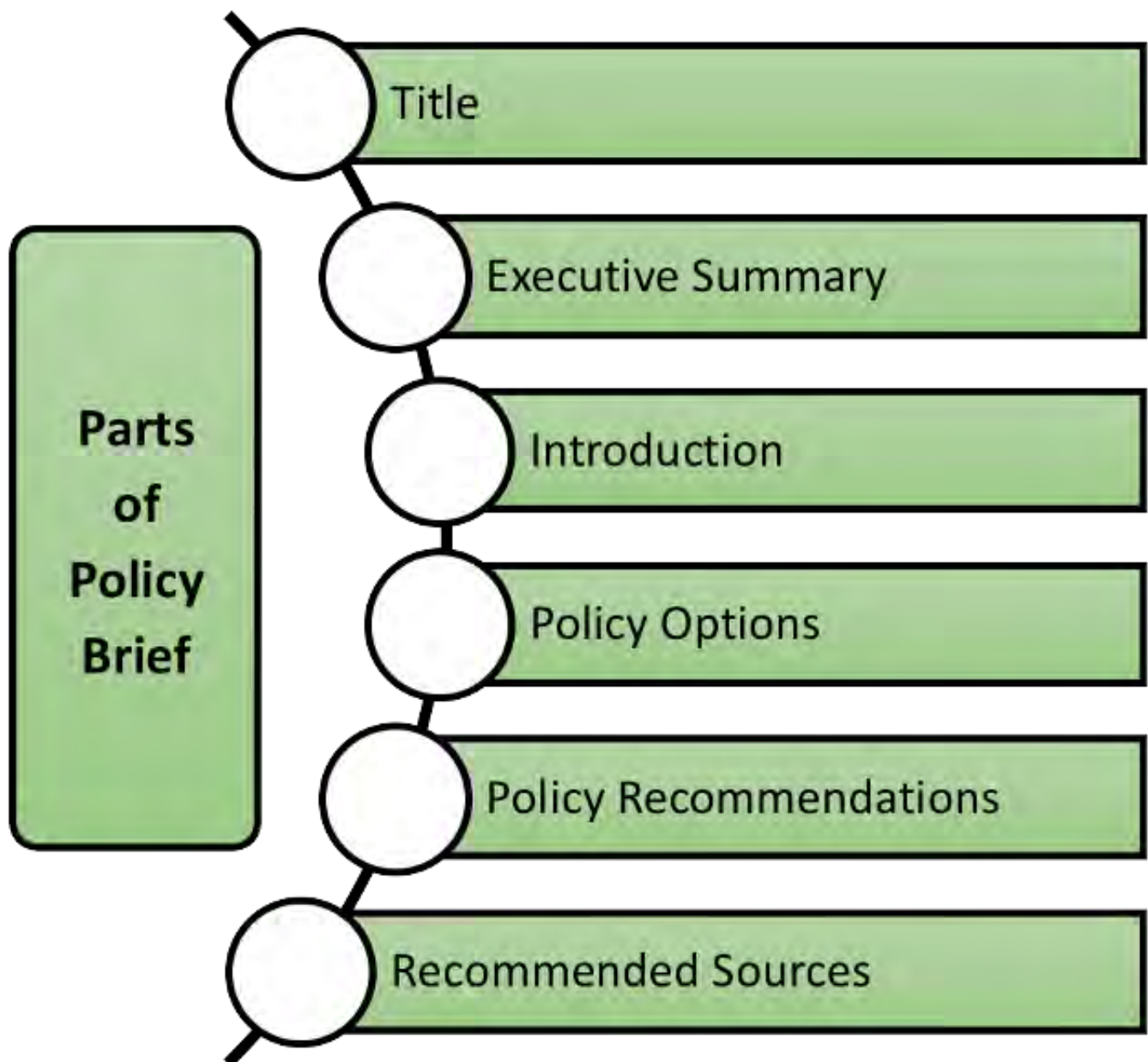


Figure 9. General components of Policy Brief

Title:The title is an important opening element. It should be short, to the point, and catchy so as to spark the interest of and 'hook' the readers. It can either reflect the urgency of the situation or communicate the need for change.

Executive Summary:An executive summary is an overview of the policy brief. Its main points are often presented as bullet points instead of as a paragraph. The goal is to get the important parts of the policy brief across to the policymakers quickly and to convince them to further read the document. Often, the executive summary is written last.

Introduction:The introduction section clearly establishes the relevance of the issue and contains the following elements:

- A statement clearly stating the issue/problem
- The magnitude, importance, and context of the problem
- The target population affected
- Possible causes of the issue or gaps/shortcomings in the current policy
- Long term consequences if the issue is not addressed

Sidebar or boxes can also be added to highlight important information or provide examples relevant to the issue being addressed.

Policy Options: In this section, options or alternatives are provided to the problem mentioned in the above section. These options are based on facts, evidence-based, and ideally should be supported by graphs (bar charts, line graphs and pie chart), figures or tables. This makes the information visually appealing, easy to digest and remember, and can have a strong impact on the reader. Citations from reputable sources are important to ensuring the credibility of the information provided. Additionally, adding a photograph with a caption strengthens the message and makes the brief document more attractive.

Policy Recommendations: Based on the evidence presented in the previous section, the policy recommendations section provides details of how policy options can be implemented in a practical and feasible way. It also involves stating potential barriers to implementing policy options and suggests strategies to overcome those barriers. A useful acronym to use while formulating policy recommendations is 'SMARTER' – are the recommendations **S**pecific to the issue? Are they **M** easurable? Are they **A**chievable? Are they **R**elevant to the issue? Have they been **T**imely suggested? Are they (cost) **E**ffective and **R**ealistic?

Recommended Sources: The recommended sources section provides a list of sources referenced in the policy brief which enhance transparency and establishes the credibility of the findings. It is also best practice to provide a few other useful sources and publications for further readings.

CONCLUSION

Table 2 summarizes the advantages and challenges of a policy brief. Over the years, policy briefs have gained interest as the document of choice among policymakers due to its concise and condensed format. It is important to remember that writing and presenting a policy brief is just the first step towards a critical policy change, the outcome of which can impact many lives. Successful implementation of the recommendations in a policy brief requires further discussion, mediation and collaboration of various policy actors with researchers. A policy brief, in fact, serves as a spark to instigate change for the better.

Advantages
Evidence of a proposed solution is presented in a condensed and user-friendly manner
Distinct format and template ensure standardization
An important knowledge mobilization tool towards engagement of policy related stakeholders. Also, a simplified version can be used with all level of stakeholders.
Challenges
Sometimes there is need to develop different policy briefs for different readers or stakeholders
The distinct condensed format may be a barrier to detailing research findings and methodology.

Table 2. Advantages and Challenges of using a Policy Brief

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