

SURE Guides for Preparing and Using Evidence-Based Policy Briefs

1. Getting started

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The SURE Collaboration

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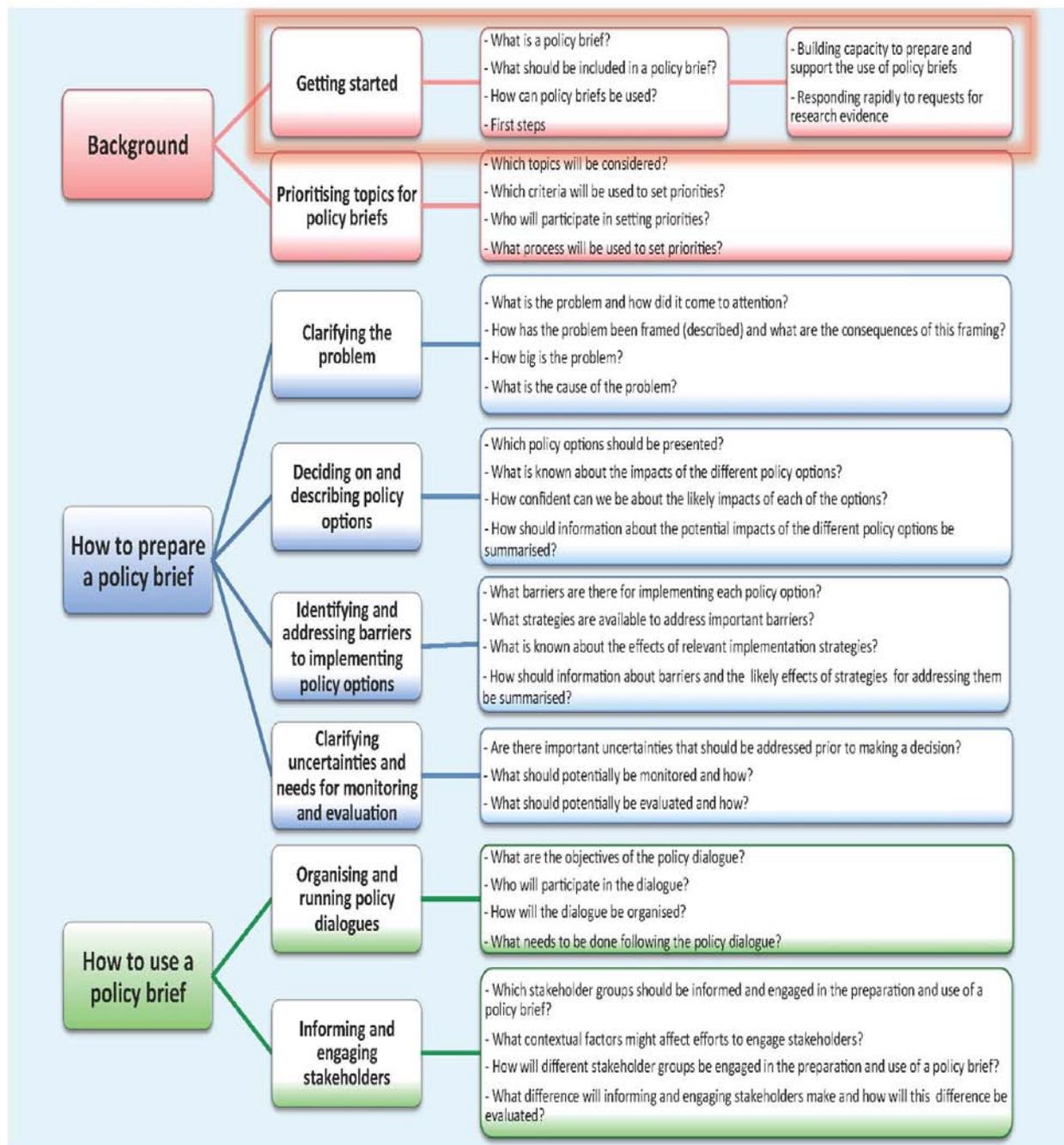


SURE is a collaborative project that builds on and supports the Evidence-Informed Policy Network (EVIPNet) in Africa and the Regional East African Community Health (REACH) Policy Initiative. The project involves teams of researchers and policymakers in seven African countries and is supported by research teams in three European countries and Canada. SURE is funded by the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme (Grant agreement no 222881).

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1. Getting started



Summary

In this guide we describe what an 'evidence-based policy brief' is, what should be included in such a document, the ways in which it can be used, and the first steps required when preparing one.

- [What is a policy brief?](#)
- [What should be included in a policy brief?](#)
- [How can policy briefs be used?](#)
- [First steps](#)

This guide also includes additional resources for developing a plan to build the capacity needed to prepare and support the use of policy briefs. Resources are also provided for the preparation of rapid responses for policymakers in circumstances in which they may need research evidence but there is insufficient time to prepare a policy brief, or in instances when there is no need to prepare one.

- [Building capacity to prepare and support the use of policy briefs](#)
- [Responding rapidly to requests for research evidence](#)

It may be helpful to familiarise yourself with all the guides in this series before getting started.

Evaluating the guides

As you use the guides, please complete the [evaluation form](#) included in the '[Additional resources](#)' section so that the guide can be improved.

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What is a policy brief?

The term 'policy brief' is used widely to describe a range of different types of documents. For example:

The World Health Organization (WHO) applies this term to a range of documents it produces (see [Box 1.1](#) below). However, it lacks a standard definition of the term 'policy brief'.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) describes its policy briefs as "clear, concise summaries of country economic surveys and today's global policy challenges."⁶

Brookings Policy Briefs are described as "short and informative analyses on some of the nation's most pressing domestic and foreign policy challenges that bring background and recommendations to policymakers, journalists and the general public."⁷

And the Center for Policy Research Policy Briefs are essays on current public policy issues in ageing, health, income security, metropolitan studies, and related research done by or on behalf of the Center for Policy Research at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.⁸

Box 1.1: Examples of WHO policy briefs

A WHO health workforce policy brief describes an issue, and proposes ways to address it, based on experience drawn from different country settings. The briefs are designed to encourage adaptation to local needs and local languages.¹

WHR05 policy briefs are summaries of between 2-4 pages that, in conjunction with the 2005 World Health Report “Make Every Mother And Child Count”, are intended to structure dialogue with policy and opinion makers on moving towards universal access to care for mothers, newborns and children. These policy briefs focus on programmatic development and overcoming the main system constraints to scaling up.²

Evidence for Action (E4A) policy briefs are summaries of evidence. In some cases they are recommendations that can be used by policy makers for advocacy purposes, for example, regarding the importance of interventions included in a comprehensive package of interventions for HIV/AIDS and injecting drug users.³

Policy briefs by the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies emphasise the key policy lessons from Observatory studies in a brief and concise format. They are easy to read and useful to busy policymakers.⁴

Joint Health Evidence Network (HEN) – Observatory Policy Briefs are commissioned reports that cover and synthesise available research evidence and deliver a message on potential policy options for good practice. HEN–Observatory briefs consist of: key messages delivered in bullet point format; an executive summary; and a core section providing the evidence and substance of the report itself.⁵

Policy briefs are sometimes viewed as advocacy documents. For example: “The policy brief is a document which **outlines the rationale for choosing a particular policy alternative or course of action in a current policy debate**. It is commonly produced in response to a request directly from a decision-maker or within an organisation that intends to advocate for the position detailed in the brief. Depending on the role of the writer or organisation producing the document, the brief may only provide a targeted discussion of the current alternatives without arguing for a particular one. On the other end of the scale, the brief may focus directly on providing an argument for the adoption of a particular alternative. Nevertheless for any case, as any policy debate is a marketplace of competing ideas, **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.**”⁹

What is common to all the examples listed above is that policy briefs are concise and brief, and that they are targeted at policymakers (although not necessarily only policymakers). However, the content and format varies widely, they may or may not address a problem, may or may not present policy options, may or may not advocate specific options, and may or may not be based on (or refer to) research evidence.

The term 'policy brief', as used in these guides, refers to an "evidence-based policy brief" or an ***"evidence brief for policy", which brings together global research evidence (from systematic reviews) and local evidence to inform deliberations about health policies and programmes.*** The policy briefs in these guides begin with a description of a policy problem, then summarise the best available evidence to clarify the size and nature of the problem, describe the likely impacts of key options for addressing the problem, and inform considerations about potential barriers to implementing the options and strategies for addressing these barriers.¹⁰ [Examples of SURE policy briefs](#) can be found in [the libraries](#) at the end of these guides.

[Workshop materials](#) and a [presentation](#) introducing evidence informed policy-making and [workshop materials](#) and a [presentation](#) giving an introduction to policy briefs, are also provided.

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What should be included in a policy brief?

A policy brief, as described above, should include the following:

- **Key messages** – one page of bullet points summarising the most important take-home messages from the policy brief, including the problem description, options for addressing the problem and implementation considerations
- **Executive summary** – a summary (e.g. three pages) of each section of the policy brief (the problem, policy options, and implementation considerations) that can be read quickly by someone who may not have time to read the full report
- **Full report** – (e.g. 25 pages) including:
 - **The problem** – a description of the problem, including how it came to attention and the reason for preparing the policy brief at this time, any important considerations about how the problem has been framed, the size of the problem, and factors underlying the problem
 - **Policy options** – a description of two or more viable options for addressing the problem, including a description, the likely impacts, and a consideration of impacts on equity, costs and cost-effectiveness, as well as issues related to monitoring and evaluation
 - **Implementation considerations** – a description of important barriers to implementing the options as well as of implementation strategies, including the advantages and disadvantages of each relevant implementation strategy
 - **References and appendices**, including an appendix describing how the policy brief was prepared

A [detailed policy brief outline](#), a [template for a full SURE policy brief report](#), a [template for an executive summary](#), and the [SUPPORT Tool for preparing and using policy briefs](#) are all provided in the '[Additional resources](#)' section later in this document.

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How can policy briefs be used?

SURE policy briefs are intended to inform deliberations and decisions about health policies and programmes. They may also help to add issues to health policy agendas, or contribute to policy change. The ways in which they can be used to do this are described in detail in the last two guides in this SURE series: [7. Organising and running policy dialogues](#) and [8. Informing and engaging stakeholders](#). Policy dialogues and other ways of informing, consulting or involving policymakers and stakeholders can also be used during the preparation of a policy brief, as well as after a policy brief is completed.

- **Policy dialogues**

A policy dialogue - a structured discussion of a policy brief with policymakers and stakeholders - can contribute to the development of evidence-informed health policies. This can be achieved by helping to clarify the problem and viable solutions, and by developing a shared understanding of these; by contributing to developing and implementing effective policies; and by contributing to good governance and democracy. A policy brief can be used as the starting point for discussions within a policy dialogue. An example of a policy dialogue is provided in [Box 1.2](#) below.

Box 1.2: Example of a policy dialogue

Task Shifting in Maternal and Child Healthcare: A Policy Brief for Uganda

This policy brief was discussed as a background document at two national policy dialogue meetings in Kampala. Participants at these meetings included: members of parliament, policy makers, health managers, researchers, and representatives from civil society, professional organisations, the media and development partners. The purpose of these dialogues was to conduct a structured discussion of the policy brief on task shifting.

Many participants who came to the deliberations held strong opinions, both for and against the options described in the policy brief. The policy brief and dialogues had little, if any, observable impacts on these opinions. Moderation of the proceedings was also a challenge. One lesson learned was that a strong, neutral moderator with a clear understanding of the process is crucial to achieving the objectives of a policy dialogue.

Despite these challenges, participants in the meetings evaluated the policy brief and dialogues positively. Following this, the next step in the dialogue process included presenting the policy brief to senior management during a regular meeting held by the Ministry of Health. Additional steps included the further dissemination of the policy brief, and the engagement of interested participants in future activities in Uganda aimed at improving the use of research evidence in health systems decisions.

- **Informing and engaging stakeholders**

Other ways of informing, consulting or involving policymakers and stakeholders can be used both during and after the preparation of a policy brief. For example, it may sometimes be desirable to consult or involve stakeholders in clarifying the problem that is being addressed by a policy brief. Similarly, it may be desirable to consult or involve stakeholders in identifying and selecting viable policy options for inclusion in a policy brief, or in identifying barriers to implementing policy options and implementation strategies. Therefore, when preparing and using a policy brief, it is worthwhile early in the process to consider plans for policy dialogues and other ways of informing and engaging stakeholders.

Box 1.3: Ways of informing, consulting and involving stakeholders

Stakeholders can be:

- **Informed** – by disseminating a policy brief to them; by using tailored information derived from a policy brief targeted at key audiences; through the mass media, and through face-to-face presentations
- **Consulted** – (both in preparing and using policy briefs) by soliciting written comments; by holding question and answer sessions; by providing open telephone lines that stakeholders can call; and through interviews, focus groups, surveys and public hearings
- **Involved** – (both in preparing and using policy briefs) by including them in discussions, workshops, working groups; deliberative processes (such as policy dialogues or targeted briefings designed to reach specific audiences); advisory groups or task forces (that may discuss aspects of a policy brief over a series of meetings rather than at a single dialogue); or consensus processes (where the aim is to reach agreement on a policy or on issues that will feed into the development or implementation of a policy)

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First steps and the policy brief writing team

The first step in preparing a policy brief is to agree on the problem that needs to be addressed. Because resources for producing (and using) policy briefs are limited, it is important to decide which particular issues, from among all the potential problems to be addressed, it would be best to examine. As discussed in the [next guide](#) in this series, the use of explicit criteria and systematic processes is more likely to ensure well-informed decisions about which issues to prioritise, than implicit criteria and non-systematic processes.

After deciding on the focus of a policy brief, the next step is then to build a timeline for the preparation of a policy brief and a work plan. Often the timeline will be determined by external factors, such as the policy development processes being used by policymakers. Consequently, policy brief work plans may need to be adapted according to pre-determined timelines, if they are to be relevant and useful. Typically, regardless of such external factors, the timeline of a policy brief must be within weeks or months, particularly if the brief is intended to address a prioritised issue. This is important given the dynamic nature of priorities.

It is also important to consider who is responsible for the preparation, support and use of a policy brief. This requires an understanding of the context (including policy processes and the health system) and the different competencies needed. These include, for example, the ability to analyse health systems problems, to find and appraise research evidence, to write well, to communicate with policymakers and other stakeholders, and to organise and facilitate policy dialogues. It is important to ensure that the team responsible for the brief includes people with the necessary knowledge and skills, or that the team has access to such support from others. Equally important, the team (and especially the lead person) must ensure that they have adequate time to work on the policy brief. A substantial amount of time may be required, particularly by those without previous experience, and this time should be blocked off from other work activities.

Policy brief writing teams are generally small, with one or two individuals having primary responsibility for driving the brief forward, and doing most of the writing. A policy brief writing team might include:

- * One lead person who coordinates the preparation of the policy brief and does most of the writing
- * A person representing policymakers
- * A person representing researchers (possibly the lead person)
- * A person representing relevant health professionals
- * A person representing relevant NGOs, or civil society

A [worksheet for preparing a work plan for a policy brief](#) – including key tasks, who is responsible and target dates – is included in the ‘[Additional resources](#)’ section. [Examples of completed worksheets for work plans, and time lines for policy briefs done in Zambia and Uganda](#) are also provided. Setting target dates for key tasks, being clear about who is responsible, and identifying who will provide the support needed can help to ensure that a policy brief is completed within a suitable timeframe and is then used to inform decisions. However, it should be recognised that the process is iterative. So, for example, while it is important that the problem is clarified before deciding on the options, the

consideration of options to address the problem may lead to further clarifications of the problem during the process itself.

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Building capacity to prepare and support the use of policy briefs

Preparing and using policy briefs requires a range of knowledge and skills, including the ability to clarify problems, to decide on – and describe – the options to address the problem, to identify and address barriers to implementing the options, and to organise and run policy dialogues. Typically these competencies need to be developed over a period of years. A wide skill-set is also needed when writing a policy brief. It is helpful if the team working on a policy brief is able to incorporate as many of these core skills as possible. This skill-set should not be restrictive and may include, for example, experience in a relevant research background, health systems or health economics, or knowledge about how to search the literature.

A [worksheet for developing a plan to build the capacity](#) needed to prepare and support the use of policy briefs is available in '[Additional resources](#)'. This worksheet can be used to obtain an overview of the skills required, who is responsible, the training they need, and plans for how to obtain such training. Securing this capacity will help to ensure that policy briefs are produced and used more effectively and efficiently. An [example](#) of a completed worksheet is also included in '[Additional resources](#)'. Completing the entire worksheet at once, as this example illustrates, is not necessary. Rather, it may be more useful to periodically update plans for capacity building as skills are developed further, new people recruited, and the need for additional training is identified.

When developing a capacity building plan, consideration should be given to a range of strategies for building capacity, including:

- Workshops (on site or elsewhere)
- Traineeships and exchanges
- Online support and discussion lists
- The recruitment of staff with specialised skills or relevant backgrounds
- The use of consultants with specific types of expertise

It may also be helpful for an organisation, such as a health department or a unit supporting evidence-informed health policymaking, to broadly assess its capacity to recognise needs for research evidence, acquire evidence when needed, critically appraise it, use it to inform decisions, and measure the impacts of the policies and programmes implemented. A [SUPPORT Tool for improving how an organisation supports the use of research evidence to inform policymaking](#) is available in the '[Additional resources](#)' section. Included in this SUPPORT tool is a worksheet to facilitate [self-assessment of organisational capacity to support the use of research evidence to inform decisions](#). [Workshop materials](#) and a PowerPoint [presentation](#) on improving how an organisation supports the use of research evidence to inform decisions are also provided.

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Responding rapidly to requests for research evidence

Decision makers are sometimes faced with issues that need responses within hours or days. In these circumstances, a policy brief may not be needed, or preparing a policy brief may not be possible. Nonetheless, to ensure that their responses are well-informed, decision makers need rapid access to research evidence that has been both appraised and contextualised. The skills needed to do this are similar to those needed during the preparation of policy briefs. These include being able to clarify the question being asked, finding relevant research (ideally a systematic review), and being able to reliably summarise and communicate the research.

A set of [resources for preparing rapid responses](#) to policymakers in need of research evidence are included in the '[Additional resources](#)' section. These resources include a [template](#) for rapid responses, as well as examples (one on [obstetric fistula repair](#) and another on [WHO guidelines for infant feeding in the context of HIV](#)) for:

- Clarifying a question
- Searching, critically appraising and summarising evidence
- Summarising and reporting responses to questions

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Additional resources

[Evaluation form](#)

A form for evaluating the SURE Guides

[Glossary](#)

A glossary of terms used in the guides

[Detailed outline for a policy brief](#)

A suggested outline for an evidence-based policy brief

[Template for full report of a policy brief](#)

A template for preparing a user-friendly policy brief

[Template for an executive summary of a policy brief](#)

A template for preparing a user-friendly executive summary

[SUPPORT Tool for preparing and using policy briefs](#)

Questions to consider when assessing or preparing a policy brief

[Work plan for a policy brief](#)

A worksheet for preparing a work plan for a policy brief

[Example of completed work plans for policy briefs](#)

Example of a completed worksheet for preparing work plans for policy briefs in Zambia and Uganda

[Worksheet for developing a capacity building plan](#)

A worksheet for preparing a plan for developing the capacity that is needed to prepare and support the use of policy briefs

[Example of a capacity building plan](#)

Example of a completed worksheet for preparing a plan for developing the capacity that is needed to prepare and support the use of policy briefs

[SUPPORT Tool for improving how your organisation supports the use of research evidence](#)

Questions to consider for improving how an organisation supports the use of research evidence to inform policymaking. A self assessment tool for assessing organisational capacity to support the use of research evidence is included.

[SURE Rapid Response Guides](#)

A guide for preparing a rapid response

[SURE Rapid Response Template](#)

A template for documenting a rapid response

[Examples of rapid response documents produced in Uganda using the SURE Rapid Response Guides](#)

[Workshop materials and presentations](#)

Guides for workshops and PowerPoint presentations on

- *What is evidence-informed policymaking?*
- *Improving how your organisation supports the use of research evidence*
- *Introduction to policy briefs*

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