

HOW TO GUIDE

How to produce policy briefs: Experiences from Lagos State

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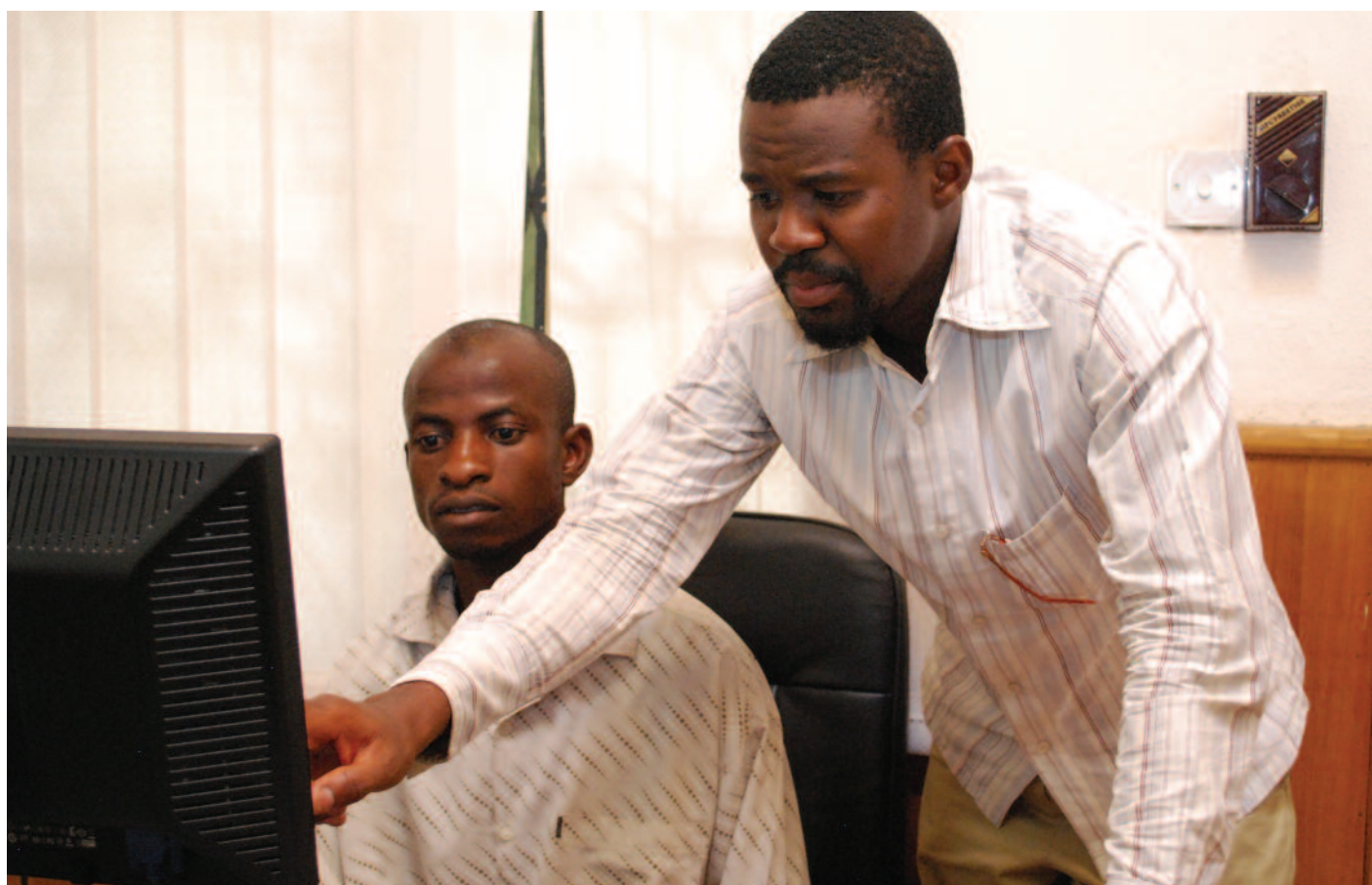
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Abbreviations and acronyms

DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
EIU	Economic Intelligence Unit
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
INMASP	Integrated nutrient management to attain sustainable productivity
MDAs	Ministries, Departments and Agencies
MEPB	Ministry of Economic Planning and Budget
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
SPARC	State Partnership for Accountability, Responsiveness and Capability
SAS	Statistical Analysis Systems
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SURE-P	Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme



Section 1. Introduction

Background

Since 2009, the State Partnership for Accountability, Responsiveness and Capability (SPARC), a UK Department for International Development (DFID) funded programme has been providing support to the Lagos State Ministry of Economic Planning and Budget (MEPB) as a central agency. A major focus of the support is to ensure that MEPB develops policies and strategies that are based on research, data, and statistical evidence.

SPARC helps Nigerian leaders and government workers change governance for the better and supports governance reforms already underway in the country. SPARC works in ten states (Anambra, Enugu, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Lagos, Niger, Yobe and Zamfara). It focuses on three aspects of 'good governance':

- Developing responsive policies and strategies that respect the rights of citizens
- Managing public finances well
- Managing public services to improve service delivery.

Support to these areas is backed up with help on monitoring and evaluation, and managing knowledge.

This *How to guide* is an outcome of the interactions of the embedded technical assistance from SPARC and the staff of the Lagos State MEPB Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU); a partnership that fostered a shared understanding of the transition from research findings to a policy brief. The guide presents a snapshot of how to develop policy briefs from research findings; it forms the backbone of future work by EIU in these areas.

How to use this document

Producing policy briefs is the first in the series of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) *How to guides*. The guides are designed to contribute to M&E knowledge management and replication. The overall aim is to share results, including lessons learned, within the M&E work stream, with the potential for replication in other states.

This guide describes the processes involved in evolving policy briefs from research findings and draws from the experiences of Lagos State. It starts with a description of a policy brief and why such a document is important. It then takes the reader through the step-by-step stages of developing a policy brief from research findings.

The steps described are necessarily suggestive and there is, therefore, scope for the user to add further

things if necessary. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this paper will help senior officers involved in research, M&E and communication to deepen their skills in the art of producing policy briefs.

What is a policy brief?

A policy brief is a short and concise document – no longer than four to six pages – that presents research findings, policy options and recommendations to policymakers. Policy briefs synthesise a large amount of complex information and present findings and recommendations, for example from research, in a format that enables the reader to easily and quickly understand an issue. A policy brief is designed for government policymakers and other stakeholders, such as civil society organisations and academia who are interested in formulating or influencing policy. The desired actions or changes that occur as a result of the better understanding of the issue considered in the policy brief are thus the ultimate rationale for developing it. The policy brief is a document that *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 direct request from a decision-maker or officer within an organisation who intends to advocate for the position detailed in the brief.

Given the audience of a policy brief (mostly policymakers), it should:

- Provide enough background for the reader to understand the problem
- Convince the reader that the problem must be addressed urgently
- Provide information about alternatives (in an objective brief)
- Provide evidence to support one alternative (in an advocacy brief)
- Stimulate the reader to make a decision.

There are two basic types of policy briefs as shown in Table 1.

Why prepare a policy brief?

Policy briefs are a valuable communication tool with the potential to dramatically improve the chances that policymakers will read, consider and apply evidence when making policy decisions. This is because evidence that is presented through policy briefs is more likely to reach policymakers who do not have the time to read academic papers (or the expertise to understand them), but need to be informed about a specific topic. Policy briefs are one type of communication tool and they target a particular audience.

Table 1: Types and examples of policy briefs

Type:	Advocacy brief	Objective brief
Purpose:	Argues in favour of a particular course of action	Gives balanced information for policymaker to make up his or her mind
Example:	Farmer field schools on land and water management: an extension approach that works (Integrated nutrient management to attain sustainable productivity [INMASP] and Food and Agriculture Organization (of the United Nations) [FAO] 2006) <i>This policy brief urged Uganda's government to adopt a particular approach to farmers' education</i>	Rising food prices: cause for concern (Overseas Development Institute [ODI] 2008) <i>This policy brief presents some problems caused by rising food prices, and suggests ways policymakers might respond</i>

Remember that...

Policymakers are busy people, and are probably not specialists in your area. They are likely to only read something that...

- Looks attractive
- Appears interesting
- Is short and easy to read.

When should a policy brief be prepared?

Policy briefs should be part of any comprehensive communication strategy. Figure 1 provides examples of where they have been used in Lagos and the questions they have sought to answer.

Who should prepare a policy brief?

Individuals responsible for producing policy briefs should be from government or non-governmental agencies, parastatal organisations or groups that have a mandate to prepare research reports and briefs. In the case of Lagos State, the EIU within MEPB is the 'think tank' of the state and has the statutory mandate to analyse issues for planning, including providing macroeconomic factsheets as background for annual and multi-year budgets. EIU also has the responsibility for undertaking research in social and economic issues, as well as undertaking policy analysis and developing policy briefs.

To achieve its objectives therefore, a policy brief should:

- **Be short and to the point.** It should focus on a particular problem or issue. Do not go into all the details. Instead, provide enough information for the reader to understand the issue and come to a decision
- **Be based on firm evidence,** not just one or two experiments or a single year's experience. It should draw evidence from various sources – preferably from several different areas or organisations
- **Focus on meanings, not methods.** Readers are interested in what you found and what you recommend. They do not need to know the details of your methodology
- **Relate to the big picture.** The policy brief may build on context-specific findings, but it should draw conclusions that are more generally applicable.

Figure 1: Examples of when policy briefs have been used in Lagos and their focus

Research results are applicable to specific national and sub-national contexts in which policymakers operate

- How has Lagos fared in the face of the partial removal of the fuel subsidy in 2012?
- What policy guidelines are there for SURE-P implementation in Lagos?

Researchers are prepared to make value-driven judgements about the outcome that would best address the specific problem

- What options are available for combating the perennial traffic problems in Lagos?

Recommendations are feasible, actionable and are clearly connected to specific decision-making junctures in the policy-making process

- What options are there for government as apt of the current efforts towards affordable housing in Lagos?



Section 2. How to prepare a policy brief

A policy brief outlines the **rationale** for a particular policy alternative or course of action in a current policy **debate**. A policy debate is the 'market place' for competing policy ideas. The purpose of a 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**.

Checklist:

With the outlined purpose of a policy brief in mind, before you begin writing your policy brief, it is important to focus your thinking by answering the following questions:

- ☐ What is the issue (the policy debate)?
- ☐ Who is the audience?
- ☐ Who are the stakeholders?
- ☐ What are their interests?
- ☐ So, what are you recommending (what policy action)?
- ☐ What is your outreach plan for the brief?

This process could start with a workshop where people discuss topical issues or policy debates and then agree on which of these would require a policy brief, including the justification. In addition to answering the questions in the checklist, the guiding principles for informing these discussions would be the issues raised as part of why and when a policy brief should be prepared. The steps outlined provide some suggestions on processes that could be followed.

Stage one: getting organised

In preparation for producing a policy brief, there are a number of requirements that need to be in place in order to ensure that the process progresses smoothly.

- **Institutional requirements:** The important issue at this point is to have a group of individuals who have the mandate to produce policy briefs, and are, therefore, focused on the initiative. It is this group who

would be involved in the workshop mentioned earlier. In the case of the EIU in Lagos, all staff members are involved and each staff anchors a particular initiative which may or may not lead to the production of a policy brief. Initiatives are part of these individuals' annual work plans and these include a periodic catch up at the group level to look at progress.

Checklist:

- ☐ Is the right arrangement in place at the institutional level for producing policy briefs - is there a group of people in place responsible for this task?
- ☐ Who are they?
- ☐ Is this part of their regular activities?

- **Skill requirements:** A mix of skills and expertise is required for producing policy briefs. The group members, or those individuals with responsibility for producing briefs, should have skills in data gathering and analysis. More importantly, they should have good analytical and writing skills and be able to summarise complex reports or issues into simple materials that are easily understandable. In addition, group members should have knowledge of and skills in the computer software used for data manipulation, analysis and word processing, including desktop publishing. Having skills in the Microsoft family of Excel (for data manipulation), Word and Publisher (for desktop publishing) is desirable. Additional knowledge and skills in the use of specialised statistical packages, like SPSS (Statistical Packages for Social Sciences), SAS (Statistical Analysis Systems) or Stata (a statistical package developed by StataCorp LP), would be very helpful.

Checklist:

- ☐ What are the backgrounds of the individuals tasked with producing policy briefs?
- ☐ Do they have demonstrable skills in data gathering and analysis, and report writing?
- ☐ How skilful are they in the manipulation of computers and their applications, especially data/statistical analysis packages?

- **Information requirements:** Very often, producing a policy brief would start with an existing research report. However, it could also be written from data gathered through a specific initiative regarding the topical issue covered by the brief. For example, in Lagos, the Ministry of Housing had commissioned research to look at the housing needs in the state. This research looked at existing government initiatives on housing, including private sector engagement. It also looked at the housing needs by different segments of the population as well as affordability, the ability to pay for houses and under what arrangements. The information from this research was complemented with information from the annual household surveys undertaken by the Lagos Bureau of Statistics, which looked at the number of houses in the state and the average number of persons living in houses and households.

Checklist:

- ☐ What type of information do you require for the policy brief?
- ☐ How will you gather the information that will be used to produce the policy brief?
- ☐ Is the information coming from an existing research finding?
- ☐ Is the information coming from an issue under discussion?

Stage two: determine the structure of the policy brief

Once information requirements have been met, the next step is to take a decision on the structure and content of the policy brief. Typically policy briefs directly reflect the different roles that the policy analyst commonly plays. Although there is much variation, the most common elements of the policy brief are as follows.

A. Title of the brief: The title should catch the attention of the reader and compel him/her to read on and so it needs to be **descriptive, punchy and relevant** (see Table 2 for examples).



Table 2: Example of policy brief titles

Title	Comments
Food security in protracted crises: what can be done?	Posing a question in the title is a good way to lure someone into reading the text.
HIV, food security and nutrition.	A simple title that brings together the three main subjects discussed in the policy brief.
Farmer field schools on land and water management: an extension approach that works.	The first part of the title describes the content of the paper. The second part gives more explanation and invites the reader to find out why the approach works.
Rising food prices – a global crisis: action needed now to avoid poverty and hunger.	The first part of the title is short – just six words. The second part reinforces the urgency of the issue.
Natural resources: the climate change challenge.	'Climate change' is currently a hot topic, so is expected to attract attention. 'Challenge' implies that the policy brief will show how to address this issue.

B. Executive summary: The executive summary is written in such a style as to convince the reader that the brief is worth further in-depth investigation. It is especially important for an audience that is short of time. Reading the summary helps the audience to clearly see the relevance and importance of the brief. Thus, a one to two paragraph executive summary commonly includes:

- A **description of the problem** addressed
- A statement on **why the current approach/policy option needs to be changed**
- Your **recommendations for action**.

C. Context and importance of the problem: The purpose of this element of the brief is to convince the target audience that a current and urgent problem exists which requires action. The context and importance of the problem is both the introductory and first building block of the brief. As such, it usually includes the following:

- A clear **statement of the problem or issue** under consideration
- A short **overview of the root causes of the problem**
- A statement of the **policy implications of the problem** that clearly establishes the current importance and policy relevance of the issue.

D. Critique of policy option(s): This element details the shortcomings of the current approach or options being implemented and, therefore, illustrates both the need for change and where the change needs to occur. In doing so, the critique of the policy options usually includes the following:

- A short **overview of the policy option(s)** under consideration
- An argument illustrating **why and how the current or proposed approach is failing**.

It is important for the sake of credibility to recognise all opinions in the debate on the issue.

E. Policy recommendations: The policy recommendations element provides a detailed and convincing proposal of how the failings of the current policy approach need to change. As such this is achieved by including a breakdown of the **specific practical steps or measures** that need to be

implemented. Sometimes, this element also includes **a closing paragraph** re-emphasising the importance of action.

F. Appendices: Although the brief is a short and targeted document, authors sometimes decide that their argument needs further support and so include an appendix.

Appendices should be included only when absolutely necessary.

G. Sources consulted or recommended: Many writers of policy briefs decide not to include the sources of their evidence as they are not addressing an academic audience. However, if you decide to include a short bibliography then place it at the end. Many writers prefer to **lead their readers to further readings** and so include a recommended readings section. Not surprisingly, many of the recommended readings are other related policy documents produced by their organisations!

Stage three: writing the policy brief

Once you have decided on the structure of the policy brief as described in *Stage two*, the next important stage is to begin forming ideas about the content of the policy brief. In determining the content of the policy brief, it is very helpful to think about the **purpose** of the brief, and its **target audience**. Use the questions shown in *Table 3* to begin thinking about your policy brief's purpose, audience and contribution.



Remember that...

Policy briefs should not exceed four to six pages. (Please keep in mind a length of four to six single spaced or eight to ten double-spaced pages.)



Table 3: Developing policy brief content

Purpose/audience of the policy brief	Guiding questions and comments
Issue: Examine the issue you will be dealing with	Answer these questions: Is the issue general or specific? How general/specific is it?
Audience: Take your primary audience into serious consideration. Your brief should be tailored to the needs of your audience. It makes a fundamental difference as to how you must frame your analysis and your recommendation	Is your audience an individual (e.g. a governor) or an organisation (i.e. the government as a whole)? Also, deciding who your audience will be tells you how much context is needed in the brief. What do you know about the audience (e.g. technical knowledge, political or organisational culture or constraints, exposure to the issue, potential openness to the message)? (i.e. if you are briefing a Finance Commissioner, you don't need to explain him/her what the Naira is and its history).
Actors: Identify the relevant actors for the issue you are dealing with. This is an essential step, since you will have to analyse their interests in order to make sensible and viable policy recommendations	Who are the major stakeholders who can take actions which can affect the policy options?
Interests: Once you have identified the relevant actors, it is necessary to analyse their interests	What are the actors' interests? Which of the relevant actors have similar interests to your audience? Which ones have different interests? How different? This step is important both for the context part of your brief and for the critique of policy options/policy recommendations (see above and below). Without clear identification of the actors involved in the issue and their interests, your brief will be vague and not useful.
Recommendations: Your policy recommendations should reflect the analyses undertaken above	Remember that, according to the issue and the audience, your recommendation(s) might not suggest the best policy, but instead the most viable one. This should not limit your recommendation to just compromise policies. If you want to recommend radical change, you can; remember though that such radical action has to be implemented in some way.

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Once you have decided on the issues described in Table 3, you can begin framing the policy brief by answering the following questions:

1. What is the **aim** of the policy brief? Write one or two sentences from which the rest of the brief will follow
2. What is the best **hook** for the audience?
3. What **background information** does the audience need?
4. What **data** are *most important* to include *for your audience*? How will you present the data so it best conveys its message (e.g., as text, bar graph or line graph)?
5. What are the **policy options** (if appropriate to your topic/aim)?
6. What **recommendations** will you make?

When you are done drafting the policy brief, you can use the checklists to critique your own policy brief or review another policy brief.

Do the arguments flow clearly?

Ensure that:

- Aim is clear
- Conclusion is clear at the outset
- Problem is clearly stated and backed up with evidence
- Recommended actions are clear and specific
- Recommendations flow logically from the evidence presented
- All information is necessary for the development of the argument.

Is the language clear?

Ensure that:

- Words are not unnecessarily complex
- Jargon is not used
- Sentences are not cluttered with unnecessary words or phrases
- Text is engaging (e.g. active voice, varied sentence structure).

Is the content appropriate for the target audience?

Ensure that:

- Importance to the audience is clear
- Recommendations are appropriate for the audience
- Content is understandable without specialised knowledge.

Are data presented effectively?

Ensure that:

- All data are necessary for the argument
- Data are easy to understand
- Data are presented in the most appropriate format
- Graphics are not redundant.



Section 3. Lessons learned from Lagos

This section briefly highlights factors that were instrumental in ensuring that policy briefs were produced on time, and with the right focus. The policy briefs can be found in the SPARC Resource Centre on the SPARC website at: www.sparc-nigeria.com/RC.

Planning: *It was instructive to define and document the objectives of the proposed policy brief as a group.*

There are brainstorming sessions in which all staff of the EIU can look at and agree on the focus of the policy brief. Part of the planning process is to identify any potential obstacles to the policy brief and put in place mechanisms for overcoming these. For example, the policy brief might require senior management approval before it is published and, given that this might require some bureaucratic follow-up, it was important to plan who would take responsibility for follow-up and seeking approval.

Defined governance: *Having a 'lead' for a particular policy brief ensured accountability and follow-through.*

There is a defined anchor for a particular policy brief or

initiative. This individual leads and oversees the production of the policy brief and manages the exchange between the unit and other ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) in relation to the initiative. As mentioned under planning, this individual is also responsible for bureaucratic follow-up within the system.

Committed leadership: *Ensuring leadership commitment is also important for ease of undertaking the activities required for producing the policy brief.*

A senior staff at the level of Director provided leadership for the initiatives. This individual was responsible for bringing staff together, making sure resources were available and taking decisive actions to address obstacles. The Director is also responsible for planning future roles and needs in relation to other initiatives.

Communication plan: *Having a communication plan in place is important*

Although the policy brief is a communication product in its own right, having a plan on how to disseminate the policy brief is very important. For example, decisions on how many copies will be produced and the platforms for dissemination should be taken early, before the brief is written. In addition, a decision about whether the brief should be placed on the website was taken.



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