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## Policy Brief Practical Guide

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# Writing an Effective Policy Brief from Your Research: A Practical Guide for Researchers in Africa

By **Charles Wendo**

In this practical guide:

Turn complex findings  
into a clear and  
actionable policy brief

Key elements that  
make a policy  
brief effective

Tips for  
writing concise,  
impactful policy  
recommendations

## Introduction:

Most researchers would like their findings to have a positive societal change. For this reason, researchers consider the impact on society as an important aspect of career success. Across the developing world, numerous studies generate valuable insights that can help address critical public policy challenges. However, to influence policy decisions, development programs, or resource allocation, research findings must be communicated effectively to policymakers. One of the most direct ways to do this is through a **policy brief**.

Even if you plan to work with a communication specialist, understanding how a policy brief is structured will help you gather and prepare the right information.

Before we delve into the structure of a policy brief, let's define some key terms: **policy**, **policymaker**, and **policy brief**.

## What is Policy?

Although definitions vary with the source, we can identify the key themes across sources. Consider these examples:

- “A set of coherent decisions with a common long-term purpose.” – [FAO](#).
- “A set of ideas or a plan for action followed by a business, government, political party, or group.” – [Cambridge dictionary](#).
- “A course or principle of action adopted or proposed by an organization or individual.” – [Oxford English Dictionary](#).
- “A set of rules or ideas about what should be done.” – [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#).
- “A set of principles to guide actions to achieve a goal.” – [British Ecological Society](#).

From these, we can define policy as: A set of decisions or guiding principles adopted by a government, organization, or individual to achieve specific goals.

This guide focuses specifically on influencing government policy through effective policy briefs.

## Who Are Policymakers?

Policymakers are individuals who make high-level decisions on behalf of governments or institutions. They may be:

- Elected officials, such as legislators.
- Appointed officials, such as permanent secretaries or heads of departments, programmes, or parastatals.

Some policymakers influence national or regional policy, while others make institutional decisions. To increase the chances of influencing policymakers, it's important to engage them in a way that resonates with their priorities and information needs. Besides, use clear, non-technical language.

## What is a Policy Brief?

A policy brief is a concise, evidence-based document designed to inform decision-makers and recommend specific actions. Typically 2–4 pages long, a policy brief distils complex research into clear, actionable insights.

## Ensure Your Brief is Easily Understandable

We have a detailed practical guide on how to communicate research in simple language that non-specialists can understand. Nevertheless, it is important to re-emphasise here that you should avoid using scientific terms in a policy brief. Most policymakers are not experts in your field and may not understand technical language. Without understanding your policy brief, they cannot take up the policy recommendations you are making. Replace scientific terms with everyday words that are familiar to non-specialists. For example, say weeds instead of encroacher bushes, or solar panels instead of *photovoltaic modules*. If you must use scientific terms, be sure to explain them.

Use comparisons involving size, shape, colour, time, and other relatable features to help your audience visualise the information. Images such as photos, graphs, and infographics can also make your points clearer and more engaging.

When using numbers and statistics, include only those that are essential. Use fewer digits and avoid unnecessary decimal places. For example, say 7.6 million instead of 7,628,146. When comparing numbers that are far apart, such as 13.27 and 27.26, rounding off to the nearest whole number may be appropriate. You can also consider using familiar fractions — for instance, say “nearly a quarter” instead of 24.53 percent.

## Begin With a One-Paragraph Summary

Before starting to write your policy brief, it's important to write down a 4-sentence paragraph summarizing your research findings in simple language. This paragraph will serve as the central theme of your brief.

1. Problem – What societal issue does your research address?
2. Finding – What is your main research conclusion?
3. Importance – Why does this matter to the policymaker?
4. Recommendation – What specific action do you propose?

Below is a worked example based on a [study](#) on wheat cultivation in Uganda.

### Example:

Uganda relies heavily on costly wheat imports because the available varieties cannot grow in the non-highland areas, which cover more than 95% of the country. Our study identified four wheat varieties that thrive in both highland and non-highland areas. These findings can reduce import dependency, lower food prices, and offer new income sources for farmers. Therefore, the government should revise its agricultural policy to promote wheat cultivation nationwide and partner with seed companies to multiply and distribute these varieties.

Build the rest of your policy brief around this summary.

# Structure of a Policy Brief

The structure of a policy brief can vary depending on the purpose and audience. However, every policy brief should articulate the societal problem, research findings, implications of those findings to society, and policy recommendations. Below is an example of a structure.

- Identity of the institution – name and logo.
- Date of publication or release.
- Title
- Executive summary
- Introduction
- Findings
- Policy recommendations
- Conclusion
- References
- Contact details: For further inquiries or clarification.

Note: A visually appealing layout — clear headings, bullet points, charts, and spacing —enhances readability.

## Title

The title should be:

- Clear: Use simple, non-technical language
- Concise: Around 10–15 words
- Compelling: Speak to the policymaker's priorities
- Focused: Highlight the main message

There are different ways to craft a title:

- Make a revelation, for example, 'New wheat varieties break barriers: Ugandans can now grow wheat in non-highland areas'.
- Give a hint, for example, 'The key to lower wheat prices and farmer prosperity may be growing beneath our feet'.
- Make an argument, for example, 'Expanding wheat cultivation into Uganda's lowlands is a smart investment in food security'.
- Ask a thought-provoking question, for example, 'Why is Uganda still importing wheat when most of its land can now grow it?'

## Executive Summary

This is a brief overview of the entire policy brief. It allows busy policymakers to grasp your key messages quickly.

*Include:*

- The problem
- Your findings
- The implications
- Your main policy recommendation

The format of an executive summary can be either bullet points or a short paragraph.



*Example:*

Uganda spends heavily on wheat imports due to the limited cultivation of wheat in the country, which is mainly restricted to highland areas. However, over 95% of Uganda comprises non-highland regions previously considered unsuitable for wheat. Our research has identified four wheat varieties that perform well in both highland and non-highland conditions. This breakthrough has the potential to transform Uganda's wheat industry by expanding production areas, reducing imports, lowering consumer prices, and increasing farmer incomes. We recommend that the government revise its agricultural policy to promote wheat cultivation nationwide and partner with seed companies to ensure availability and adoption of these new varieties.

## **Introduction**

Clearly state the problem, its relevance, and why the policymaker should act. Explain why your study was needed and what the reader can expect to learn. This section sets the stage and must capture interest quickly. It should be well thought-out because it determines whether someone will go on to read the rest of the policy brief.

*Example:*

Wheat is widely consumed in Uganda in the form of bread, chapati, mandazi, cakes, and other products. Despite high demand, local production is low and confined mainly to highland areas. As a result, over 90% of the wheat consumed in Uganda is imported. This reliance increases the national import bill, exposes the country to global price shocks, and limits local farming opportunities. The major constraint has been the lack of wheat varieties adapted to non-highland conditions. Therefore, there is an urgent need for high-yielding wheat varieties that can perform well in both highland and non-highland areas.



## Research Findings

This section provides the scientific evidence for your policy recommendations. Summarize your research clearly and simply:

- Objective
- Methods (brief)
- Main findings
- Why the findings matter
- How they relate to national priorities or existing policies
- Simple visuals (charts, graphs), if helpful

Avoid technical jargon and focus on the most policy-relevant findings. Do not bog down the policymaker with technical details.

*Example:*

A recent study conducted by the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO) aimed to:

- Develop and introduce new wheat types that can grow well in most parts of Uganda, not just the highlands.
- Improve access to good-quality wheat seeds so that more farmers across the country can grow wheat successfully.

To achieve this, researchers conducted field experiments with 19 wheat varieties at six sites across Uganda. As a result, they identified four varieties that grow well in both highland and non-highland areas. These varieties show:

- Strong resistance to common wheat diseases
- Good yield performance under non-highland conditions
- Maturity periods that match Uganda's rainfall patterns

The adaptability of these varieties presents a major opportunity to expand wheat production across Uganda's vast non-highland areas, which cover more than 95% of the country's landmass.

## Policy Recommendations

Offer specific, actionable, and evidence-based advice.

Each recommendation should be:

- Clear: What exactly should be done?
- Feasible: Is it practical given the context?
- Justified: Supported by your research findings

In some cases, present multiple options with pros and cons before suggesting the best course.

*Example:*

To harness the full potential of this research breakthrough, the following policy actions are recommended:

1. Revise Uganda's agricultural policy to promote wheat cultivation beyond the traditional highland zones, embracing the newly identified varieties for non-highland regions.
2. Collaborate with seed companies and agricultural research institutions to multiply, certify, and distribute seeds of the new wheat varieties at scale.
3. Launch awareness campaigns and provide training for extension workers and farmers to encourage uptake of the new varieties.

## Conclusion

Use this section to reinforce your message. Summarize the key problem, your main finding, and the most important recommendation. Briefly state what is at stake if no action is taken.

*Example:*

Uganda stands at a turning point in its wheat production landscape. With the discovery of wheat varieties suitable for non-highland regions, the country has an opportunity to enhance food security, reduce its wheat import bill, and improve rural livelihoods. Strategic policy support and public-private partnerships will be key to making non-highland wheat cultivation a success story for Uganda.

## References

Cite any studies, data, or reports you've used. Use a simple, consistent citation format.

## Contact Information

Policymakers may want further engagement or clarification. Provide clear contact details for follow-up:

- Name
- Position
- Email
- Phone number

## How Long Should a Policy Brief Be?

A policy brief of 2–4 pages is standard. 1 page is good for senior decision-makers who need quick insights (e.g., ministers). 5–8 pages is suitable for technical audiences needing more detail (e.g., heads of research institutions).

## Qualities of a Good Policy Brief

Concise: Focused, without unnecessary detail

Clear: Free of jargon; easy to understand

Relevant: Speaks directly to policymakers' priorities

Visually engaging: Use headings, bullets, charts, and whitespace

## Conclusion

Writing a policy brief is a powerful way to turn research evidence into action. By simplifying complex findings, structuring your message clearly, and focusing on the needs of policymakers, you can bridge the gap between science and decision-making. Remember: clarity, relevance, and conciseness are important. With practice and attention to your audience, your policy briefs can influence policies, inform strategies, and contribute to meaningful change.

## References

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## Related Practical Guides



- [How to give a good science talk anywhere](#)
- [How to convince the media to report about your research](#)
- [How to brief policymakers on science issues](#)



## About the author

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