



Policy brief template

How to write
an effective
policy brief



**World Health
Organization**

Eastern Mediterranean Region



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Introduction

Evidence-informed policy-making is essential to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and universal health coverage, and its importance has been emphasized repeatedly by the World Health Organization (WHO) as well as key national and international institutions.¹

Policy briefs are among the key knowledge products and policy documents for policy-making processes. Although the development of policy briefs has been promoted, as they facilitate transparent evidence-informed policy-making, data suggest that few countries in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region use or issue policy briefs regularly – even for main national policies for health.

The WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean endorsed resolution EM/RC66/R.5² in 2019 on Developing national institutional capacity for evidence-informed policy-making for health. The technical document supporting the resolution introduced an “integrated multi-concept approach” for evidence-informed policy-making.³ The technical paper and its associated regional action plan⁴ highlighted the key role that policy briefs can play in enhancing evidence-informed policy-making for health at the national level. The regional action plan also envisaged the active role that WHO can play in enhancing national capacity for the development of policy briefs.

¹ Resolution WHA58.34. Ministerial Summit on Health Research. In: Fifty-eighth World Health Assembly, Geneva, 16–25 May 2005. Resolutions and decisions, annexes. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2005 (https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA58/WHA58_34-en.pdf, accessed 13 August 2023).

² WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean resolution EM/RC66/R.5 on developing national institutional capacity for evidence-informed policy-making for health. Cairo: WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean; 2019 (<https://applications.emro.who.int/docs/RC66-R5-eng.pdf?ua=1>, accessed 13 August 2023).

³ Developing national institutional capacity for evidence-informed policy-making for health (EM/RC66/6). Cairo: WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean; 2019 (<https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/369544/EMRC666-eng.pdf?sequence=1>, accessed 13 August 2023).

⁴ Regional action plan for the implementation of the framework for action to improve national institutional capacity for the use of evidence in health policy-making in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (2020–2024). Cairo: WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean; 2021 (<https://applications.emro.who.int/docs/9789290229124-eng.pdf?ua=1>, accessed 15 October 2023).

The value of policy briefs

Policy briefs can support policy-making processes at all stages: identifying and framing problems, formulating and implementing policies, and evaluating policy impact.

There are significant differences between policy briefs and academic publications.⁵ Notably, policy briefs aim to support policy-making by presenting policy options and their advantages and disadvantages. Policy briefs are often based on evidence from multiple sources of research and data and focus on policy-oriented findings and interpretation. They also place a special focus on implementation challenges, which are usually not included in academic papers.

⁵ Lavis JN, Permanand G, Oxman AD, Lewin S, Fretheim A. SUPPORT tools for evidence-informed health policymaking (STP) 13: preparing and using policy briefs to support evidence-informed policymaking. *Health Res Policy Syst.* 2009;7(Suppl 1):S13. doi:10.1186/1478-4505-7-S1-S13.

The need for a template

Despite the importance of policy briefs, they are only useful if they serve the purpose for which they were produced. Often, policy briefs lack relevant policy options and a proper analysis of those options. Sometimes the policy options presented are too broad or vague and not specific enough to help with impactful policy-making.

Thus, as part of implementation of the regional action plan, this policy brief template was developed by WHO as a concise tool to support the production and use of policy briefs. It provides a template for policy briefs that lists all the necessary sections, while avoiding unnecessary details.

The template for policy briefs

A good policy brief is a concise standalone document focused on a key policy topic. The optimal length of a policy brief is 2–8 pages (1000–4000 words), although it can be supported by annexes that provide additional information or by technical reports. The content of the brief should be expressed in plain language.

A policy brief should include all the key sections listed below, while remaining concise to maximize their usefulness to policy-makers. The headings that should be used in a policy brief are provided, as well as guidance for each section.

1. Title

The title should be clear, short and focused on the topic. Abbreviations should be avoided in the title. Subtitles may be included if they make the title clearer to the reader.

2. Justification and purpose (introduction/background/purpose)

(Recommended word limit: up to 200)

This section should summarize the justifications for and the purpose of the brief. It presents the background to and the purpose of the brief, and should include the following key areas:

- the problem or problems that the policy brief addresses
- a description of why the problem is important
- evidence on the magnitude of the problem to justify the attention of policy-makers.

This section is also used to clarify the scope and coverage of the policy brief and to highlight relevant issues that are beyond its focus. For example, if the policy is focused on the management of a disease at primary care level, the brief may specify that the policy brief does not include hospital-level interventions.

3. Key policy option(s) and message(s)

(Recommended word limit: up to 150, or six bullet points)

This section should include the main messages (findings) of the policy brief, such as the proposed policy options. The policy options highlighted here are those that have the strongest evidence of effect to address the problem for which the policy brief has been developed. Other key messages, such as implementation barriers, facilitators and other considerations, could also be highlighted in this section. However, only items that are key for decision-makers should be included in this section. They can be presented as text or as a list of a few bullet points.

The text or bullet points should stand alone and be easily understandable, so that if policy-makers (or other users of the policy brief) read this section only, they will still receive the key messages of the brief.

4. Description of the policy options and their advantages and disadvantages

(Recommended word limit: up to 600)

This section should provide a summary explanation and justification for all the policy options included in the brief, including those policy options listed in the previous section. The section should list the identified or assessed policy options, describe their meaning, and list their main advantages and disadvantages. If possible, details related to the potential cost and other information related to the feasibility of implementation should also be included for each policy option. A note on the stakeholders responsible for the implementation of the policy options may also be added, where applicable.

The policy options presented in this section are often identified as the result of the technical work that underpinned the development of the policy brief.

The information in this section should be presented in a table for easy reading and use, as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Proposed table format for the presentation of policy options and their characteristics in a policy brief*

Policy options	Policy option 1	Policy option 2	Policy option 3
Description	Description of policy option 1	Description of policy option 2	Description of policy option 3
Main advantages**	Main advantages of policy option 1	Main advantages of policy option 2	Main advantages of policy option 3
Main disadvantages**	Main disadvantages of policy option 1	Main disadvantages of policy option 2	Main disadvantages of policy option 3
Cost and feasibility of implementation (includes acceptability, organizational factors etc.)	Cost and feasibility of implementation of policy option 1	Cost and feasibility of implementation of policy option 2	Cost and feasibility of implementation of policy option 3
Equity considerations (gender, socioeconomic, ethnicity, geographical)	Key equity considerations that affect the selection of policy option 1, or equity implications of its implementation	Key equity considerations that affect the selection of policy option 2, or equity implications of its implementation	Key equity considerations that affect the selection of policy option 3, or equity implications of its implementation
Stakeholders' responsibilities	Stakeholders' responsibilities related to policy option 1	Stakeholders' responsibilities related to policy option 2	Stakeholders' responsibilities related to policy option 3

* Columns can be added or removed depending on the number of policy options. The table should, however, remain concise.

** Evidence of effectiveness (and cost-effectiveness), including certainty of the evidence.

5. A description of how the policy brief was developed (methodology)

(Recommended word limit: up to 150)

This section should briefly describe the methods used in the development of the brief and specifically in the identification or selection of the policy options. Such methods may include:

- systematic review(s) of effects
- primary research studies
- methods or sources of cost analyses (if applicable)
- qualitative research evidence
- expert views or stakeholder consultations
- local or unpublished data or research evidence.

This section includes the methods used for the critical appraisal of evidence, where applicable. It should be written in such a way that the main methods are transparent and understandable for a technical person. However, the section should not include the details of the methods used in the development of the policy brief. Such details can be added as an annex to the policy brief, or a source that describes them may be cited.

6. Further important considerations

(Recommended word limit: 150)

This section should include any other important messages and considerations that are not covered in the methods or in the description of the policy options presented previously. Examples of such further important considerations may include key recommendations for the monitoring of the policy implementation and related indicators and targets. Other examples could be relevant to additional implementation considerations, barriers and facilitating factors that may affect the implementation of the policy options. The key next steps can be listed; for example, additional documents or advocacy material that will be created. In addition, this section can be used for highlighting gaps in knowledge for policy-making, such as a need for further data or research evidence to further assess the validity and relevance of policy options or whether new knowledge is expected to emerge. This section should also highlight the timeline for updating the policy brief, if relevant.

7. Acknowledgements

This section should list the key people and/or institutions involved in the development of the policy brief, and the financial resources (if any) used for its development.

8. Conflicts of interest

Conflict of interest should be avoided in the development of policy briefs. A general guide is to exclude those who can be perceived to benefit or be negatively affected by the potential policy options presented in the policy brief. In any case, there should be a clear statement that specifies whether there is any such conflict of interest, who is affected and how their interests conflict with the policy options.

9. Sources of evidence and key references

This section should list the key reports or documents used in the development of the policy brief. If this list is long, it can be presented as an annex to the policy brief.

Further resources related to the development and use of policy briefs

Evidence-informed policy-making training package [web-based training]. Cairo; WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean; 2023 (<http://www.emro.who.int/evidence-data-to-policy/training-package/index.html>, accessed 21 July 2023).

