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Communicating research for evidence-based policymaking

A practical guide for researchers in socio-economic sciences and humanities

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The policy brief
Engaging and sustaining interest

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The policy brief
Relevance

The SSH policy brief series was launched in 2008 as part of an initiative by the Directorate-General for Research to improve the uptake of Framework Programme research results by the policymaking community. As the term "Policy Brief" implies, this form of publication is specifically intended to provide orientation for those dealing with policy-relevant subject matter, whether that be on a practical or a theoretical level.

Clearly, some research projects do not lend themselves to proposing any particular course of policy-related action. Many projects, however, do. And in those cases, where appropriate, SSH policy briefs offer researchers the option of articulating their conclusions in the form of constructive recommendations.

Of all the publications a research project produces, the policy brief is the one most likely to be read first in policymaking circles. If you succeed in capturing a decision-maker's interest with this document, your findings have a good chance of entering the policy debate. Conversely, if a project fails to produce convincing policy briefs, the capacity of your findings to support the policymaking process will be greatly diminished.

A policy brief can only be as good as the research it is based upon. Its success, however, also depends to a large degree on how the results are presented. The policy brief should present the project's policy-relevant findings in the most convincing terms possible, without overstating or understating their significance.

The policy brief
Form and style

Regardless of whether you are producing a policy brief for an ongoing or a finalized project, the form and style will remain basically the same. Aimed at an audience of intelligent non-experts, the writing should be succinct and accessible, "professional" instead of technical. The information should be logically organized and largely free of jargon. Long sentences (more than 30 words) and complex-compound formulations should be used very sparingly; footnotes should be avoided. Acronyms are to be employed judiciously and clarified on first reference. The Directorate asks that special care be taken to assure that all SSH policy briefs are both "attractive" and "understandable".

The information provided in this guide is intended to serve as orientation for those preparing additional contributions to the SSH policy brief series. If you require assistance with formatting or layout of briefs for your project, please contact your Project Officer.

For an overview of previously published briefs, please consult the Europa Research SSH website: http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/ policy-briefs_en.html. An example can also be found in Annex 7.1 of this guide. As one can see from the previously published examples, SSH policy briefs adhere to a standard form, though there is room for some variation.

Length

Generally, the length of an SSH policy brief should not exceed ten pages. Experience suggests that most briefs can be accommodated in eight pages, though some may be as short as six. Bear in mind the possibility that some members of your policymaking audience may skim the brief or read only the first page before delegating the task of detailed examination.

Strive to provide a clear and convincing account of what your research has found and what it means in policy terms. Regard the policy brief as a tool for explaining the significance of your project in a nutshell. Should you succeed in capturing a policymaker's interest with this document, they will dig deeper.

The five parts of an SSH policy brief
1| Introduction Succinctly describe the relevant policy problem and relate your evidence to the task of addressing it (1 page).
2| Evidence and analysis Enumerate your most policy-relevant findings with basic contextual orientation (3 to 4 pages).
3| Policy implications and recommendations State the policy implications of your findings and, where appropriate, offer recommendations (1 to 2 pages).
4| Research parameters Describe the project's objectives and methodology (1 page).
5| Project identity Provide details about the research consortium, project funding, time frame, etc. (1 to 2 pages).

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The policy brief
The power of page one

Vulnerable to the power of first impressions, people routinely judge policy briefs by their covers. It is essential, therefore, that a policy brief's first page represent a project's very best work. The form should be visually appealing and the writing must be highly coherent.

Page one of the brief presents the project's policy relevance in condensed form. It identifies the project, outlines the main policy problem it was designed to address, introduces key findings and advocates a specific course of action.

Given the unique burden of responsibility this page carries, putting extra effort into it is justified.

The policy brief
Title bar

A good title serves two functions: it identifies the topic and inspires interest. Both are important. In order to fulfil these functions, a title has to capture the essence of a research project in very few words.

Depending on the nature of the research project, the title may introduce wordplay. It can incorporate metaphor or other turns of phrase.

Here are some good examples from FP6 and FP7 SSH projects:

Chasing work: The mobility dilemma
Business on the edge: Cross-border cooperation in the context of EU enlargement
Rattling the value chain: Work in the age of flexibility

Remember: Brevity and astute word choice are the keys to a good title. A long-winded title that fully describes the topic but bores or confuses the reader will benefit no one. Equally undesirable is a cute title that fails to accurately identify the topic or skews the project's character. Title writing requires imagination and skill.

The title is then followed by a descriptive phrase (blurb) beginning with the words: "Policy implications of". The blurb continues with the project acronym and one or two explanatory details. For example:

Policy implications of SOCCOH (the challenge of socio-economic cohesion in the enlarged European Union), an EU-funded research project involving eight institutions led by the London School of Economics and Political Science
Policy implications of CBCED (Cross-Border Cooperation and Entrepreneurship), an EU-funded research project on entrepreneurship in European border regions
Policy implications of WORKS (Work Organization and Restructuring in the Knowledge Society), a pan-European research project

If considered essential for reader orientation, an additional descriptive passage can be inserted two lines below the blurb (though keep in mind that this will reduce the amount of space available for the introduction). This passage should be printed in italics. For example:

Findings based on analysis of current literature and empirical investigations in border regions of Finland, Germany, Poland, Greece, Bulgaria and Estonia.

The **project logo** should appear directly opposite the blurb, in the left-hand column.

The last line of the title bar contains the designation "Ongoing project" or "Finalized project" and indicates the publication date (month and year).

The policy brief
Introduction

The amount of space available for the introductory statement on page one is limited. After accommodating the European Policy Brief masthead and title bar (with logo, descriptive blurb and publication date), there is room for only three or four introductory paragraphs running to a total length of 200 words. This length, however, is sufficient for fulfilling the introduction's purpose.

Begin your introduction with a paragraph explaining the specific policy challenge the project was designed to address. This section should succinctly state the project's main objective, echoing language found in the Call. The focus is likely to be a particular socio-economic phenomenon (e.g. mobility in the work-place), a cultural construct (e.g. the European public sphere) or some thematic element in the Framework Programme's agenda. Seek to quickly establish the topic in a policy context while communicating the urgency of the policy challenge.

Having identified the project's main EU objective, your next task is to contrast that with the status quo. Some of your project's key observations will come into play here. Depending on the project's findings, this thumbnail assessment may acknowledge progress being made, but it is more likely to identify deficits, obstacles and risks.

Finally, having described the project's thematic challenge and presented some key observations, the introduction should conclude with a paragraph explaining the main (policy-relevant) implications of the research findings. If appropriate, the introduction should end with an appeal to pursue a particular course of action, noting the rationale for the recommendation and its potential benefit.

On the basis of this short introduction, policy-makers should be able to judge whether your project is relevant to their own discussions and warrants closer scrutiny.

Note: The introduction to a policy brief is not an academic abstract or a summary of the research project. Procedural details and methodology are described later in the brief.

The policy brief
Evidence and analysis

This is the heart of the policy brief. The Evidence and Analysis section contains the most important policy-relevant information your project has produced: empirical data and cogent analysis – in other words, **new knowledge**. When policymakers go searching for the added value of EU-funded SSH research, they should find it here.

Selecting information

Choosing what to include and what to omit in your Evidence and Analysis section can be difficult, especially if the task has been postponed to the end of a project. Sifting through reams of deliverables, trying to pick out the embedded policy-relevant bits retrospectively, is tedious and inefficient. It is also unnecessary.

The task is much easier if the project establishes a strategy for collecting the data it needs early on. With clearly defined priorities, team members can quickly spot policy-relevant activity on their radar screens when it appears. They can then capture and collate the data, and the Evidence and Analysis can be drawn from this data set.

Obviously, the kind of information that will appear in this section of your policy brief depends on the nature of your project. New knowledge generated by the project should be granted top priority, but that knowledge must be presented in a context relevant to policymakers, who may require certain background information the researchers themselves take for granted. All published Evidence and Analysis should support the task of advancing a policymaker's understanding of your topic.

In general, SSH policymakers value research that:

a. provides solid and timely empirical data
b. identifies trends
c. anticipates potential challenges
d. improves measurement capabilities
e. evaluates policy effectiveness

Remember: The data and analysis offered in the Evidence and Analysis section of the policy brief should support the recommendations that follow.

Organization

Depending on the structure of the research, the Evidence and Analysis section may be divided into two or more subsections. Each subsection should be given a separate heading.

Regardless of whether subsections are used or not, the material should be logically arranged into thematic blocks. The blocks should contain patterns of related information that speak to policy-relevant questions (which may or may not have been formulated at the beginning of the research project). These questions should appear in the left margin opposite the thematic blocks and serve as signposts to assist the reader in navigating through the brief.

Structure the information according to its scientific weight and, above all, its policy relevance. Strive to create coherent compositions, but do not hesitate to include "stand-alone" observations if their relevance warrants it.

Follow the contours of the landscape your research has revealed; unleash the narrative potential of your work.

Elucidation

Since few Framework Programme projects are truly pan-European in scope, it is important that the limitations of your investigative sample be acknowledged. Though the scope of the research should be established on page one of the policy brief and implicit throughout, it may be useful to further explain the limitations in a preface to the Evidence and Analysis section.

Elucidation should be added wherever necessary to avoid the reader ascribing a representative character to findings based on samples unsuitable for extrapolation.

A more detailed description of a project's scope should be provided in the Parameters section.

Graphics

The visual impact of a policy brief can be greatly enhanced if graphic elements are used to illustrate the evidence and analysis. Charts or tables of any kind may be employed as long as they are pertinent and comprehensible and do not exceed the brief's spatial capacity. Original graphics generated by the project itself are preferred, but those originating outside the project may also be used if they are especially pertinent.

Policy teams are encouraged to factor statistical and/or analytical graphic elements into their dissemination plans.

The policy brief
Policy implications and recommendations

Encouraged to provide orientation for policymaking where appropriate, researchers are invited to offer recommendations on an optional basis and according to the nature of their research.

Again, not all SSH research projects lend themselves to the task of producing policy-relevant recommendations. But for those projects with a clear policy component, research findings can be highly valuable for the policymaking community.

Research-oriented policy briefs communicate policy implications based on solid evidence and cogent analysis. Any advice offered derives its authority from the excellence of the research and probity of the consortium that produced it. For those researchers who do produce recommendations, it is an opportunity to possibly "make a difference" and directly impact the policymaking process.

Some researchers may not be accustomed to communicating with policymakers in this way. Yet the practice is both useful and necessary. Indeed, done in good faith, it arguably constitutes the *raison d'être* of socio-economic sciences. By identifying policy implications and formulating recommendations, researchers fulfil one of the main objectives of the Commission's evidence-based policymaking effort.

Approach – How to get started

Imagine various groups of dedicated decision-makers (governmental and nongovernmental) have asked you for orientation on exactly the issue your consortium is investigating. They genuinely want to know, on the basis of your research, what you think can be done to improve conditions relative to that issue particularly in Europe. They invite you to be open and express your views in straight-forward terms. This is your starting point.

Projects that do produce policy recommendations should be mindful of the fact that the usefulness of this advice depends to a large degree on how specific it is. This applies to both the advice itself and its intended benefactors. Researchers can assume that the European Union has a profound interest in the policy relevance of their findings.

Organization – Clustering implications

Depending on the research project, policy implications may be ordered thematically, geographically or institutionally.

If your implications/recommendations apply to specific groups of policymakers, name the groups and cluster your material accordingly. The addressee (group) should be listed in the left-hand column. Begin at the international policymaking level and move on to the national, regional and local levels. If certain points apply to all audiences, group them under the heading "General".

Some projects, especially those dealing with more abstract, pan-European subjects (e.g. the European public sphere) may yield general orientation only. In such cases one need not specify a target policymaking audience.

Stating policy relevance

So, in light of the evidence, what should be done to address the challenge at hand? That's a question policymakers themselves ultimately have to answer. But researchers can offer expert advice based on a thorough examination of the problem.

Policy briefs frequently offer suggestions expressed in the form of recommendations. In an ongoing project still in the process of gathering and analysing data, findings will be preliminary and any recommendations offered are likely to be expressed in conditional terms. A finished project, however, should be in a position to offer clearer orientation.

Where appropriate, researchers should utilize final policy briefs as an opportunity to articulate recommendations based on their findings. Obviously these recommendations are in no way binding, but – reflecting the results of expert research and analysis – they can provide valuable orientation for the policymaking community.

From a policymaker's perspective, the more directly stated these recommendations are the better. Though one might consider it good form to use polite language to express recommendations, equivocal phrasings should be avoided (e.g. "The evidence suggests that it might be advisable for policymaking body x to consider the merits of action y").

In formulating recommendations, researchers are encouraged to use the infinitive verb form (omitting the "to"). Thus, the key clause of a recommendation might begin with a word like "adapt", "avoid", "create", "develop", "improve", "increase", "promote", "strengthen", "support", etc. Examples of how to formulate recommendations can be found in previously published SSH policy briefs on the Europa Research SSH website: http://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/policy-briefs_en.html

The policy brief
Research parameters

To borrow an angling metaphor, the Research Parameters section should explain where the project went fishing, what kind of tackle it used and what it set out to catch.

For the purpose of the policy brief, Research Parameters are divided into two categories – Objectives and Methodology – prefaced by an introductory statement describing the project's overall objective.

Introductory statement

Begin the Research Parameters page with the project acronym followed by the project's complete name (in parentheses) and a phrase summing up its main objective. For example:

CBCED (Cross-Border Cooperation and Entrepreneurship) was a research project that sought to assess the potential for cross-border entrepreneurship in contributing to development in EU border regions.

WORKS (Work Organization and Restructuring in the Knowledge Society) was a pan-European research project aimed at improving our understanding of major changes in work in the knowledge-based society.

Objectives

List the primary objectives your project set out to achieve. These should be delineated in a series of bullet-points, introduced with the phrase: "The main objectives of the project were to:". State each objective using an infinitive verb (without repeating the word "to").

Verbs commonly used to describe research objectives:

- Assess
- Determine
- Develop
- Evaluate
- Identify
- Investigate

Remember that policymakers often scan through a policy brief searching for a specific kind of information that might be helpful in addressing a particular policy challenge. Your objectives should be stated clearly enough to enable policymakers to determine whether the information they are looking for might conceivably be found in your project's other deliverables.

Methodology

Policymakers want to know how you arrived at your findings. Explain in as few words as possible where, when and how you gathered your key data. If field surveys were conducted, indicate the size of the samples and provide a general profile of interviewees. Specify the project's geographical parameters.

Though some technical terms may be required to describe the project's formal methodology, keep them to a minimum. If several methodological approaches were utilized (and each warrants mentioning) they may be presented in bullet-point format. There will not be sufficient space to accommodate all details. Prioritize the information according to its value to policymakers for weighting the project's findings.

The policy brief
Project identity

The final section of the brief provides basic information about the research project itself and those who participated in it. Importantly, this section includes contact details for members of the consortium and contains the URL (internet) address of the project website.

There might be eight or nine parts to this section, depending on whether Further Reading is included. For easy navigation, the parts are identified with a "slug" in the left margin. The parts are arranged as follows:

a. **Project name** – Give the full name followed by the acronym in parentheses.

b. **Coordinator** – Indicate the name, institution, city, country and e-mail address.

c. **Consortium** – List all participating entities (institutions). Order the institutions alphabetically, on the first line, followed by the academic unit on the next line. Below that, place the city and the country.
Examples: Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy – ELIAMEP – Athens, Greece
Lehrstuhl Sozialgeschichte, Institut für Geschichtswissentschaften, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. Berlin, Germany

d. **Funding scheme** – Provide details of the specific funding programme.
Examples: FP6 Framework Programme for Research of the European Union – Specific Targeted Research Project (STREP)
Thematic Priority 7 – Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge-based Society
FP7 Framework Programme for Research of the European Union – Collaborative project
Activity 3 – Major trends in society and their implications

e. **Duration** – List the dates (month and year) when it began and ended, then the total number of months the project was funded for (in parentheses).
Example: September 2004 – August 2007 (36 months)

f. **Budget** – Indicate the EU budget contribution.
Example: EU contribution: 1 895 000 €

g. **Website** – Give the URL of the project website.

h. **For more information** – Provide the names and e-mail addresses of one or two project participants who have agreed to serve as general contact persons. Place the word "Contact" in front of the first full name.

i. **Further reading** – List up to five current or forthcoming publications the project has produced that might be of interest to policymakers.