

What Difference does a Policy Brief Make?

Penelope Beynon, Christelle Chapoy,
Marie Gaarder and Edoardo Masset

August 2012



What difference does a policy brief make?

Penelope Beynon, Christelle Chapoy, Marie Gaarder and Edoardo Masset

First published by the Institute of Development Studies the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) in June 2012

© Institute of Development Studies and the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) 2012
All rights reserved.

Reproduction, copy, transmission, or translation of any part of this publication may be made only under the following conditions:

- with the prior permission of the publisher; or
- with a licence from the Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd., 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE, UK,
or from another national licensing agency; or
- under the terms set out below.

This publication is copyright, but may be reproduced by any method without fee for teaching or non-profit purposes, but not for resale. Formal permission is required for all such uses, but normally will be granted immediately. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, prior written permission must be obtained from the publisher and a fee may be payable.

This research was funded by the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)



The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), or 3ie or DFID. The publishers have made every effort to ensure, but do not guarantee, the accuracy of the information within this publication. IDS is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England (No. 877338).

1 Introduction

1.1 Why does research communication matter?

A large number of development conferences and a growing body of research and blogs are dedicated to the mission of increasing use of research evidence in policymaking processes. Why? The obvious answer is that policies, a broad term used for decisions that affect a significant number of people's lives, *do* affect a significant number of people's lives, or at least they have the potential to. Hence, we are interested in the decisions being as 'good' as possible. And we think 'good' decisions are achieved when they are informed by 'evidence' that show that these policies 'work'; that the decision chosen is the best available option given the set of outcomes it is designed to achieve. While this line of argument should be timeless, the topic of evidence-based and evidence-informed policies has gained new momentum over the last decade with the heightened focus on the results agenda, aid quality, and development effectiveness, captured in the Paris and Busan declarations. A mixture of aid fatigue and financial crises have increased the emphasis on ensuring good returns for the investment of scarce public funds, and the constant improvements in the tools and methods for measuring results is probably an adequate summary of what brought about this evidence-revolution. Research provides one form of evidence in the evidence-revolution,¹ and a key question for those of us working in research institutions, is how best can we communicate research so that it informs relevant policies and practice?

It has frequently been pointed out that policy influence rather than being a linear process is likely to be complex, with feedback loops and two-way processes between research, policy and practice (ODI 2004; Walt 1994). 'Searching for a direct connection between one masterpiece of scientific discovery and policy is to misunderstand the nature of the policy environment. New information and knowledge do percolate through the policy environment and become part of policymakers' thinking, not in a clear linear fashion, but in a much more diffuse way....like water falling on limestone' (Walt 1994: 2). As pointed out in a report by the WHO, policy change often begins before it is recognised as such. 'At every stage of this process – from the generation of knowledge, to its entry into the public discourse, to the nature of the debate it provokes, to the policy options that are finally identified by decision-makers over time, to the policy change that finally occurs – interest groups and conflicting coalitions are at work....While a robust policy debate may not directly influence governmental decisions, it serves a critical enlightenment function by gradually altering concepts and assumptions of policy-makers over

¹ While what constitutes evidence is subject to much debate and disagreements, we will limit our discussion in this paper to research-based evidence.

time'. (WHO 2002: 10–11). The ODI identifies the relevant question to ask as being 'Why are some of the ideas that circulate in the research/policy networks picked up and acted on, while others are ignored and disappear?' (ODI 2004: 2). The institute suggests that it is in the interplay between the political context, the evidence, the links between policy and research communities, and the external context that the adoption of evidence by policymakers and practitioners is being determined. Walt (1994) suggests that politics may affect how much notice policymakers take of research results; 'Where governments are committed to policy on ideological grounds, they may be only secondarily interested in research findings, especially if these challenge or question the policy impetus, its ideological basis or authoritative knowledge'. (Walt 1994: 3).

While maximising the influence of development research on public policy and action is admittedly a challenge in general, in his recent book '*Knowledge to Policy*' Fred Carden points out how much harder this is in developing countries due to greater challenges on the governance and implementation front, greater staff turnover, a lack of demand for research, lack of data, and lack of intermediary institutions that carry research to policy. (Carden 2009).

Most of the factors that influence research uptake are beyond the control of research communicators. But one factor that is within their control is the design and dissemination of the documents they produce for policy audiences. In particular, the design of their policy briefs.

A policy brief is a concise standalone document that prioritises a specific policy issue and presents the evidence in non-technical and jargon-free language.² In general, the purpose of a policy brief is to distil or to synthesise evidence with the intention of influencing the thinking and actions of policy actors as they take decisions in complex policy processes. That is, to achieve the elusive outcome of evidence-informed policymaking.³ Many funders require research organisations to produce succinct summaries of research findings in a 'user-friendly format' to ensure that funded research is disseminated and understood by target audiences. For decades, policy briefs have dominated as the format of choice for both scholarly and advocacy-based organisations seeking to influence policymakers. But despite the proliferation of the policy brief,⁴ very little serious research has been undertaken to explore their value, both in terms of usage and effect.

² 'Policy brief' has been variously defined by a multitude of authors and institutes, generally in 'how to' guidance notes. Guidance is often conflicting (e.g. advice as to whether the brief should be neutral or include opinions), and while most guidance agrees on general principles, **no single format has been proven to be best.**

³ Policymaking is complex and the discussion of its complexity are well rehearsed elsewhere (See ODI, 2004; Walt, 1994; WHO 2002; Carden, 2009 for examples). We don't suppose that any researcher or communication expert would propose to bring about evidence-informed policy using a standalone policy brief and no other tools or plan for engagement.

⁴ A search of the term 'policy brief' returned no less than 30 million results in general Google and 2.8 million results in Google Scholar.

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Science and Development Network (SciDev.Net) interviewed a sample of policymakers from developing and developed countries and reported that while 50 per cent of policymakers and 65 per cent of researchers think that dissemination of research findings is not sufficient to have an impact on policy, 79 per cent do think that policy briefs are valuable communications tools. Thus justifying the demand for policy briefs, Jones and Walsh go on to list a number of 'key ingredients of effective policy briefs', including two that are of interest to this study: 1) authority, described as a messenger (individual or organisation) that has credibility in eyes of policymaker, and 2) opinion, described as presentation of author's own views about policy implications of research finding (Jones *et al.* 2008). The findings of this study have been contested due to the leading nature of some of the questions that were fielded (*ibid*), nonetheless they raise interesting questions about what makes for an effective policy brief, and whether such a thing exists.

A policy community survey commissioned by IDRC's Thank Tank Initiative and carried out across Africa, Latin America and Asia, contests the findings from the ODI/SciDev survey and finds policy briefs to be among the least useful forms of information exchange to support their work in national policy. The study also shows that informal communications, such as newsletters and online forums, are considered less useful than user-driven, self-directed information exchanges such as statistical databanks, online publications and reports. In-person events and advice from individual experts was also considered more useful than briefs and bulletins (Cottle 2011).

So we see that despite their popularity, the value of policy briefs is disputed. A lesson emerging from these studies is that policy briefs are useful when policy interest exists, capacity is there to absorb, timing and context are favourable, the message and conclusions are clear, and when the brief is but one of the information and exchange tools used. In line with this perspective, some would argue that a policy brief is never intended to have influence in and of itself but rather as part of a package of engagement.⁵ Nonetheless, most organisations *do* put their policy briefs out on their own and into the public domain, both electronically and in hard copy, where they can be (and are) read by any interested actor. While they may be on the periphery of most influencing strategies, these actors are many and varied and they have potential to be influenced by research communications, and potential to go on to influence policy and practice processes in under-explored ways.

So, policy briefs remain one of the most commonly used tools by international development agencies, research institutes and research-to-policy intermediaries. While opinions of their

⁵ In a recent blog discussion, Enrique Mendizabal describes policy brief use as 'something one leaves behind after a meeting (or sends in advance). It is what gets forwarded, etc. But does it influence on its own? Certainly not.' <http://onthinktanks.org/2012/03/30/should-think-tanks-write-policy-briefs-what-an-rct-can-tell-us/> (Accessed 30 March 2012).

usefulness diverge, actual experiments on the effectiveness of policy briefs have not previously been carried out. We decided to do just that – both to shed some light on what makes for an effective policy brief and to explore whether an experimental design could be used to better understand the effectiveness of research communication tools.

1.2 A simple theory of change for a policy brief

A simple theory of change for a policy brief is presented in Figure 1.1. It predicts that a policy brief reaches a reader and prompts him or her to engage with a message; by engaging with the message readers update their knowledge on a topic and create an evidence-accurate belief; these new or reinforced beliefs spark an action commensurate with the reader's role; and depending on the current opportunity for change, some or all of the reader's actions will lead to changes in policies and/or practice within their sphere of influence.⁶

Figure 1.1 A simple theory of change for evidence-based policy and practice



Figure 1.1 is certainly overly simplistic. Studies of media communication have focused on the phenomenon that different individuals may receive the same message but act on it quite differently. Influential studies conducted by Carl Hovland throughout his career (for example, Hovland 1954) concluded that people are very selective in how they use media; in particular regarding exposure, interpretation of information, and retention of information obtained through the media. In particular, three types of selectivity are relevant to our study:

- selective exposure (whereby people seek out not only topics of interest to them but more importantly viewpoints with which they expect to agree);

⁶ The piece of evidence does not necessarily entail change, as it could confirm and reinforce an existing attitude or policy, however demonstrating an active selection of the status quo poses a particular challenge to those interested in measuring policy influence activities.

- selective perception (whereby people interpret facts to suit their existing biases), and;
- selective retention (whereby people remember messages that support their opinion longer than they remember opposing messages).

So what would this mean for our simplified theory of change? Firstly, we cannot assume that when readers receive a policy brief they automatically *engage with the message* by reading the brief. It is far more likely (particularly in this era of information overload) that discerning readers discard a significant amount of information they receive without ever reading it at all based on quick judgements informed by a few features that are immediately apparent (e.g. title, source and whether they find the visual layout pleasing). That is, they exercise selective exposure.

Secondly, selective perception and selective retention theories suggest that reading is not (necessarily) believing. Depending on the type of priors a reader holds, it may take repeated evidence before he or she actually updates his/her beliefs to *form an evidence-accurate belief*, and if it is a firmly held belief (fundamental prior) it may not lead to any update at all. Indeed, evidence suggests that when confronted with evidence that undermines a strongly held opinion (a 'fundamental prior') people tend to hold their prior belief even more fiercely (Edwards and Smith 1996; Lord *et al.* 1979). The tendency is to accept evidence that confirms one's prior opinion at face value while subjecting 'disconfirming' evidence to critical evaluation – the so-called 'disconfirmation bias'.⁷ Furthermore, the idea that attitudes and beliefs on any given subject are readily available in a 'mental file' that can be consulted and reported upon in a survey, the so-called file-drawer model (Wilson and Hodges 1992), has been widely criticised (Tourangeau *et al.* 2000).⁸

Finally, some particularly challenging assumptions surround the *actions* step in our simple theory of change, i.e. that information which is read, understood, and absorbed will lead to action. It is well understood that a number of contextual factors will influence a reader's tendency to translate information to action, even if they have engaged with and been convinced by a message. So those readers who do develop an evidence-accurate belief may still fail to act. Alternatively, readers who don't update their beliefs (either because they never engaged with the brief or because they consciously or unconsciously rejected the message) may succeed in taking action. Just as readers

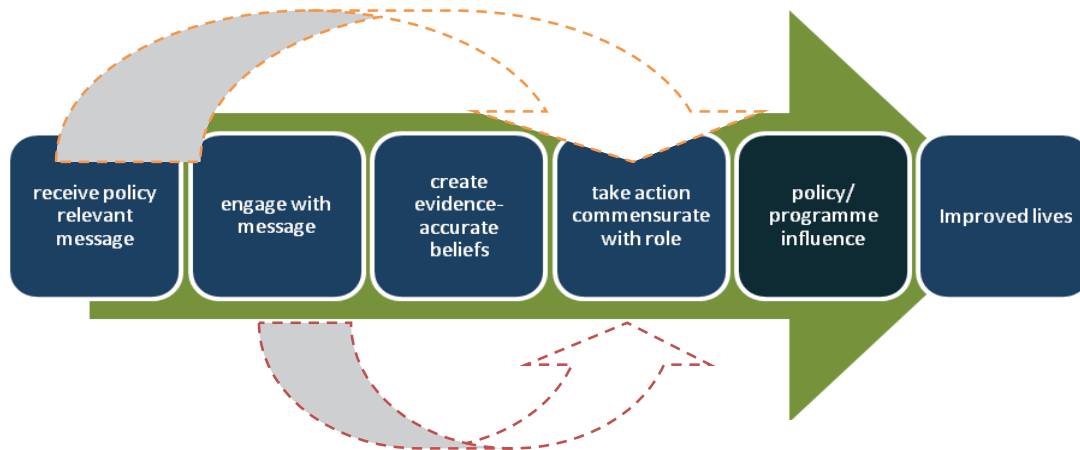
⁷ 'To test these assumptions, 48 undergraduates supporting and opposing capital punishment were exposed to two purported studies, one seemingly confirming and one seemingly disconfirming their existing beliefs about the deterrent efficacy of the death penalty. As predicted, both proponents and opponents of capital punishment rated those results and procedures that confirmed their own beliefs to be the more convincing and probative ones, and they reported corresponding shifts in their beliefs as the various results and procedures were presented. The net effect of such evaluations and opinion shifts was the postulated increase in attitude polarisation' (Lord *et al.* 1979).

⁸ 'The evidence suggests that there are multiple paths to an answer to an attitude question, just as there are multiple routes to placing an event in time or making frequency judgements. Which path is taken in any given instance depends on the accessibility of the necessary information and on strategic considerations, such as the amount of time the respondent takes and his or her motivation to render a defensible judgement.' (Tourangeau *et al.* 2000: 178).

make quick decisions about whether or not they will read a brief themselves, they can also make quick decisions to send the brief on to others within their knowledge network. Likewise, readers who mistook the message of a brief could still succeed in taking any range of actions based on their misunderstanding, and those who rejected the message of a brief may be prompted to research further, for example.

With these points in mind, when interpreting the findings of our study we need to assume that readers can bypass steps in our simple theory of change (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 A simple theory of change for evidence-based policy and practice



1.3 Reader characteristics that could affect results

When examining the relationship between reading the policy briefs and the beliefs and actions that follow, we were particularly interested in exploring gender, level of education, and self-perceived level of policy influence as potential effect modifiers (factors that may modify the treatment’s effect on the outcome). We theorised that differences could exist between the beliefs, types of action or levels of actions reported by men and women, and these differences may reflect actual differences in outcomes of achieved or different survey reporting behaviour.

When it comes to actual outcomes (beliefs and actions), there may be a number of drivers for gendered effects: in their reading of the brief, men and women may respond differently to the format, writing style and gender of the author making them more or less likely to be influenced by what they read; men and women may have different tendencies for action driven by innate qualities or by the environment in which they work. In their 2009 study of gender, language and social influence, Reid

and colleagues claim that ‘linguistic style, stereotypes and social influence are tightly intertwined’ (Reid et al. 2009: 466) and draw on self-categorisation theory, role congruity theory and expectation states theory to explain variation in men and women’s responses to a social message presented by a female reader who was introduced as either female or highly educated. They suggest that a complex interplay of factors determined by the listener affect men’s and women’s responses to messages;⁹ in particular, a) the listeners’ stereotyped expectations (regarding the style of delivery that is appropriate to gender and message), b) context-based self-positioning (whether the listener positions themselves alongside the reader or not) and c) context-based other-positioning (whether the listener identifies gender to be a relevant or irrelevant factor in relation to the topic). Also, research has found that in group situations information that was introduced by men was six times more likely to influence the group decision than information introduced by women (Propp 1995; Carli 2001). All of these internal and external factors may have implications for women’s readings of the brief and choices of follow-up actions.

With regard to survey reporting behaviour, there could be a number of factors influencing gender differences. For example, education research (Bennett 1996; Furnham and Rawles 1999; Hogan 1978 cited by Mengelkamp and Jager 2007) suggests that girls and women tend to estimate their performance to be poorer than do boys and men, when comparing similar performances. When translated into survey response behaviour, this could mean that women would report a lower intention to carry out follow-up actions.¹⁰ Other studies have shown that men’s and women’s self-reported past behaviours are influenced by their expectations of what is socially acceptable or socially empowering.¹¹ If men and women perceive different follow-up actions to be either appropriate or empowering based on their gender and social context (for example, *if* men perceive that they gain status by sharing knowledge items with others face-to-face, and *if* women perceive that they lose status by sharing knowledge items face-to-face) then when translated into survey response behaviour, this could mean that men boast higher rates of action and women are overly modest.

⁹ Particularly for our study, it may be that male and female readers will respond differently to the tentative nature of the policy brief message, the gender of the author (where known) and the interaction of these two.

¹⁰ Studies of gender effects in survey self-reporting show mixed outcomes, with women possibly over-reporting or under-reporting their behaviour compared to men depending on social expectations associated with the topic under scrutiny (e.g. potential under-reporting in surveys of sexual behaviour and potential over-reporting of healthy eating) and the method for data collection (e.g. a survey administered by a gendered interviewer or an electronic CATI survey).

¹¹ For example, Jonason (2007a, b, c, cited by Haavio-Mannila and Roos 2008) gives psychological explanations for men over-reporting sexual behaviour if not otherwise instructed. He suggests that men may gauge their own status by comparing themselves to other men in terms of how many sexual partners they have had. However, it is likely that the nature of men’s and women’s over- or under-reporting in surveys will be influenced by the social expectations associated with the specific topic under scrutiny. We are as yet unclear what the gender-related social expectations are for the range of actions explored in this study, and how they may differ based on cultural context and power/status of the actor. These are interesting areas for further investigation.

The level of education could have a number of (possibly offsetting) effects. While higher levels of education would tend to imply a higher exposure to, and understanding of, research, it could also make individuals more critical consumers of research evidence. Furthermore, very high levels of education such as a having PhD and beyond, would tend to be positively correlated with an academic position, which arguably would provide little room for any follow-up activities that translate more directly into policy influence.

A particularly interesting issue is whether people who perceive themselves to have a higher level of policy influence act in a different manner to others. Do they use different influence channels than others? Are they perhaps more prone to action in general? Rather than relying on traditional indicators of policy influence – job title and organisation – we developed a scale for self-reporting influence in a number of areas for two reasons: 1) we recognise that policy processes are non-linear and complex involving a number of actors inside and outside government, and 2) anecdotal evidence suggests that unexpected actors can have significant influence and would not be identified through job title and organisation. Further work is needed to interrogate the extent to which self-reported influence correlates with actual influence, or whether this indicator is picking up other traits such as a high internal locus of control. While this report does explore links between self-rated degree of influence and impact, the interpretation of this is complicated and should be approached with caution.