

Measuring the Impact and Influence of the Policy Brief

Research Summary

August 2012

How best can we communicate research so that it informs relevant policies and practice? How effective is the policy brief as a research communication tool, and what is the most effective way of using policy briefs to engage target audiences, and then influence action?

A pioneering study, funded by 3ie, and conducted by 3ie and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), in collaboration with Norad, has explored the effectiveness of a policy brief for influencing readers' beliefs and prompting them to act. The study used a multi-armed randomised control design to test whether the policy brief's design affected whether some or all of the readers' actions led to changes in policies and/or practice within their sphere of influence.

Key findings

- The policy brief was more effective in creating 'evidence-accurate' beliefs amongst those with no prior opinion
- Messengers matter when it comes to readers' intended actions
- Gender and self-perceived levels of influence affect people's intention to act after reading the policy brief

“The Policy Brief experiment is the first output of a more proactive approach to find out what works in policy influence. The results are striking, and not that reassuring for those, including 3ie, who place importance on policy briefs.”

Howard White, Executive Director of the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)

Summary of our findings

1. Influencing beliefs: the policy brief is more effective in creating ‘evidence-accurate’ beliefs amongst those with no prior opinion

The authors found that the proportion of respondents who have an opinion about the strength of evidence and about the effectiveness of two policies under discussion increased immediately after they had read the brief. Additionally, the brief was more effective in creating evidence-accurate beliefs among respondents who had no opinion at the baseline survey, than it was in changing the beliefs of respondents who already held an opinion.

2. Messengers matter when it comes to intended actions

Interestingly, the impact of the policy brief on people's *belief* seems to be independent of the brief's form (i.e. length of the brief and whether or not it includes an opinion piece), meaning that the opinion and authority effects suggested by Jones and Walsh (2008) were not supported in this case.

However, when it comes to *actions* the form of the policy brief does matter:

- a) There is a clear authority effect on readers' intentions to send the policy brief to someone else and an opinion-piece effect (i.e. an effect for both of the briefs which included the opinion-piece) on intending to tell someone about the key messages.
- b) Readers of the policy brief which included an opinion-piece from an authoritative source were more inclined to share this brief, than those whose brief only included an opinion-piece attributed to an unnamed research fellow

3. Influencing action: gender and self-perceived levels of influence affect people's intention to act after reading the policy brief

Being a woman is significantly (negatively) correlated with the intention to act for most of the intended actions (see Table 1), implying that women are less likely to claim that they will do follow-up actions than men. Where gender is not found to make a difference are in follow-up activities that do not entail direct interaction with others (e.g. re-reading the brief or sending it on). The significance of the gender variable decreased when looking at *actual* reported actions. This could indicate that women may be more cautious in stating *intentions* to act than men, but these differences decrease when looking at *actual* actions.

Table 1: Examples of intended and completed actions explored in this study

Revise the message	Share the message	Seek further information	Review practice	Change practice
e.g. re-read policy brief	e.g. send policy brief to someone else	e.g. read the full report of the study discussed in policy brief	e.g. review your current policies/ practices regarding policy brief topic	e.g. change your current policies/ practice regarding policy brief topic

When it comes to highly rating one's self-perceived level of influence in local government this is positively correlated with most intended and completed actions. Interestingly, while still being positively correlated, the effect is much weaker for respondents rating highly their influence in central government, and it diminishes over time.

Viewpoint: Should we bother producing policy briefs?

By Howard White, Executive Director of the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)

The traditional model of research dissemination involving the publication of a report followed by a dissemination workshop is not enough. The head of the World Bank's Development Impact Evaluation Initiative (DIME), Arianna Legovini, stressed recently that "dissemination is dead". At 3ie we encourage researchers to engage policymakers throughout the study, and to do so in many different ways.

As evaluators we should practice what we preach. We should innovate and test different approaches of policy influencing, and learn from experience. 3ie has commissioned studies¹ to examine the policy impact of impact evaluations, and put in place a monitoring and evaluation system to capture the policy influence of studies we finance.

The Policy Brief experiment is the first output of a more proactive approach to find out what works in policy influence. The results are striking, and not that reassuring for those, including 3ie, who place importance on policy briefs. But this experiment is just a start. It does show that, with a bit of ingenuity, rigorous large designs can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of policy influence. There is a lot of potential to learn more about how policy briefs can be more effective, or what sticks better than policy briefs in the mind of a policymaker.

We welcome suggestions for such experiments and want to explore testing new communications medium including social media. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that this work is only one part of the overall effort required for influencing policy. Policy making involves multiple actors in different ways, in different places and at different times. While there is growing acceptance of the value of evidence, there is still much work to be done in pushing the evidence-based revolution.

¹ See the studies at: www.3ieimpact.org/en/evaluation/policy-influence/3ie-case-studies/

Methodology: multi-armed randomised control design

The study used four “policy brief” treatments: a three page policy brief with no opinion piece; a five page policy brief including an opinion piece by sector expert and IDS Director, Lawrence Haddad; a five page policy brief including an opinion piece by an unnamed research fellow from IDS; and an alternative policy brief used as a placebo. The first three treatments were variations on a policy brief summarising the findings of a DFID-funded systematic review conducted by Masset E, Haddad L, Cornelius A and Isaza-Castro J in 2011. The systematic review aimed to assess the effectiveness of food-based agricultural interventions in improving the nutritional status of children in developing countries.

Of the 75,000+ people invited to take part in the study, 807 opted in by completing an online baseline survey. The sample was composed of highly educated people (60% holding a master degree and a further 20% holding a PhD); equally distributed between men and women; with most of them working in government and non-government institutions. 75% of respondents were already engaged with nutrition and agricultural issues in their work or research. The study’s limitations are around selection bias, its reliance on self-reporting, the nature of the original agriculture report in terms of its actionability, and the fact that a policy brief is rarely consulted in isolation.

Implications for those who work in research communication

● **Ensure policy briefs have clear key messages to minimise misinterpretation**

On the surface of it, finding that a significant proportion of participants pass on the message of the policy brief would appear to be a good outcome for research communication – this activity would a) keep messages in circulation, thus increasing the chance they would land on the right desk at the right time to influence the right decision-making process, and b) add currency to the messages as they are brokered from a trusted source, thus increasing the chance they will be read by the receiver. However, when coupled with a limited effect on belief, readers may move directly from receiving evidence to taking action, either without engaging with that evidence at all (i.e. without reading it) or with engagement but without an updated set of beliefs (i.e. they have not taken in the key messages of the brief).

● **Include opinion and authority features as they may help to ensure briefs are shared and passed on**

The study findings suggest a complex and yet unresolved interaction between readers and both ‘opinion’ and ‘authority’ effects. The authors found no negative impact associated with the opinion and authority treatments, and some positive impacts. While further research is required to unpack these effects further, at this stage it would seem advisable for those working in research communication to consider including such ‘opinion’ and ‘authority’ features within the policy briefs they are preparing.

- **Consider whether a policy brief's design or format is less appealing to women and/or makes them less inclined to take action**

The authors found that women were significantly less likely than men to find the brief 'convincing', which suggests that factors internal to the brief may be driving this finding. Gendered effects in the receipt of research communications must be explored in more detail, as this has far reaching implications for how we develop our research communications.

- **Target the 'movers and shakers'**

The authors also found a positive correlation between readers' self-perceived level of influence and their likelihood of carrying out follow-up actions. It could be that targeting these 'movers and shakers' could provide good outcomes for research communications work. Whether or not a higher self-perception of influence does reflect higher levels of actual influence, these readers are recognising themselves as the audience and responding to the policy brief. Even if they do not have influence, they are keeping ideas in circulation and potentially brokering knowledge to others who have greater influence.

Credits

This research summary is based on the report titled: *What Difference does a Policy Brief Make?* By Penelope Beynon, Christelle Chapoy, Marie Gaarder and Edoardo Masset.

The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IDS or any of the other institutions involved.

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The full text of the Research Report is available from:
www.ids.ac.uk and www.3ieimpact.org

Further Reading

Beynon, P.; Chapoy, C.; Gaarder, M. and Masset, E. (2012) 'What Difference does a Policy Brief Make?', Brighton: IDS

Jones, N. and Walsh, C. (2008) 'Policy Briefs as a Communication Tool for Development Research', Background Note, London: Overseas Development Institute

