

WHAT IS A POLICY PAPER?

A policy paper is a decision-making tool that:

- defines an urgent policy issue;
- identifies and evaluates policy options; and
- recommends a preferred alternative.

It does not aim at gathering and analyzing data about a policy problem (i.e. research), but at developing a set of recommendations for action.

The policy paper should provide comprehensive and persuasive arguments justifying the policy recommendations presented and serve as a call to action for the target audience. Achieving this usually involves:

1. Defining an urgent policy issue which needs to be addressed.
2. Outlining the possible ways (policy alternatives) in which this issue can be addressed.
3. Evaluating the probable outcomes of these options.
4. Recommending a preferred alternative (policy recommendation) and providing a strong argument to establish why your choice is the best possible option.

BUT WHAT IS POLICY MAKING?

Policy making can be understood as a process of identifying real world problems, formulating solutions and a course of action to follow.

- Identifying problems
- Formulating solutions
- Implementing actions

Public policy, which is determined and implemented by the government, is central to food security. Policies may be established by any institution or agency. Furthermore, policy is usually not a single decision, action or reaction but an elaborated approach or strategy. The policy may be implemented by a single government representative or body or by multiple actors.



EXPERT TIPS

- ✓ *The purpose of a policy paper is to provide policy recommendations.*

The critical question to ask is “does the paper identify the problem, present possible solutions, evaluate the effectiveness of these alternatives and make recommendations on which course of action to follow?”

- ✓ *Tips on Titles*

An effective title for your policy paper is crucial for attracting and keeping your readers' interest. As the first part of a report that will be seen by the reader, the title is an important opportunity to start communicating the main message to the target audience.

An example of a title that conveys the main message is “Making the Case for Cash.”¹

- ✓ *A policy paper needs to provide a comprehensive description of the problem and discuss available policy options. A paper might systematically discuss all possible options, while another might advocate for one particular policy choice.*

Part of the necessary trade-off is length. Policy papers should probably be limited to 10 pages or less if they are to capture the attention of busy decision makers. It is hard to be both brief and comprehensive. The purpose and readership of the paper will determine what works best.

1. Oxfam Briefing Note. 2005. *Making the case for cash: Humanitarian food aid under scrutiny*. Oxfam Publications http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/conflict_disasters/downloads/bn_cash.pdf

ELEMENTS OF A POLICY PAPER

Title	<p>The title is the first part of a paper readers see and it begins the process of communicating the message contained in the policy paper.</p> <p>An effective title of a paper should give readers a quick overview of the subject and problem addressed in the policy paper. A reader may use the title in deciding whether to read the paper or not.</p>
Table of contents	<p>The table of contents is a skeleton or overview of the structure of the policy paper. It shows the overall organization, the main sections and their sub-sections and page numbers to locate sections in the paper.</p> <p>The table of contents leads readers through the whole paper. It provides readers with a quick overview of the focus and major issues addressed in the paper. The table of contents helps readers to find specific sections or information that they are particularly interested in.</p>
Executive Summary	<p>The executive summary aims to interest readers in reading the whole paper.</p> <p>However, the main function of the executive summary is to satisfy the needs of those readers who will not read the entire paper and readers whose main interest is in the outcomes of the study findings and proposed policy recommendations, especially decision-makers.</p> <p>The executive summary represents the whole paper by providing a synopsis of all main parts and findings.</p>
Introduction	<p>The introduction sets the scene by presenting the context for the policy problem and linking this to the specific focus of the policy paper.</p> <p>The introduction demonstrates that an urgent problem exists and that your paper is worth reading because it will offer possible solutions to the problem. The introduction will include a statement on the purpose of the policy paper and a brief overview of the methodology used.</p> <p>The introduction may conclude with a road map, showing how the paper is organized.</p>
Problem Description	<p>The problem description identifies, defines and elaborates the nature of the problem being discussed. This may include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the background of the problem (the history of the problem: its causes; who is affected; past policies and their outcomes); and - the current status of problem (the current extent and impact of the problem, who is affected, the current policy and its successes and failures).
Policy Options	<p>This section outlines, evaluates and compares the possible policy alternatives. All possible policy options should be presented to build a comprehensive and convincing case.</p> <p>The focus is on evaluating how each option compares in solving the specific problem. On the basis of this evidence an argument is made for the preferred policy alternative.</p>
Conclusions and recommendations	<p>This section clearly presents the case to decision makers and provides a call to action. This section provides a concise synthesis of major findings.</p> <p>This is more than a summary of the main findings, but highlights links with the main policy recommendations that follow.</p> <p>Finally the reader is provided with a set of policy recommendations - practical steps that need to be taken to implement the proposed policy option.</p>
Appendices	<p>Many policy papers do not contain appendices. However, they can be useful for presenting additional information which supports the main arguments, especially when including detailed information would interrupt the flow of the main discussion.</p> <p>Appendices may present the data and methodology collected and used.</p>
Bibliography	<p>A bibliography provides a list of the sources that you used to develop your argument. Readers may want to refer to these references. It provides them with a comprehensive guide to the current literature on the topic which they may use in their own work.</p>

CHECKLIST

As you develop a policy paper or brief you should consider a series of questions. The following is the most important one:

Does your paper achieve its purpose of presenting an effective argument, to the primary audience, for your preferred policy option?

Is the title interesting, clear, succinct and descriptive?

Are headings of sections and sub-sections chosen effectively, and do they provide a clear overview to your paper?

Is the executive summary a good representation of the paper?

Is the policy problem clearly and convincingly defined?

Does your problem description convince the readers that an urgent problem exists?

Are all possible policy alternatives presented and evaluated?

Is the basis on which you evaluated each option – the framework of analysis – clearly outlined?

Do you demonstrate that your chosen alternative represents the best solution to the policy problem?

Do you outline a course of action to solve the policy problem?

Are recommendations clearly written and practical in nature? Are they easily identifiable in the text?

Are all appendices relevant and appropriate in supporting the paper?

A FINAL WORD ON STRUCTURE AND FORMAT

The exact format and structure of the policy paper or brief will need to be adapted to the purpose and primary audience.

For example, if you are working for government you may be asked to help develop public policy by carrying out an in-depth study and make policy recommendations. In this case, a relatively formal policy paper may be most suitable for reaching policy makers.

Alternatively, you may be a stakeholder outside of government looking to influence the policy debate on a particular issue. As part of an advocacy strategy you might want to target a broader audience through the media. A report suitable for uptake by the media might contain the same main message, but in a simplified form.

FIND OUT MORE:

E-learning

These guidelines are taken from the e-learning course “Reporting Food Security Information” available at: www.foodsec.org/dl

Publications

Young, Eyin and Lisa Quinn. 2002. *Writing Effective Public Policy Papers: A Guide to Policy Advisers in Central and Eastern Europe*. LGI Documents http://lgi.osi.hu/publications_datasheet.php?id=112

Examples of Policy Papers

Oxfam Briefing Note. 2005. *Making the case for cash: Humanitarian food aid under scrutiny*. Oxfam Publications http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/conflict_disasters/downloads/bn_cash.pdf

Stephen Devereux. 2003. *Policy Options for Increasing the Contribution of Social Protection to Food Security*. Institute of Development Studies http://www.odi.org.uk/Food-Security-Forum/docs/SocProtection_theme4.pdf

This document is available online at: www.foodsec.org/docs/policy_paper_guide.pdf

For more resources see: <http://www.foodsec.org/pubs.htm>

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