Writing an advocacy Policy Brief

An advocacy policy brief is a concise action orientated document used to facilitate policy making decisions or influence/advocate for specific actions on an issue or problem. The policy brief is a professional genre that is designed to translate academic information into a more understandable format by using strategies such as tables, images, and figures. Addressed at a specific policy maker (non-academic, yet, educated audience), they often need to make practical decisions in a certain time frame. Therefore, the brief should provide both evidence and actionable recommendations. A brief is usually 2-3 pages long which allows the reader to quickly grasp the essence of the policy brief. The brief contains the following sections:

Executive summary: Convinces the reader that the brief is worth an in-depth investigation. It is particularly important for an audience that is under time constraints to clearly see the relevance and importance of the brief by reading this summary. It is usually one paragraph in length (100 - 150 words) and contains no references and mentions the target audience such as specific government officials.

Background and importance of the problem: This section convinces the target audience that a current and urgent problem exists which requires action. The context and importance of the problem is both the introductory and first building blocks of the brief. As such, it usually includes the following:

a) A clear statement of the problem or issue.
b) A short overview of the magnitude and causes of the problem.
c) A clear statement of the policy implications of the problem that clearly establishes the current importance and policy relevance of the issue.
d) Research findings are incorporated throughout this section.

The length of the problem description may vary from brief to brief. There may be a need for a more extensive problem description at the evaluation stage of the policy versus the option choosing stage. Images or infographics can be added to support this section.

Policy recommendations: This section provides a detailed and convincing proposal of how the current policy approach needs to change. It includes a breakdown of specific practical steps of measures that need to be implemented by specific role players in a specific time frame that is actionable (SMART) and supported by evidence (where appropriate).

Conclusion/Critique of policy options(s). This last section describes shortcomings of the current approach or options being implemented and, therefore, illustrates both the need for change and focus of where this change needs to happen. It contains a short overview of the policy option(s) in focus and an argument illustrating why and how the current or proposed approach is failing.

References List: The number system or Vancouver style is preferred to avoid distracting from the message.

Author details: Added at the end so that the policy maker can make contact.

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