

THE ROLE OF A POLICY BRIEF IN POLICY FORMULATION AND REVIEW: BRINGING EVIDENCE TO BEAR

Gilbert Likando and Ngepathimo Kadhila*
University of Namibia

Abstract

Applying scientific evidence in policy making is a complex, yet crucial issue that policy makers need to embrace at all times. Evidence-based policy making helps in filling the gap between academic research and practice. A policy brief is perceived in this review paper as a neutral synopsis that makes research findings easily digestible with a sole purpose to succinctly evaluate policy options regarding a specific issue, for a policy-maker audience. Unlike the general recommendations from findings of an academic research, a policy brief is a 'professional' concise report that ensures the impact of research in addressing problems and challenges facing society. Using document analysis as a methodological approach, this review paper discusses the importance of a policy brief in facilitating policy formulation and review. In addition, it critically examines, what a persuasive policy brief entails, and what steps to consider in designing actionable policy brief. The paper also provides a critical analysis of the current status-quo in terms of the development and use of policy briefs in policy formulation in Namibia.

Introduction

Research has shown that while systematic reviews make the process of evidence mobilisation feasible (Lavis, Permanand, Oxman, Lewin, & Fretheim, 2009), it is the packaging and the way research findings are communicated to the larger audience, referred to in this paper as '*policy brief*', that is critical in identifying the issue. Lavis, Permanand, Oxman, Lewin, and Fretheim (2009, p. 2) assert:

Once an issue is prioritised, the focus then turns to mobilising the full range of research evidence addressing the different features of the issue concerned. These include the underlying problem, options to address the problem, and key implementation considerations.

***Gilbert Likando** holds a PhD in Education. He is currently a Senior Lecturer and Assistant Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Namibia (UNAM), Rundu Campus. His research interests are teachers' education, adult literacy and higher education. E-mail: glikando@unam.na

Ngepathimo Kadhila holds a PhD in Higher Education Studies (with Quality Assurance as focus area) from the University of the Free State, South Africa. He currently serves as Director for Quality Assurance at the University of Namibia. His research interests are focussed on the area of higher education. E-mail: nkadhila@unam.na

The implication in the foregoing assertion is that the findings of systematic reviews inform the packaging of policy briefs. Informed by evidence, policy briefs are central in the policy formulation and review processes, since they are “increasingly used as an input into policy dialogues involving individuals drawn from those who will be involved in, or affected by decisions about a particular issue” (ibid., p. 3). While policy briefs are important because they are written for a variety of policy actors – local, national, regional/internal or private (French-Constant, 2014) – evidence shows that “...there has been little systematic research” in many critical areas “to inform policy brief content and design” (Jones & Walsh, 2008, p. 1). This implies that there are several research findings (even in the Namibian context) that have not been synthesised to concise summaries to inform policy formulation or review on particular issues, and also make recommendations for the best policy options. While there are limitations in Namibia in conceptualising the role policy briefs play in informing policy formulation and review, two types of policy briefs are worthy of examining: *advocacy brief* – that argues in favour of a particular course of action; and *objective brief* – that gives balanced information for the policymakers to make informed decisions.

Conceptual framework

The orientation of this review paper is informed by the concept ‘*policy brief*’ as a means to evidence-based policy formulation and review. While several researchers (Jones & Walsh, 2008; Lavis et al., 2009) have highlighted the inadequacy of findings and research recommendations in persuading policy makers to take action, a policy brief has become an effective tool in communicating research findings and recommendations to policy makers or a “non-specialist readership” (Jones & Walsh, 2008, p. 1). In the Namibian context several research studies have been conducted in various fields and very little is known about the findings and recommendations of such research by policy makers. It is at this angle that a policy brief would play a key role as a communication tool to inform policy makers on critical issues that may inform policy formulation or review. According to French-Constant (2014, p. 5), policy makers are busy people by implication, and usually non-academics “... making research findings easily digestible increases the likelihood of research being read and acted upon”.

It is imperative, therefore, that researchers understand that presentation of research findings and making recommendations, even though they may highlight critical issues, is not an effective way of communicating research evidence to policy makers or “non-specialist readership” (French-Constant, 2014, p. 5). Policy briefs have the potential to reach large audiences through various networks because of their

condensed format. However, the challenge has been the inability of researchers to convert their research findings into effective and informative policy briefs. A quality policy brief should be able to clearly outline research findings and identify implications for policy formulation or review.

This implies that the policy formulation process requires careful consideration. Lavis et al. (2009, p. 3) identified six critical questions to be considered during the preparation and use of the policy brief in order to support evidence-informed policy formulation:

1. Does the policy brief address a high-priority issue and describe the relevant context of the issue being addressed?
2. Does the policy brief describe the problem, costs and consequences of options to address the problem, and the key implementation considerations?
3. Does the policy brief employ systematic and transparent methods to identify, select, and assess synthesised research evidence?
4. Does the policy brief take quality, local applicability, and equity considerations into account when discussing the research evidence?
5. Does the policy brief employ a graded-entry format?
6. Was the policy brief reviewed for both scientific quality and system relevance?

While we agree that policy briefs are developed for non-academic audiences, it is the careful consideration of the above six questions that makes policy briefs relevant, context based and evidence oriented.

Research purpose

This review article's purpose was to examine the importance of a policy brief as a tool for communicating research findings in a manner that is consumable by policy makers or a non-specialist readership (French-Constant, 2014). The article aims to advocate for evidence-based policy formulation and review, as informed by research findings. In so doing, it unpacks the policy brief development process and brings to the fore the *what*, *how* and the *when*. It further brings to light the role that policy briefs play in the policy formulation or review processes, as Lavis et al. (2009, p. 7) argue: "...policy briefs are a new approach to supporting evidence-informed policymaking".

Methodology

Literature review was used as a data collection method. In order to adequately address the purpose of the study, document analysis was used to analyse information from various sources that included re-

search reports and policy briefs. The Ministry of Health and Social Services' (2010) *Male Circumcision Policy* was analysed to provide a context to the discussion based on evidence.

Findings and discussion

Policy brief outlines the rationale for choosing a particular policy alternative or course of action in a policy debate as it has the potential to convince the target audience regarding the urgency of a current problem and the need to adopt the preferred alternative or course of action (Tsai, 2006), and serve as an impetus for such action (Young & Quinn, 2004).

While policy briefs in general are designed to support more informed evidence-based policy-making within an organisation, *advocacy brief* and *objective brief* take a specific approach in communicating research findings. It is evident that most research make several recommendations that may be very difficult for readers to understand, based on the technical nature and volume of such reports, as these are written by academics in an academic language that only they could (normally) digest and understand. An *objective* policy brief bridges the gap between the academic jargon and the target audience through a systematic approach, and is able to:

- explain an issue and its context, stakeholders, scope and impact;
- explore any known causes, links or relationships involved in the issue; and
- identify the implications of these findings for the key actors or the target audience.

While it is agreed that the findings explored in the policy brief could be built upon strong scholarly roots, it is also believed that a policy brief should target professionals (who have limited time to consider background material before having to make practical decisions), rather than an academic audience.

This observation brings to light the point that there is a high potential for the findings of important research to be lost due to the format and technical nature in which the findings and recommendations could be packaged. Given the limited time policy makers have, policy briefs provide a smart way on how large audiences could be reached due to the "... snowball effect, where a policy brief travels to an expanding circle of recipients ... because the research findings are in an accessible and transferable format" (French-Constant, 2014, p. 5).

Translating research findings into a policy brief

Whereas the definition of a 'policy brief' and its purpose to policy makers or non-academic audiences have been thoroughly examined, the question that still needs to be answered is what the policy brief

considerations are? Young and Quinn (n.d., p. 2-3), and Jones and Walsh (2008, p. 4) attempt to answer this question by highlighting six steps that researchers should consider when translating research findings into a policy brief:

1. **Issue:** The issue to deal with should be examined and the following questions answered : Is the issue general or specific? How general, or how specific?
2. **Audience:** Serious consideration should be paid to the primary audience. The brief should be tailored to the needs of the audience. How policy producers frame the analysis and recommendations makes a fundamental difference. Attention should be given to the following questions: Is the audience an individual or an organisation?
3. **Actors:** Relevant actors for the issue being dealt with should be identified. This is an essential step, since the interests of the audience need to be analysed in order to make sensible and viable policy recommendations. Identifying the relevant actors is equally essential to produce a good assessment of the context and of the interests that are plugged into the issue;
4. **Interests:** Once the relevant actors have been identified, it is necessary to analyse their interests. What are the actors' interests? Which of the relevant actors have similar interests to the identified audience? Which ones have different interests? How different? This step is important, both for the context of the brief and for the critique of policy options and/or policy recommendations. Without a clear identification of the actors involved in the issues and their interests, the brief will be vague, and thus not be useful;
5. **Recommendations:** Policy recommendations should reflect the above analysis. It is important to remember that, according to the issue and the audience, recommendation(s) might not suggest the best policy, but instead, the most viable one. This should not limit recommendations to just compromise policies. If radical change should be recommended, it should be done, and somehow implemented;
6. **How-To:** The last step is to suggest to the audience the way to 'sell' the policy to its public (the public could be other members of the organisations, policy makers, other parties, etc.). This last step helps the audience to build support/consensus to implement the policy recommendations.

The aforementioned steps underscore areas of consideration for a policy brief to be persuasive to the reader. In addition, Young and Quinn (2004, p.3) stress the following when translating research findings into a policy brief, or constructing a policy brief that can effectively serve its intended purpose:

- **Focused:** All aspects of the policy brief (from the message to the layout) need to be strategically focused on achieving the intended goal of convincing the target audience. For example, the argument provided must build on what the audience know(s) about the problem, provide insight about what they don't know about the problem, and be presented in the language that reflects their values by, i.e., using ideas, evidence and language that will convince them;
- **Professional, not academic:** The common audience for a policy brief is not interested in the research analysis and procedures conducted in order to produce the evidence, but are interested to know the writer's perspective on the problem and potential solutions based on the new evidence;
- **Evidence-based:** The policy brief is a communication tool produced by policy analysts, and therefore all potential audiences not only expect a rational argument, but will also only be convinced by argumentation supported by evidence that the problem exists, and the consequences of adopting particular alternatives;
- **Limited:** Adequately comprehensive, but appropriately targeted argument within a limited space should be provided ; the focus of the brief needs to be limited to a particular problem or specific area of a problem; and
- **Succinct:** The type of audience targeted commonly does not have the time or inclination to read an in-depth 20 pages argument on a policy problem. Thus, it should be kept concise.

Creating an informed audience for decision making

Jones (2008) states that policy briefs, if carefully designed, could be a powerful tool for communicating research findings to policy development audiences. However, the effectiveness of any tool depends upon appropriate usage. Producers of policy briefs aiming to increase uptake of scientific and technological research in development policy, need to focus on, and actively address, the communication tensions at the research-policy boundary. Policy-makers operate in a complex environment of competing concerns. The provision of research information alone is not sufficient to influence the policy agenda. The value of a policy brief needs to be viewed, not only in terms of presenting quality evidence, but also in translating new knowledge into context-relevant messages and guidance for policy-makers. Most importantly, however, even with a well-crafted policy brief, the research communication process has not ended but is only the beginning.

Young and Quinn (2004) claim that, as with all good marketing tools, the key to success is targeting the

particular audience with a message. The most common audience for a policy brief is the decision-maker; but, it is also not unusual to use the document to support broader advocacy initiatives targeting a wide but knowledgeable audience (decision makers, journalists, diplomats, administrators, researchers, etc.).

To foster uptake and implementation, face-to-face and/or electronic discussion and deliberation with policy-makers about the policy brief evidence and policy guidance is critical. Active mediation and translation among knowledge producers, knowledge brokers and end-users is needed, as well as an integrated communications approach that takes into consideration individual, organisational and systemic levels. It is critical to foster close collaboration between researchers and policy-makers from the outset, rather than disseminating research results at the end of a project in order to reach consensus on the key questions to be addressed, and to promote understanding of research methodologies as well as the ownership of findings.

Constructing an appropriate platform from which to communicate is also key especially when research findings challenge current policy approaches. Informed by insights from literature on advocacy and user engagement, there is a growing realisation of the efficacy of promoting broad engagement and participation on an issue, and using public engagement (global advocacy campaigns, community radio) as a platform from which to approach policy-makers and advocate for accountable decision-making (Start & Hovland, 2004). Improved research communication is therefore critical, not only between researchers and policy-maker communities, but also among the broader public.

Efforts to strengthen researchers' communication and knowledge brokering skills need to be complemented by efforts to strengthen the institutional capacity of policy agencies to take up research. This includes enhancing individual capacities and skills, as well as developing institutional channels, procedures and incentive structures to promote evidence-informed policy processes.

Implications of policy briefs for policy formulation and review in Namibia

Policy briefs synthesise existing research knowledge on a policy or practice of importance. If policy briefs are written in a language an interested non-expert would find accessible, it will answer the following questions: What is the research evidence related to a given policy or practice option? And: What policy recommendations follow from that evidence? (National Education Policy Centre, 2016, p. 1). An attempt is made here to illustrate how policy briefs could be used to make research-based options by providing a brief review of the 2010 *Male Circumcision Policy* of the Ministry of Health and Social Services (MHSS).

The Namibian Government, through the Ministry of Health and Social Services spends a large amount of money on male circumcision as a means to reduce HIV infections and prevent cervical cancer, among others. The Policy on Male Circumcision for HIV Prevention states that male circumcision could reduce the risk of HIV transmission *from women to men* considerably (GRN, 2010). According to this policy, studies show that circumcised men are less likely to become infected with HIV, in comparison to uncircumcised men, with the reduction in risk estimated between 51% and 60% (GRN, 2010). Our argument is that it seems the policy is biased towards women, as it focuses on “reducing HIV transmission from women to men”, but is silent on the transmission of HIV from uncircumcised men to women. Addressing this gap in the policy would require an evidence-based policy review informed by research to ensure that protection of females is also taken into consideration in advocating male circumcision.

The policy is also silent on the impact of homosexuality in the transmission of HIV. While the policy only makes reference to heterosexuality and calls for male circumcision, it is common knowledge that homosexuality takes place in Namibia and HIV could also be transmitted between men. The other challenge in this debate that complicates the matter emanating from the findings of the Integrated Bio-Behavioural Surveillance Study (IBBSS) conducted by the Ministry of Health and Social Services in Namibia in collaboration with the University of San Francisco in Windhoek, Walvis Bay and Swakopmund during 2012-13, is that there are men (who are not gay) that have sex with other men for monetary gain (Kangootui, 2017).

While this may hinder the national control efforts of HIV and AIDS, including measures to reduce new infections, it also speaks for the review of the male circumcision policy to address all compelling issues. The mere fact that there is no law in Namibia supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender citizens, and men engaging in sex with other men for monetary gain, cannot be a strong basis for the policy to ignore the dangers caused by uncircumcised men in these categories with regard to HIV prevention. In other words, the silence of the policy on the prevention of HIV transmission among men with same sex partners undermines the effectiveness of the policy. There is, therefore, a need for evidence-based policy review, informed by a policy brief to consider inclusion of some of these aspects in the existing policy, particularly in relation to HIV prevention.

Conclusion and recommendations

It became evident from the literature review that policy briefs are useful tools for conveying the implications of scientific evidence for policy formulation and review. It also came to light that writing effective policy briefs requires a specific set of communication skills if policy briefs are to be effective. Further, It

has been demonstrated through the review of the MHSS circumcision policy that policy briefs are an effective way of identifying gaps in the existing policies, and bringing important issues to the attention of policy makers, because they can be read in a short amount of time. Making research findings easily digestible increases the likelihood of research being read and acted upon.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- Namibian researchers should adopt a culture of translating their research findings into policy briefs in order to promote evidence-based policy formulation and review;
- Researchers should find effective ways of advocacy, and equally effective marketing strategies of policy briefs to policy makers and the general audience in order to ensure that these policy briefs are put to good use;
- Namibian policy makers should use policy briefs where they exist to formulate new policies and/or review existing policies based on scientific evidence instead of speculation; and,
- Where policies do not exist, it is recommended that policy makers remand for policy briefs from researchers before embarking upon policy formulation and/or review.

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