Evidence-informed policy briefing

Effective policy communication: Designing a convincing policy proposal

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1 - Research evidence is only “one piece of the (policy) puzzle”

2 - The key is to understand what your audience needs and wants

3 - All is played in the first few lines (or 30 seconds)
Effective policy communication

What the literature says

Brick et al., 2018

“No science/answers about “what works”

What decision-makers need:
- A clear summary of potential outcomes of their decisions
- Describing the potential harms and benefits of different options"
Effective policy communication

Tips from insiders

**Togolani Mavura** - Tanzania
Private Secretary of former President Kikwete

*Understanding the inner workings of policy making*
March 2018

**Babu Rahman** - UK
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

*How to make research more useful to government officials*
October 2017
“Government is not homogeneous – people think differently in every office, every ministry. Knowing what they are thinking will give you the leeway to build something that gets support…”

“Yours isn’t a debate about whose statistics are right, but how to influence change. The devil is not in the numbers, but in the narratives!”
Effective policy communication

Tips from insiders – Togolani Mavura

3 reasons why your policy proposal is not taken up:

- Other proposals are better
- Does not address the core/self interest (of policy makers or institution)
- Timing isn’t right (e.g. ahead of its time, at odds with public concerns…)

Effective policy communication

Tips from insiders – Togolani Mavura

1. Know the system:
   - Who holds the key?
   - Through which pathway can your policy be enacted?
     - Some policies must go thru parliament, others emanate from civil service...

2. Learn to see through their eyes:
   - What can they really do? (action/influence power)
   - What/who do they trust or care about?
     - Preferences and prejudices, usual data sources/advisors
3. Master the importance of timing
   - Government has its own internal clock/calendar.
   - Crises can be opportunities – e.g. need distraction to recover from scandal

4. Get smarter at lobbying – i.e. COMMUNICATING
   - Policymakers are over stretched and overwhelmed (by papers)
   - Find creative ways to get their attention and harness their interests
“Whereas academics’ value lies in illuminating complexity, civil servants are assessed on their ability to simplify complex issues down to the key components necessary to make a decision.”

“What we want from research is NOT: ‘it’s complicated’ or ‘here’s the answer’. What we want is comparative work highlighting a range of possible solutions, showing how particular tools and approaches have worked out.”
4 quick points that will significantly improve your chances of getting attention:

• Make your written piece short but not dumb – not easy!

• Avoid jargon and assumed knowledge – e.g. info about methodology

• Structure is really important – go straight to your point in headlines and bullets.

• Be accessible – make yourself available to sit down with someone and talk to them about the issue.
Effective policy communication

3-sided challenge:

• **Views** – need to influence “perception” (ideas, values, positions..)

• **Knowledge** – need to simplify complex information

• **Time** – need to grab attention quickly (short attention span)
Design a convincing policy argument
Must address policy makers’ core interests and concerns

Questions that decision-makers always have (Sir Peter Gluckman):

• Why do we have to do something now? Why is it a priority?
  ➢ What is the political risk of doing or not doing something?

• Have we got the OPTION that meets our broader needs?
  ➢ Who will it benefit, who won’t it benefit?
  ➢ Does it benefit priority stakeholders?
  ➢ What are the risks and to whom?

• What will it cost?
Must address policy makers’ core interests and concerns

Winners and losers (Brick, 2018):

Decision-makers need communications that **succinctly describe potential harms and benefits of different options**

Succinctly.....

**Use your TABLE!**

All in your policy paper!
Comparing policy options

1 - Identify policy options:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Efficiency/effectiveness</th>
<th>STATUS QUO Current policy</th>
<th>Option 1 – student work program</th>
<th>Option 2 – microcredit program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achieve desired outcome</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>+5,500 youth employed (per year)</td>
<td>+1,500 youth employed (per year)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost - budget implications</th>
<th>STATUS QUO Current policy</th>
<th>Option 1 – student work program</th>
<th>Option 2 – microcredit program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost-benefit analysis (RoI)</td>
<td>49 M RoI = 2.4</td>
<td>+ 5 M$ (5 years) RoI = 2.8</td>
<td>+ 7.5 M$ (5 years) RoI = 2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fairness/equity</th>
<th>STATUS QUO Current policy</th>
<th>Option 1 – student work program</th>
<th>Option 2 – microcredit program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>women/men, rich/poor...</td>
<td>poor &gt; rich men = women</td>
<td>poor &gt; rich men &gt; women</td>
<td>poor &gt; rich men &lt; women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acceptability</th>
<th>STATUS QUO Current policy</th>
<th>Option 1 – student work program</th>
<th>Option 2 – microcredit program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political risk?</td>
<td>Favorable</td>
<td>Unknown, but benefits larger popul.</td>
<td>Very favorable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feasibility</th>
<th>STATUS QUO Current policy</th>
<th>Option 1 – student work program</th>
<th>Option 2 – microcredit program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Means, tech, capacity...</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 – Compare options/scenarios, based on strategic POLICY CONSIDERATIONS
Design a convincing policy argument

Combine facts and emotions – to reduce both uncertainty and ambiguity

➢ Select key facts/evidence to support your proposal/claims
  • Don’t bombard people with information, use the most striking facts
  • Anticipate and prepare to address counter-arguments

AND

➢ Tell a story – or building a narrative
  • Addressing values, emotions, perceptions of right & wrong…
  • Emphasizing the “human side” of the policy, to build an emotional appeal
Combine facts and emotions – to reduce both uncertainty and ambiguity

(Small, 2008; Slovic, 2010) Series of psychological studies show that:

- Behaviorally, people ignore data when there’s too much (overload)
- Humans respond to humans, not statistics:

  The human brain has difficulty connecting emotionally with data, and it is emotion that typically produces the motivation necessary to elicit active response
Design a convincing policy argument

Combine facts and emotions – to reduce both uncertainty and ambiguity

➢ Cairney (2018): Develop an evidence-informed story
  • Including a plot, hero, and moral.
    ○ E.g. Find a typical beneficiary, describe his/her situation and how the policy has or would improve it
  • Your aim shifts:
    ○ from providing more and more “information” (to reduce uncertainty),
    ○ to providing a persuasive reason (to reduce ambiguity).
Design a convincing policy argument

Combine facts and emotions – to reduce both uncertainty and ambiguity

➢ Cairney (2018): Building a narrative

“Ambiguity relates to the fact that policymakers can understand a policy problem in many different ways – such as tobacco as an economic good, issue of civil liberties, or public health epidemic – but often pay exclusive attention to one.

So, your aim may be to influence the simple ways in which people understand the world, to influence their demand for more information.”
Design a convincing policy argument

Structure is critical – think “pyramid”

(Rahman, 2017)

- Senior officials have only 30 seconds to get “hooked”
- Always assume people won’t read more than 10 lines in your brief
- So get straight to your points in headlines and bullets
Design a convincing policy argument

Structure is critical – think “pyramid”

The pyramid principle: classic model of “persuasive communications”

#1 Key message
(recommendation)

#2 Core arguments
(findings – why this recommendation?)

#3 Supporting evidence
(Info backing each claim)

Conclusion or recommendation
Problem/question

Argument 1
- Support evid. 1.1
- Support evid. 1.2
- Support evid. 1.3

Argument 2
- Support evid. 2.1
- Support evid. 2.2
- Support evid. 2.3

Argument 3
- Support evid. 3.1
- Support evid. 3.2
- Support evid. 3.3
Structure is critical – think “pyramid”

The pyramid principle:

- **Situation**: A statement about the subject with which you know the reader will agree
- **Complication**: The complicating event that creates tension in the story
- **Question**: The implicit question that results from the complication

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**Answer**: States the answer to the question raised in the readers mind

**Key Line**: Major points which, taken together prove the answer

**Support**: Data and facts that support the key line

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Implementation requirements or road map
CONCISENESS IS KEY

The shortest pieces will always be the first and most read:
- E.g. brief, abstract, executive summary, press release, slides…

So should invest the most efforts/time to write..

REMEMBER

Your target audience won’t be reading your piece for the quality of its prose; they’re searching for insights to support a decision-making process.
Design a convincing policy argument

CONCISENESS IS KEY

Main challenge = balancing

COVERAGE Vs INTEREST
(information) (attention)

Keep only what’s NECESSARY to understand point – leave the rest aside

• First review: Cut out ideas/sentences
• Second review: Cut out words in remaining sentences
Design a convincing policy argument

CONCISENESS IS KEY

Main challenge = balancing

COVERAGE (information) Vs INTEREST (attention)

Use structure:
- **Pyramid**: get interest first, then provide coverage for those who want more.
- **Organize knowledge**: Group and categorize ideas + use headlines and titles
Design a convincing policy argument

Orwell’s rules for writing

BE BRIEF:

- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, ALWAYS CUT IT OUT!

BE STRAIGHTFORWARD:

- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a metaphor or figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
Design a convincing policy argument

WRITE FOR SCANNERS, NOT READERS

- **Think “skim read”** - use headings, bullets, etc
- **Give and highlight actionable contents** - help them brief their own audience

USE KEYWORDS, NOT BIG WORDS:

- **Plain language** will benefit/attract any audience, regardless of background
- **Put the more important before the less important, the general before the specific**
  ➢ Make sure you reach people, before you get into details
Illustration
Informing youth employment policy strategy
Pyramid principle: example

Slide #1 – Recommendation = problem/question/answer

Everything is played in a manner of SECONDS!!

Use the first few lines wisely

If you use a title – GET IT RIGHT!!
The national youth employment strategy should include “work-while-in-school” programs

It currently takes up to 4 years in average for young graduates to find work. Youth (15-29) represent 25% of the population and nearly half are unemployed (2019).

Government programs since 2010 have focused on providing training and support for youth AFTER graduation.

New evidence suggests that gaining work experience DURING school years can help young graduates find jobs up to 75% faster.
1. Programs focused on “post-graduation training and support” are costly and have limited impact on overall youth employment outcomes.

2. Evidence from recent studies shows that work experience during school years significantly reduces school-to-work transition period for young graduates with a secondary education.

3. Our analysis suggests that this new approach would not only yield greater results in terms of employment, but also be much more cost-effective than the current programs.
Slide #3 – Evidence/facts supporting argument #1

1. Programs focused on “post-graduation training and support” are costly and have limited impact on overall youth employment outcomes.

   1.1. Impact evaluations suggest that programs implemented since 2010 contribute to increasing youth employment rates by 5 to 8% (annually)

   1.2. Evaluations also show that post-graduation programs do not reduce of school to-work transition period – during which households are more vulnerable

   1.3. Since 2010, these programs have cost over 130 M$
2. Evidence from recent studies shows that work experience during school years significantly reduces school-to-work transition period for young graduates with a secondary education.

2.1. Several neighboring countries have successfully experimented with “work-while-in-school” programs, with significant positive results on youth employment outcomes.

2.2. Findings from local researchers suggest similar results can be expected here, and would reduce school-to-work transition by 75% (from 60 to 15 months in average).

2.3. The effect is greater if the experience is gained through apprenticeships/internships and during school holidays.

Include references
3. Our analysis suggests that this new approach would not only yield greater results in terms of employment, but also be much more cost-effective than the current programs.

**COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS**

3.1. **Current programs have yielded 126 M$** in gained productivity, tax revenues and reduced vulnerability since 2010. The programs have **cost over 90 M$** – **RoI of 1.4**

3.2. **The proposed program would cost approximately 50 M$ over 5 years.** Based on anticipated outcomes (youth employment and reduced transition/household vulnerability periods) it would **yield over 285 M$** in total benefits over the same period – **RoI of 5.7**
To implement a “work-while-in-school” program:

- **Analyze labor market opportunities**
  - For apprenticeships/internships for high-school students, esp. female students

- **Identify and survey:**
  - Relevant business owners to assess will and conditions to participate
  - Target beneficiaries (schools, areas, household income, etc.)

- **Create/mandate government unit in charge of programme**

- **Design program**
  - In consultation with Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labor, private sector, unions, etc.

- **Pilot + evaluate**

- **Adjust and scale up/implement**
Exercise: breakout rooms

5 minutes to read the Mongolia brief

In small groups (25 minutes)
Via Google doc link:
- Identify/select key messages from the brief
- Apply the pyramid principle to structure the key messages

Back in the main room (25 minutes)
- Read and evaluate other groups’ results
Next - tomorrow

Learn how to

1) Adapt to different audiences
2) Package & visualize your communications