

## Top Tips for Planning and Writing Briefs

### What is a Brief?

A brief is a concise summary of a particular issue, research project/ intervention, research findings, or initiative. It should have a clear purpose and key messages, e.g. providing evidence to inform policy change, or inspiring an action that will help your intervention or organization to influence policy, attract requests for further information or funding, and/or broaden the knowledge base of all key stakeholders.

### Audience

A brief is created with a specific audience in mind, meaning that *you can have many briefs depending on your key message, purpose and audience*. Your audience is often referred to as the key stakeholder who the Key Message/s are intended for.

#### *Potential audiences include:*

- Policy makers and Government officials
- National and International NGO's
- Global and National donors
- Academics and Researchers

Understanding your audience and, planning a brief with the specific audience in mind, is critical to writing a good brief that is likely to be read, understood, and lead to action.

- For **Policy** audiences the aim of the brief is to **highlight the problem**, and **share findings** from the **intervention/research**, with a specific **call to action**, for example, introduction of a policy or implementation of an existing policy.
- For **Practitioner** audiences the aim of a brief is to **highlight the problem**, and **share lessons** from **intervention/practice** to address the issue/problem.
- For **Donor** audiences the aim of the brief is to outline the problem as above, and to make a specific call to the donor community to allocate more funds to address the issue.
- For **Academic and Research** audiences, the aim of the brief is to outline the problem as above, **present the latest evidence** on either the content or research methods related to the problem and **identify gaps** in the existing body of knowledge.

### KEY MESSAGES

#### WHAT IS A KEY MESSAGE?

Questions to ask yourself to help develop your key message:

- What story do you want to tell your audience?
- What message is going to resonate most strongly with your key audience?
- What change do you want to see as a result of this work, and how does your key message fit in with your objectives?
- What action do you want to inspire, and will your key message inspire that action?

## Before you set out to write a brief, ask yourself:

- Who am I writing this brief for? (**Tip:** Choose one audience per brief and write for that audience only)
- How knowledgeable are they about the topic?
- How willing are they to receive the message? Do they already agree with my messages and I am giving them supporting evidence, or do I need to convince them to change their view?

## Purpose

The purpose of a brief is to convince the audience of the **issue/problem**, the **urgency** of it, and the need to **take policy or programmatic action** to address the issue/problem.

You need to be very clear on the outcome you want in other words, **what change do you want to see?** Once you are clear on this you can ensure your brief supports your team to achieve that change.

## Planning a brief

### *If you are writing for a policy audience:*

- It is **essential** to know **how** policymaking occurs in your context (at national and local levels). For example, **how** policy is made around VAWG at national and local levels? what political structures exist (e.g. ministries with a mandate to address VAWG, portfolio committees, interministerial committees, local level committees) that directly address your specific topic?
- Know what the political realities are in the policy context that you are targeting. This will enable you to work out how your key messages and call to action link these political realities. For example, who should you reach out to? who are the gatekeepers? how does your issue link to other political concerns and/or national political priorities?
- Briefly research opposing views to the key messages in your brief. This will help you understand who your opponents are, what their main arguments are, and how you can challenge those views with your key messages.
- Remember policy makers want clear concise information that is accurate and credible.
- Provide short, powerful key messages that they can use in their own lobbying, advocacy and speeches.
- Note that in addition to a policy brief, some (not all) policy makers may also want a research report or journal article to supplement the brief, be prepared for this request.

### *If you are writing for an NGO/practitioner audience:*

- Know what you want this audience to do, what action you want them to take as a result of reading this NGO Brief, and shape your key messages around that. For example; adopt lessons learnt for similar interventions, or collaborate to lobby or advocate for policy change, service delivery, more funds etc.
- Be clear on what information would be useful for this audience and provide it in short, clear messages, infographics, graphs etc.
- Understand your circle of influence among this audience, you may need to work with a range of stakeholders to develop your credibility and trust within this audience.
- Understand the role and influential power your organization holds in the NGO/practitioner space in other words among our allies. You may need to work with a range of different actors (academics, advocates, lobbyists) to influence programmatic decision-making.

### *If you are writing for an academic/research audience:*

- Write so your audience can understand why your work is of interest and relevance to them (e.g. content is relevant or methods are relevant). Show how it relates to the other literature and research on the issue.
- Cite credible and recent references to other research in the field (*Tip: As a general rule, references should not be older than 10 years prior to you citing them*).
- Ensure that you have a reference list at the end of the brief that is correctly and consistently styled. For example, use a reference format such as APA, Harvard, and Vancouver.
- Write clear and concise key messages (for example if social norms are a driver of VAWG, consider scale up of effective social norms programmes to prevent violence) policy with a “take home” message that can be remembered.
- Use charts and graphs and infographics to present complex analysis and key findings instead of long complicated narratives/text.

### *If you are writing for a donor audience:*

- If possible, it is advisable to speak to a donor or read up on their funding preferences before you write a brief. This will enable you to understand the scope of their funding and whether your work fits into that scope.
- Write a convincing “story” or background explaining the importance of the issue, what action/ change is needed and how they can contribute to achieving that action/ change.
- Explain to the donor how they can be part of the solution to the issue/problem. For example, their funding can help fill a gap in knowledge, practice.
- Clearly ask the donor if they would consider funding the project
- Thank them in advance for their time and anticipated support.

## Writing a Brief

A brief should be a standalone document that focuses on a single issue, initiative, or research/intervention.

For the purposes of What Works, the brief should be, ***no longer, than four pages***. It should be printed double-sided in portrait orientation. Anything longer is likely to lose your reader’s interest.

When laying out the brief, you may want to add one or two *photographs*, *select them carefully to ensure they reinforce the point you are making* and ensure you have consent to use photographs – (***Please refer to the RU and communication guidance document on taking and using photographs***). You could also use infographics, tables or graphs that illustrate your points or activities, in order to break up the text. If used carefully they can replace words and be very powerful.

Remember, that the ***key message*** is the most important idea you want your target audience to see. See box on the right with tips for writing key message/s.

The What Works template provided will also assist you in outlining the key components of the brief e.g. Background, Issue/problem, Methods etc. Remember you have limited space in which to get your message across, so use your words wisely.

### Tips for writing a Brief

- Use simple and clear language that is easily understood.
- The brief title should be short, clear and “catchy”.
- Write in short, clear sentences and paragraphs.
- Use credible information to *make an argument* for the key message, supported by evidence (research findings).
- Separate opinion from evidence and facts, and avoid opinionated statements
- Be creative and make the overall brief “eye catching” to grab the reader’s attention.
- Try to convey the socio-political implications of your findings (e.g. higher levels of VAWG, social discrimination, economic and/or social costs of VAWG)



### Tips for distributing a Brief

- Use the brief as a communication and advocacy tool to support activities such as lobbying, presentations at conferences etc.
- Identify key opportunities or events to attend where your key audience may be in attendance and target individuals to distribute the brief to. When you hand over the brief, engage them for a few minutes, do not ‘drop and run’.
- Find creative ways to distribute the briefs so that key policy/decision makers can easily access them. (e.g. social media, USB drives, info cards, CD)
- Follow up with an informal conversation or email once the brief has been shared.
- Keep copies on hand when attending meetings where you think your target audience may attend.
- Plan a meeting (e.g. stakeholder meeting or seminar) where you actively share the brief.
- Know the content well, so that you can briefly explain it to people as you hand it to them. In addition, ensure that your entire project team is familiar with the briefs and are committed to sharing them.

### Acknowledgements:

This document was informed by the following sources:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-uptake-guidance>

<http://www.researchtoaction.org/howto/policy-briefs-2/>