

ProSPER.Net Policy Brief Guidelines

What is a Policy Brief?

Since Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) educate current and future decision makers, they play a key role in building more sustainable societies and creating new paradigms. As educational institutions, they have the mission to promote development through research, teaching, outreach and disseminating new knowledge.

A policy brief is a short, stand-alone document targeting decision makers. It focuses on a specific issue or problem, and advocates a certain course of action for addressing it. It makes a clear, persuasive argument for a certain course of action, based on evidence and analysis. A policy brief can be an effective tool for contributing to policy debates and influencing the policymaking process.

As one of ProSPER.Net's main objectives is to bring up a new generation of leaders with the competencies to tackle the multi-faceted challenges of sustainability, ProSPER.Net Policy Briefs should help develop structural links and interactions between scientists, policy-makers and society at large. ProSPER.Net Policy Briefs can further help promote and practice inter-university collaboration within and beyond the network. The main aim of a ProSPER.Net Policy Brief is to integrate sustainability in curricula and research, both core ambitions of the network. In broader terms this means the transformation of HEIs in their curricula, research, campus and outreach towards sustainability.

Policy briefs must

- (i) explain a specific problem/issue,
- (ii) outline what changes are needed and what options exist, and
- (iii) recommend actions for addressing the problem.

Many organizations publish policy briefs, including think tanks, NGOs, and private sector organizations. Policy briefs are NOT promotional materials for projects. The argument and recommendations within a policy brief can, and in the case of ProSPER.Net should be based on the conclusions of project research. Project work should be related to the argument of the policy brief. By presenting recommendations based on specific research, policy briefs can help promote ProSPER.Net's research work.

Pitch

In order to assess its content and effective production, we recommend to submit a policy brief pitch (approx. 500 words) to the ProSPER.Net Secretariat. It should summarize the objective of the policy brief and its major recommendations. The ProSPER.Net Secretariat can analyze the potential impact of the brief and identify potential synergies with other in-house expertise in that particular topic. This will ensure the ProSPER.Net Secretariat can give the authors the necessary support needed to finalize the policy brief.

Structure

1. Highlights (120 words max)

Short summary of the issue addressed and the argument of the policy brief (2–3 sentences), and shortened recommendations (3–4 bullet points, one short sentence each).

2. Context and Problem Statement (Introduction)

- State the issue and why it is important
- Explain the scope and scale of the issue (convince the reader that action is needed).
- Address one specific topic and provide a balanced discussion of this topic. This sets the stage for your analysis and recommended course of action.

3. Analysis: What changes need to be made, and what options exist?

- Build on facts and evidence: criticize the status quo and show where changes are needed and why.
- Your arguments for and against different options should be the result of a measured and balanced analysis. Consider the impact and feasibility of each option.
- Provide examples (from reputable sources) such as data, comparisons, and the effects of inaction or policies that have been implemented.

4. Recommendations: What actions are needed in order to deal with the issue?

Provide a set of specific, targeted recommendations to address the problem. Each recommendation should be practical and feasible from the perspective of policymakers. List recommendations in the form of bullet points for clarity. 3-4 recommendations are typical for a good policy brief. At least one policy recommendation should relate to the vision and mission of ProSPER.Net: integrating sustainability in curricula, capacity development, especially for young leaders and towards creating a community of higher education institutions that can play a leading role in societal transformation for sustainable development.

Principles of an Effective Policy Brief

The following principles are based on best practice, and authors are strongly encouraged to follow them.

Be succinct. Policymakers usually have limited time. Be as brief as possible, using clear and simple language (free of academic jargon), and ensure that any terminology is explained.

Consider your target audience. A policy brief targets policymakers and other decision makers, but these are broad categories, including, for example, administrators, government officials, diplomats, UN officials and journalists.

Be practical rather than academic. The audience is interested in potential solutions based on new evidence, instead of research/analysis procedures.

Provide evidence to support your argument. Base your policy recommendations on solid evidence and rational analysis. Use academic references where appropriate, but avoid excessive referencing.

Reiterate your argument. As the purpose of a policy brief is to persuade, the strategic use of repetition can help reach this objective. Do not over-use repetition, and use different ways of making the same point each time.

Be practical and feasible. The policy brief is an action oriented tool targeting policy practitioners. As such the brief must provide arguments based on what is implementable in terms of policy.

Format

When submitting the manuscript, please keep in mind the following requirements. Below are guidelines only, but we strongly encourage all authors to follow them.

Template: 4 pages with a limit of 2,000 words, including references. British English should be used.

Visuals: Use of visuals such as graphs, tables, photos, ‘pull out quotes’, and figures is encouraged. They can help reinforce an argument and maintain the interest of the reader. A good rule of thumb is, if a visual is more effective than text in explaining a certain trend/process/framework, then it should be used. Visuals do occupy space that would otherwise be used for text, so this is to be kept in mind. The ProSPER.Net team can provide advice on the use of visuals, and issues such as resolution and space.

Referencing: Please refer to the [Referencing Guide for Policy Briefs](#) on how to use references.

Examples: Examples of Policy briefs can be found [here](#).

Authorship

The authorship may or may not include researchers from UNU-IAS. All policy briefs must acknowledge the ProSPER.Net Joint Project providing details such as title of project, participating institutions, period, and other relevant information.

Peer Review Process

The aim of the review process for ProSPER.Net Policy Briefs is to ensure the quality and technical accuracy of content.

- (i) Each manuscript is reviewed by at least two experts with recognized knowledge of the topic.
- (ii) To ensure objective evaluation, the reviewers cannot be members of the project team that produced the manuscript, but can be academic staff of the UNU system. When there are no suitable reviewers within UNU they can be external experts.
- (iii) The authors will be responsible for selecting at least three reviewers, with approval from the ProSPER.Net Secretariat.

The publication series is policy focused, and will often be used to present the results of collaborative research. As such, the peer review process will be open rather than anonymous or “blind”. Relevant expertise may not always be solely drawn from academic disciplines; a policy brief’s target audience may also be a factor in the selection of reviewers.

Editorial Support

Editorial Support can be provided on a case-by-case basis by the UNU-IAS / ESD team.

Publication and Promotion

Publication and printing will be done in-house through the UNU-IAS channels provided in the specific ProSPER.Net layout. UNU-IAS will publish and actively promote the policy brief through its open access communications channels including social media and websites. It is the responsibility of the author to widely promote the publication within his/her own network and affiliation.

This structure is intended as a guide. The exact structure (the subheadings and the number of sections) may be different, as long as above key points have been addressed.