

## **SURE guides for preparing and using policy briefs**

### **2. Setting priorities for policy briefs**

#### **Summary**

Because there are limited resources for producing (and using) policy briefs, it is necessary to decide which issues to address out of all the potential issues for which a policy brief might be helpful. The use of explicit criteria and systematic processes are more likely than implicit criteria and non-systematic processes to ensure well-informed decisions about which issues to prioritise.

The following questions can be used to guide setting priorities for policy briefs:

1. What criteria will be used to set priorities?
2. Who will participate in setting priorities?
3. What process will be used to set priorities?

Supporting the Use of Research Evidence (SURE) *for policy in African health systems*.

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Web address: [www.evipnet.org/sure](http://www.evipnet.org/sure)

Email address: [sure@nokc.no](mailto:sure@nokc.no)

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## Background

Policymakers, those who support them and stakeholders have limited resources for producing and using policy briefs. Consequently, only a limited number of policy briefs can be produced and it is necessary to decide which issues to address out of all the potential issues for which a policy brief might be helpful.

The use of explicit criteria and systematic processes are more likely than implicit criteria and non-systematic processes to ensure well-informed decisions about which issues to prioritise.<sup>1</sup> However, there are challenges to consider when deciding on and applying a priority setting process for policy briefs. These include ensuring that the process is both pro-active and reactive, and balancing the need for a rapid and efficient process with the need for a process that is explicit, systematic and fair.

There is a need to set priorities that are both proactive (i.e. focusing on long-term goals and strategic planning) and a reactive approach that can respond to unanticipated events and opportunities. One way of doing this is by using criteria that capture both of these needs. For example, a criterion that policy briefs should address important problems, such as those associated with a high burden of disease, can help to focus on long-term goals and strategic planning. Whereas, a criterion that there should be a window of opportunity for change can help to ensure that policy briefs are prepared in response to political or other events that open windows of opportunity. Another way of setting priorities that are both proactive and reactive is to use a process that allows for priorities to be revised or updated over short intervals of time.

Policy briefs take weeks or months to prepare and the timeframe for a priority setting process needs to take account of this. Thus, on the one hand it is unlikely to be useful to set priorities for policy briefs years or even many months in advance – at least not without revising or updating them close to the time that a decision will be made. On the other hand, priority setting processes should occur far enough in advance of decisions about which policy briefs to prepare that there is adequate time to collect the information that is needed to set priorities and to involve policymakers and stakeholders. One way of addressing both of these needs is to develop a list of priority issues that can be revised relatively quickly prior to making a decision to prepare a policy brief.

### **Questions to consider**

The following questions can be used to guide setting priorities for policy briefs:

1. What criteria will be used to set priorities?
2. Who will participate in setting priorities?
3. What process will be used to set priorities?

#### **1. What criteria will be used to set priorities?**

Although various criteria might be used to set priorities for policy briefs,<sup>1,2,3</sup> three criteria are likely to be particularly relevant for setting priorities in most circumstances:

- ***Is the problem (or goal) important?*** – For example, problems associated with a high burden of disease, large expenditures, major inequities, important inefficiencies or large gaps in access to effective care are likely to be important.
- ***Are viable options available that address the problem and/or strategies for implementing options that may have an important impact on the problem?*** – For a policy brief to be useful there must be at least two options that are feasible and potentially

effective – whether or not there is compelling evidence. One of the options may be the status quo.

- ***Is there an opportunity for change?*** – For example, if political or other events have opened or could open a window of opportunity, a policy brief is more likely to be useful than when change is unlikely.

Additional considerations that might also be used as criteria for prioritising policy briefs include:

- ***Is there important uncertainty about the problem and potential solutions?*** – If there are conflicting views or uncertainty, a policy brief is more likely to be useful. Conversely, if there is already a well-founded consensus, a policy brief is unlikely to be helpful.
- ***Is relevant research evidence available?*** – Although priorities for policy briefs should be driven by the importance of the problem and potential solutions, there may be pragmatic reasons for prioritising a problem for which relevant research evidence is available or, conversely, not prioritising a problem for which it is unlikely to be possible to find and synthesise relevant evidence with the resources and time that are available.
- ***Is there interest in informed deliberation about the problem and potential solutions?*** – A policy brief is more likely to be used if policymakers and stakeholders are genuinely interested in discussing the problem and potential solutions. It is less likely to be useful if policymakers and stakeholders are uninterested or if their interest in deliberation are not sincere; e.g. if a decision has already been made.

## **2. Who will participate in setting priorities?**

Priorities should reflect the views of those who will be involved in and affected by the decisions policy briefs will inform. Although it is unlikely to be practical to involve large numbers of people in decisions about which policy briefs to prepare, there are many ways in which policymakers and stakeholders can be involved in setting priorities.<sup>4</sup> These include:

- Consultation with policymakers and stakeholders
- Decision-making about priorities by groups that include policymakers, stakeholders and people with relevant types of expertise
- Group processes that ensure full participation by all members of the group

Consultation might include:

- A call for topics (problems or issues) through a simple, user-friendly questionnaire – The timing of the call should allow time to collect any additional information that is needed to prioritise proposed topics. At the same time it should likely be within, say, one to three months of when a decision will be made about which topics to prioritise, so that the relative importance of topics is not likely to change substantially.
- An email box or open phone line where suggestions for topics can be submitted at any time
- Eliciting suggestions for topics at face-to-face or telephone meetings with key informants, an advisory board or a panel of policymakers, researchers and stakeholders – This has the advantage of facilitating rapid clarification of proposed issues and collection of information that is needed to inform decisions about priorities. Meetings have the additional advantage of allowing for interactions amongst policymakers and stakeholders.
- Inviting comments on proposed topics – For example, after an initial list of potential topics has been identified, input from stakeholders might be elicited online (by posting the topics on a website) or through personal communication with policymakers and stakeholders by email, post or telephone targeted at key individuals or organisations.

- Interviews, focus groups or surveys – Standard methods for collecting qualitative or quantitative data may be used to consult stakeholders about their views regarding priorities. Although this often may not be practical or necessary, these methods may occasionally be used to reliably collect specific types of information needed to resolve disagreements or important uncertainties about the relative importance of proposed topics.

In most cases, the final decision about which issues to prioritise is likely to be made by a small group of people. Ideally, this should include policymakers with a broad overview of the health system and the policymaking environment, health system researchers familiar with a broad overview of health systems research and familiarity with the policymaking environment, and key stakeholders, for example bringing in the perspective of key non-governmental organisations, donors or international organisations, health workers and the general public.<sup>4,5</sup>

It may often be pragmatic for those responsible for producing policy briefs to make the final decision about which policy briefs to produce. However, having a steering group or advisory group make the final decision may have several advantages, including:

- Ensuring appropriate representation of the perspectives of policymakers and stakeholders who are the intended users and beneficiaries of the policy briefs,
- Protecting against decisions being inappropriately influenced by the interests of those responsible for producing policy briefs, and ultimately
- Helping to ensure that policy briefs address important problems and are used to inform decisions.

### **3. What process will be used to set priorities?**

After it is decided what criteria will be used to set priorities and who will be involved, a systematic and transparent process should be used to ensure that the criteria are appropriately applied by those responsible for deciding. Group processes should ensure full participation by all members of the group. Having a skilled, knowledgeable and neutral chair or facilitator is particularly important to ensure participation, good use of time and adherence to agreed upon processes for deciding on priorities.<sup>5</sup>

Because data to inform judgements are often lacking, unmeasured factors should also be considered by the group responsible for decisions about priorities. Both data that are used and unmeasured factors should be considered explicitly and transparently. An important role of the chair or facilitator can be to ensure that implicit assumptions and the basis for those assumptions are made explicit.

To ensure that the process is fair, four criteria should be met:<sup>6</sup>

- Relevance – rationales for decisions should rest on reasons (criteria and information) that ‘fair-minded’ people can agree are relevant in the context
- Transparency – decisions and their rationales should be publicly accessible
- Revisions – ideally, draft priorities should be open to comment prior to finalising decisions
- Documentation – the process used to set priorities should be documented to ensure adherence to the agreed process and that the first three criteria are met

A worksheet that can be used to summarise the process that was used to set priorities is provided as Appendix 1. A worksheet for summarising the reasons for prioritising a particular policy brief is provided in Appendix 2.

As with all elements of preparing and using policy briefs, the approach used to set priorities should be evaluated so that lessons can be learned for future priority setting processes. This should include evaluating the views of policymakers and stakeholders about the appropriateness of the approach that was used to set priorities, the extent to which appropriate priorities were set, and ways in which the approach could be improved. The usefulness of this guide in deciding how to set priorities should also be evaluated so that it can be improved (Appendix 3).

## Conclusion

There is not one way of setting priorities for policy briefs that is optimal for all situations. However, a systematic and transparent approach to making decisions about which policy briefs to prepare can help to ensure that policy briefs are relevant and used by policymakers and stakeholders to inform important decisions. A worksheet for planning how priorities for policy briefs will be decided is attached as Appendix 4.

## Resources

Lavis JN, Oxman AD, Lewin S, Fretheim A. SUPPORT Tools for evidence-informed health Policymaking (STP) 3: Setting priorities for supporting evidence-informed policymaking. *Health Res Policy Syst* 2009, 7(Suppl 1):S3.

Oxman AD, Schunemann HJ, Fretheim A: Improving the use of research evidence in guideline development: 2. Priority setting. *Health Res Policy Syst* 2006, 4:14.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Oortwijn WJ: First Things First. Priority Setting for Health Technology Assessment. In (PhD thesis) Leiden: The Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO) Prevention and Health; 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Oxman AD, Schunemann HJ, Fretheim A: Improving the use of research evidence in guideline development: 2. Priority setting. *Health Res Policy Syst* 2006, 4:14.

<sup>3</sup> Lavis JN, Oxman AD, Lewin S, Fretheim A. SUPPORT Tools for evidence-informed health Policymaking (STP) 3: Setting priorities for supporting evidence-informed policymaking. *Health Res Policy Syst* 2009, 7(Suppl 1):S3.

<sup>4</sup> Supporting the Use of Research Evidence (SURE). SURE guides for preparing and using policy briefs: 8. Informing and engaging stakeholders. Version: 17 May 2010. Available at: [www.evipnet.org/sure](http://www.evipnet.org/sure)

<sup>5</sup> Supporting the Use of Research Evidence (SURE). SURE guides for preparing and using policy briefs: 7. Organising and running policy dialogues. Version: 17 May 2010. Available at: [www.evipnet.org/sure](http://www.evipnet.org/sure)

<sup>6</sup> Accountability for reasonableness: Establishing a fair process for priority setting is easier than agreeing on principles. *BMJ* 2000; 321:1300-1.

## **Appendix 1. Worksheet for summarising a priority setting process**

**Date:**

**Country:**

**Who was responsible for the priority-setting process?**

**What criteria were used to set priorities?**

**Who participated in setting priorities?**

**Who was consulted to generate potential priorities?**

**Who was consulted about potential priorities after they were identified?**

**What if any additional information was collected to inform decisions about priorities and how?**

**Who made or will make the final decision regarding priorities?**

**What potential priorities were considered?**

**How were they ranked and what was the basis for their ranking?**

## Appendix 2. Worksheet for summarising the basis for prioritising a policy brief

Problem:

Date:

Assessed by:

Criterion	Assessment			What is the basis for each assessment?
	Yes	?	No	
<b>Is the problem important?</b> – For example, problems associated with a high burden of disease, large expenditures, major inequities, important inefficiencies or large gaps in access to effective care are likely to be important.				
<b>Are viable options available that address the problem and/or strategies for implementing options that may have an important impact on the problem?</b> – For a policy brief to be useful there must be at least two options that are feasible and potentially effective – whether or not there is compelling evidence. One of the options may be the status quo.				
<b>Is there an opportunity for change?</b> – For example, if political or other events have opened or could open a window of opportunity, a policy brief is more likely to be useful than when change is unlikely.				
<b>Additional considerations</b>				
<b>Is there important uncertainty about the problem and potential solutions?</b> – If there are conflicting views or uncertainty, a policy brief is more likely to be useful. Conversely, if there is already a well-founded consensus, a policy brief is unlikely to be helpful.				
<b>Is relevant research evidence available?</b> – Although priorities for policy briefs should be driven by the importance of the problem and potential solutions, there may be pragmatic reasons for prioritising a problem for which relevant research evidence is available or, conversely, not prioritising a problem for which it is unlikely to be possible to find and synthesise relevant evidence with the resources and time that are available.				
<b>Is there interest in informed deliberation about the problem and potential solutions?</b> – A policy brief is more likely to be used if policymakers and stakeholders are genuinely interested in discussing the problem and potential solutions. It is less likely to be useful if policymakers and stakeholders are uninterested or if their interest in deliberation are not sincere; e.g. if a decision has already been made.				

**Appendix 3. Evaluation of the SURE guide for setting priorities for policy briefs**

The following evaluation should be completed by the team responsible for setting priorities for policy briefs and returned to Andy Oxman [oxman@online.no](mailto:oxman@online.no).

1. How helpful was the guide for deciding what criteria to use to set priorities?

Very unhelpful	Moderately unhelpful	Slightly unhelpful	Neutral	Slightly helpful	Moderately helpful	Very helpful
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How could the guide be improved in this regard? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

2. How helpful was the guide for deciding who should participate in setting priorities and how?

Very unhelpful	Moderately unhelpful	Slightly unhelpful	Neutral	Slightly helpful	Moderately helpful	Very helpful
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How could the guide be improved in this regard? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

3. How helpful was the guide for determining the process for making decisions about priorities?

Very unhelpful	Moderately unhelpful	Slightly unhelpful	Neutral	Slightly helpful	Moderately helpful	Very helpful
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How could the guide be improved in this regard? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_



4. Were the questions to consider helpful?

Very unhelpful	Moderately unhelpful	Slightly unhelpful	Neutral	Slightly helpful	Moderately helpful	Very helpful
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How could the questions to consider be improved? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Was the background helpful?

Very unhelpful	Moderately unhelpful	Slightly unhelpful	Neutral	Slightly helpful	Moderately helpful	Very helpful
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How could the background be improved? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. What resources should be included in this guide? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. How helpful were the appendices?

Very unhelpful	Moderately unhelpful	Slightly unhelpful	Neutral	Slightly helpful	Moderately helpful	Very helpful
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How could the appendix be improved? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. How helpful was the structure of the guide?

Very unhelpful	Moderately unhelpful	Slightly unhelpful	Neutral	Slightly helpful	Moderately helpful	Very helpful
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

How could the structure of the guide be improved? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

9. Overall how helpful was the guide for setting priorities for policy briefs?

Very unhelpful	Moderately unhelpful	Slightly unhelpful	Neutral	Slightly helpful	Moderately helpful	Very helpful
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

In what other ways could the guide be improved? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

#### Appendix 4. Worksheet for setting priorities for policy briefs

Task	Who is responsible	Target date	Comments
Agree on the team that will plan and implement the approach that will be used to set priorities			
Decide the criteria that will be used to set priorities			
Decide who will make the final decision about priorities and how			
Decide who will be consulted to generate suggestions for topics and how			
Decide who will be consulted to collect comments on proposed topics and how			
Decide what if any additional information will be collected to inform decisions about priorities and how			
Decide how information from consultations (and any other information that is collected) will be summarised and used in deciding on priorities			
Decide who will facilitate any face-to-face or telephone meetings			
Prepare a report of the agreed priorities and how they were set			
Evaluate the approach that was used to set priorities			
Evaluate the SURE guide for setting priorities			