

ALC POLICY BRIEF

Primera Competencia para América Latina y el Caribe



Official Manual of the Policy Brief Competition for Latin America and the Caribbean

1. What is a Policy Brief

While there is no single definition of a policy brief, as the concept may vary across organizations and institutions, for the purposes of this competition we define it as a short document that presents a public policy challenge and proposes an evidence-based policy solution, with the aim of persuading a non-specialized audience.

In other words, it is a key tool for synthesizing the lessons learned from research and empirical evidence, exploring a problem, and providing strategic advice (policy advice) to various stakeholders in the public, private, or civil society sectors (for instance governments at all levels, NGOs, businesses, among others).

In the context of this competition, it is essential to keep in mind that your policy brief must always be action-oriented: its main objective is to recommend a specific solution or course of action, seeking to persuade the intended audience to adopt it.

Below, we present the key sections that your proposal should include.

2. Anatomy of a policy brief

A policy brief must be strategically structured so that a busy decision-maker can scan it and find key information instantly. Below, we present the sections your policy brief should include, along with the approximate recommended length for each one (this will vary depending on each brief):

2.1 Header and title

- **Title:** Concise, catchy, and descriptive. It should be more focused on the solution rather than the problem. For instance: *“Bridging the distance: Expanding tele-mental health services for rural communities in Guajira Department, Colombia”*.



- **Target Audience / Recipient:** Explicitly state the specific organization or decision-maker to whom you are addressing the brief (e.g., "To the Economic Commission of...", "To the Ministry of Environment", or "To the City Council of...").

IMPORTANT NOTE

Do not include your name or any type of personal identification in the policy brief document so that we can ensure anonymity. Each submission will be assigned a number, which will be matched with the personal details you provide in the registration and submission forms.

2.2 Executive summary (approx. 150 words)

In this section, provide a fast-paced overview of your entire brief. Keep it short and concise (ideally a maximum of one or two paragraphs).

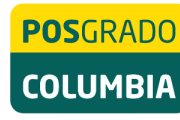
To maximize impact, this summary must include:

- **A high impact sentence that catches the reader's attention immediately.** For example: *"While the rural communities of Dibulla, La Guajira, carry deep psychological scars from decades of conflict, over 90% of its mountainous villages do not have access to a single mental health professional within a four-hour radius"*.
- **The problem:** A clear statement of the specific issue you are addressing.
- **The recommendation:** A brief, direct description of your recommended solution.
- **The impact:** The expected outcomes and benefits of your recommendation in both the short and long term.

We recommend you to write this part after you have the first draft of your policy brief.

2.3 Introduction (300 words)

The introduction is your hook. It should immediately convince a busy reader that the issue is critical and that your document has the answer. As you already did in the executive summary, define the problem and its importance, and outline the recommended policy very briefly.



TIP

To make your introduction more engaging, use a funnel approach. Start with the big picture of the issue at a macro level, and then quickly narrow it down to the specific problem, region, or population that your policy brief focuses on.

2.4 Body (1300 words)

The body is the longest section of the policy brief. Its purpose is to delve into both the problem and the proposed solution in detail. It includes 3 main elements:

- **Problem Analysis:** Go deeper into the root causes of the issue, backed by data and research findings.
- **Evaluation of Policy Alternatives (ONLY FOR CATEGORY 2):** Present and evaluate the available paths of action using clear criteria (e.g., cost, feasibility, equity, or environmental impact). In section 4 you will be able to find more information and tips about how to approach this strategically.
- **Policy solution:** This is the core of your brief. Clearly articulate your chosen solution. Explain why it is a viable option, and what specific change it aims to achieve. Also do not forget to acknowledge your preferred policy's limitations, rebut if possible, or explain why even though they exist the solution your solution is better

2.5 Policy recommendations (200 words)

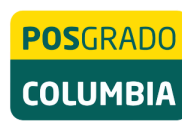
Once you have presented your policy solution, outline the concrete steps needed to implement it. Provide 3 to 4 specific, actionable recommendations, formatted as a bulleted list for quick reading. For more information [see section 6](#).

3. Defining the Problem

A strong policy problem definition tells the reader exactly what is happening, where, to whom, and why it requires immediate action. To achieve this, your definition must be: concrete, specific and evidence based.

Some questions that can help you to define your problem is:

3.1 What is the actual problem you are interested in, and who is being affected?



- Be specific when you answer this question. It is not just "climate change is bad." It is "rising temperatures are reducing crop yields for smallholder farmers in region X." Also, it is crucial to identify who or what is being affected by the problem or challenge whether specific population groups (target groups), economic sectors, institutions, or the environment.

GLOSSARY

Target group: a target group (or target population) is the specific set of individuals, organizations, or communities to which a government policy is directed¹.

3.2 What is causing this problem? Why is it happening?

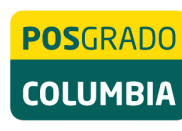
- Try to think beyond the problem itself and identify the reasons behind it. What factors are contributing to this issue? These may be social, economic, political, institutional, cultural, or environmental. For example, if your problem is poor access to mental health services in rural areas, the causes could be a mix of factors, such as the lack of funding, the shortage of professionals to serve these areas, or the low levels of uptake due to mental health-related stigmas.

3.3 What is the updated evidence behind this?

- To have a strong problem definition, evidence-based, you must cross-check and cite reliable updated sources, such as:
 - Official Data: Statistics and databases from local, national, or regional governments.
 - Grey literature: Reports from regional and international organizations (e.g., UN, World Bank, IDB).
 - Academia: Peer-reviewed studies, university research, and academic papers.
 - Civil society: White papers, field research, and impact reports from the third sector.

3.4 Why does this matter *right now*?

- Ask yourself: What will happen if the decision-maker looks at your brief, shrugs, and decides to do absolutely nothing? What are the economic, social, or environmental costs of waiting to solve this?



3.5 Who can do something about this?

- Not all actors in society have the same power, resources, or responsibility to address a public problem. Think about which institutions, organizations, or groups are actually able to take action on the challenge you identified.

3.6 What is the current policy (if there is one already addressing this issue), and how could it be improved?

- Investigate the existing policies or programs currently in place, and explicitly address the specific gaps, inefficiencies, or flaws that your research has uncovered.

3.7 Which Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and specific targets does your project address?

- For this competition, your policy paper must align with one or more of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). **Identify which SDG(s) your issue addresses (for example, SDG 5: Gender Equality or SDG 13: Climate Action) and state this alignment explicitly in your introduction or problem analysis section.**

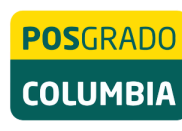
4. Policy alternatives: Finding a solution to your problem

Now that you have clearly defined the problem you want to address, you need to think about what would be the best policy solution to solve it. In public policy, there are always many possible strategies to solving one single problem – and the process of policy formulation involves considering the available policy alternatives and deciding on the best course of action².

4.1 What are policy tools and which ones exist?

Policy tools are the instruments governments implement to achieve their policy goals³. These instruments depend on the types of resources that are available to governments, and can be divided into four groups (based on Christopher Hood's framework^{2,3}):

- Instruments that rely on the government's information or knowledge, such as **information campaigns**, which are employed to inform or persuade the population, aiming to influence choices and promote behavioral changes.



Example: A national awareness campaign about social isolation and public mental health services available in rural areas.

- Instruments that utilize a government's authority – its competence to establish rules and issue punishments – include **legislation and regulations (rules, standards, permits, licences, certifications, and others that are imposed on social and economic activities)**.

Example: A new law establishing the provision of mental health services as an obligation of the national health system, which was previously not mandatory.

- Instruments that distribute the government's financial resources, such as **subsidies (financial incentives, financing, funds)** to incentivize actions, and **fees and taxes** to discourage behaviors.

Example: Providing reimbursements to mental health professionals for consultations done in rural areas – both online and on-site, in order to incentivize clinicians to serve remote communities.

- Instruments that rely on the government's organizational structure, such as the **direct provision of goods and services** (such as through health and education policies), **public organizations and companies** (which can provide goods and services not offered by private companies), **market creation** (such as through licensing of services and privatization), and **institutional reorganization**.

Example: Creation of a new program of mental health mobile units that deploys multidisciplinary teams on scheduled visits to rural communities to provide consultations, therapy sessions and medications to populations with little access to mental health services.

Now you have a general overview of the types of instruments that are employed by governments. When thinking about potential policy alternatives to your problem, you can also consider:

- policies that already exist in that context
- proposals that have been made to address the problem
- measures that have been implemented elsewhere
- expansions or improvements to existing policies and programs

If you already have an initial idea for a measure to solve the problem you have identified, think about what type of instrument it is, what government resource it



involves (it is likely that it involves more than one), and what other instruments could also work.

If you don't have an idea yet, try to think about the logic behind these types of instruments and how it would interact with your problem. This might help you visualize potential alternatives. *For example, if your problem is that mental health in rural areas has sharply declined, perhaps an information campaign on existing services could increase uptake. Maybe there needs to be further service provision by the government, or financing of local support groups.* Below, we will discuss the process of evaluating these options and how to choose the most fitting one.

4.2 Why compare alternatives and how to do it well

IMPORTANT NOTE

The discussion of policy alternatives is optional for Category 1 (Undergraduate Students) applicants – it does not have to be included in their policy brief. **Only Category 2 (Young Professionals & Graduate Students) applicants must include this in their submission.** Please see the "Call for Applications" document for a full description of requirements and evaluation criteria for each category.

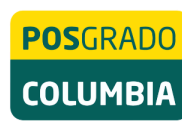
Convincing your audience that your policy solution is the best course to follow is not an easy task. An approach to make your solution stand out is to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of alternative policies.

Your brief should focus on explaining your problem and showing why your solution is the best to solve it. However, reviewing other policy alternatives can make your arguments more grounded and dispute readers' potential questions about the choices you made. **For applicants in Category 2, it is mandatory to include a discussion of two (2) alternatives other than your proposed solution.**

For structuring this section, think about the following questions:

- WHAT are the pros and cons of each of these alternatives?
- WHY is my proposed solution better than the other policy options?

Make sure to structure this section of your brief so that the three alternatives are clearly presented and that these two questions are answered within the text. This is important for evaluators to be able to identify that you have satisfied the assessment requirements.



The next section will help you evaluate your options by defining evaluation criteria. When presenting your discussion, be careful: don't highlight only negative things about other policies to make your solution **appear** better, but make sure that you are clearly showing your audience in what ways your solution **is** better in order to convince them to adopt and/or support your solution.

4.3 Evaluation criteria: making a choice

Policymakers design and choose to implement certain policies due to a number of reasons, such as resource and legal constraints, political pressure and interests, previous policy knowledge and data about measures that did (or did not) work in the past, policymakers' subjective perception of the measure, among others².

Therefore, potential policy solutions should be carefully evaluated, considering what criteria and what constraints are relevant for the specific problem and solution at hand. Establishing the relevant criteria to your analysis will help you decide which alternative is the best. You should start by defining:

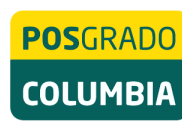
- What are the relevant criteria to this problem/solution?
- What is the level of importance of each of the criteria?

You don't have to explicitly include your criteria in your brief for this competition, but you should use them to help construct your analysis and guide your choices. Consider, for example, what is most relevant when it comes to your problem and what are the values and priorities of your target audience, and keep them in mind when developing your criteria.

To help you think about your criteria, see the example below:

- **Problem:** Low levels of access to mental health professionals in rural areas.
- **Audience:** Secretary of the Department of Mental Health within the Ministry of Health
- **Relevant criteria:**

Criterion	Rationale	Importance
Efficiency	In order to gain political support and to be feasible considering the resources available within the health budget, the program should be as cost-effective as possible.	High
Equity of access	The proposed solution should be available to the entire population living in rural areas and	Medium



	that it takes into consideration the needs of specific groups or areas in order to increase uptake.	
Logistics and infrastructure	Since some areas where the program will be implemented are remote, logistics and infrastructure are an important criteria when choosing the best policy alternative.	High
Public acceptability	Considering the public's opinion is important – especially since existing stigmas regarding mental health might impact uptake. The policy design and framing of the program should take this into account.	Medium
Access to mental health services	In what ways and to what extent will access be improved for the rural population? How well does each policy alternative deliver this expected outcome?	High

If you'd like more guidance on this, we recommend the OECD's 2021 publication "Applying Evaluation Criteria Thoughtfully"⁴. It defines six core evaluation criteria (relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability) as flexible "lenses" meant to be adapted to any context. While our example uses more specific terms to define the criteria, contextualizing them, these function as adapted ways of measuring the OECD's broader categories. This recognized approach allows you to address unique policy problems while basing your work on a solid framework. You can also explore additional approaches alongside this method.

5. Your policy solution: structuring your proposal

Now that you have considered the available alternatives, thought about the most important criteria to decide on your course of action, and chosen your proposed solution, you must clearly state and present your chosen solution (your proposal). **This is, in simple terms, WHAT you believe must be done to address your problem and why it is a viable option.**

5.1 Presenting your solution

The goal of a policy brief is to persuade the audience – the policymakers – to adopt a proposed policy. Therefore, the presentation of your proposed solution within your brief should be well-structured and clear, explaining what the policy entails, how it will work, through what mechanisms it will solve the discussed problem and why it is



the best course of action available. You can decide on the best way to present your solution, but make sure it is clear and able to convince your target audience to support your idea.

See below two short examples of what weak and strong framings to the same policy solution could look like – showing how specificity and a good structure make a difference when pitching an idea.

- **Weak:** “Provision of consultations to the rural population by sending more mental health professionals to municipalities”
- **Strong:** “Creation of a program of mental health mobile units that deploys multidisciplinary teams on scheduled visits to rural communities every 2 weeks to provide consultations, therapy sessions and medications to populations with little access to mental health services”

5.2 Acknowledging limitations

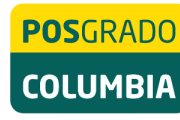
Although you must convince your audience to support your policy solution, you do not have to pretend that it is perfect. As previously discussed, acknowledging other possibilities actually strengthens your point, because it shows you have thought seriously about trade-offs. As Herman puts it, a policy analyst’s credibility depends on their ability to locate and account for counterarguments⁵. The technique is to acknowledge weaknesses briefly and then refute or qualify them: explain why each limitation is manageable, outweighed by the benefits, or addressable through implementation design.

6. The recommendations

Once you have evaluated the problem, weighed your options and found your policy solution, you arrive at the heart of the policy brief: writing the recommendations. This is a key part because it is where your analysis becomes action. The same way your policy solution answers **WHAT** to do, the recommendations state **HOW** to do it. Some people underestimate the importance of this section, but a policy brief is, in the end, a persuasive document that aims to call for action⁶. Therefore, a strong analysis paired with vague or unrealistic recommendations will rarely catch a policymaker’s attention and would miss the point of a policy brief.

6.1 From analysis to action

A recommendation is not the same as a conclusion or a suggestion. A conclusion summarizes what the evidence shows, and a suggestion explains what may happen. A recommendation, on the other hand, states what should happen to achieve your policy solution, clearly and specifically. Recommendations are the practical steps



that need to be taken to implement the chosen policy option argued for¹. Your paper, and particularly your policy solution, should build toward your recommendations, not just trace the state and history of the issue you are trying to address⁵. That is, a recommendation has to fit the direction of your paper and follow the solution you just presented.

6.2 Be specific, grounded, and actionable

Vague recommendations are the most common weakness in policy briefs. A well-formulated recommendation names a specific actor, describes a concrete action, implies a mechanism, and avoids generalizations that cannot be acted on⁵. That is, they have:

- **Commitment:** A brief that ends in "it depends" has not done its job. Evidence can be complex, but you should commit to a course of action and explain why.
- **Ownership:** consider the actor who should take the action, which usually connects to who you are targeting. "Something should be done" is not a recommendation.

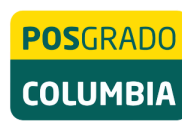
Guidance from the FAO emphasizes keeping the list of recommendations short and tied to the evidence⁷. For this contest, we require minimum 3 and maximum 4 specific recommendations as evaluation criteria. As an example of recommendations compare:

- **Weak:** "Authorities should address the lack of mental health services in rural areas."
- **Strong:** "The Ministry of Health should first focus on allocating more of the primary care budget to community mental health centers in municipalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants, to ensure better access to these services in remote areas."

The second version tells someone how to do it and why. It can be acted on, debated, and tracked. The first cannot.

6.3 Account for the implementation context

As for the policy solution, a recommendation that ignores political and institutional reality risks being analytically correct but practically irrelevant. Policy analysts must consider whether policymakers will adopt and implement the policy⁸. Before finalizing your recommendation, try to ask yourself again: Who has the authority to implement this? Which actors are likely to resist, and why? What conditions would have to hold for the recommendation to become real? You do not need to resolve every implementation challenge, but you must show your reader that you understand the context to which your recommendation applies.



7. Style, Tone, and Presentation

In a policy brief, the presentation is part of the argument. You can have excellent analysis, but if you cannot catch the reader's eye, you will fail to persuade.

7.1 Tone: technical but accessible

The style of a policy brief can be positioned between academic writing and journalism. Avoid academic jargon and literature-review framing, but also the emotional and rhetorical flourishes of journalism. Your reader/target is a group of busy decision-makers, so, even if you are dealing with a technical subject, the language of the brief should be accessible to a wide range of readers⁶. Before submitting, read your draft as if you were the receiver, and cut or define any term that seems too wordy⁵. We recommend asking someone that might not be so familiar with the field to read it and give you feedback.

7.2 Structure and subheadings

Having a clear structure in your policy brief is extremely important. The reader has to be able to skim through the document in ways that suit their interest and purposes, so using clear and specific section headings, sub-sections, data in tables or graphs, and bullet points when needed is recommended⁶. Try to make subheadings informative and connected to your text and not generic.

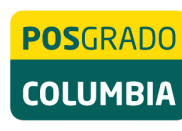
7.3 Visuals

Tables, charts, and diagrams are expected in a strong policy brief. A clear visual can communicate more efficiently than text, but it must earn its place by being relevant and directly illustrating your argument. Also, it is important not to overcrowd your brief with images as it might have the opposite effect and make the reading less smooth. Finally, ensure all visuals are original, freely licensed, have a proper citation, and/or are used with explicit authorization. Regarding the text, it is important that it is readable and clear. Therefore, in this competition **you are required to use the Times New Roman font, size 12, with line spacing 1.5.**

7.4 Referencing

All quoted evidence, facts, and statistics must be cited using [Vancouver/AMA](#) or APA style ([English](#), [Spanish](#)). You should avoid citing a bare URL in the body of the text and always include and verify the author, title, source, and date. **A minimum of 10 references is required for this policy brief.**

8. Examples of policy briefs



In order to help you visualize what a policy brief might look like, we have selected a few examples of published briefs. Please note that these examples don't necessarily fit the exact requirements of this competition, and that they are provided in order to exemplify variations in style, formatting, length, topics, and argumentation style. Take a look at them and get inspired!

AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH

- International IDEA. (2016). *Supporting peace in the Americas: Lessons from the Organization of American States* (Policy Brief). International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.
<https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/supporting-peace-in-the-americas-lessons-from-the-organization-of-american-states.pdf>

AVAILABLE IN BOTH SPANISH AND ENGLISH

- Galán-Muros, V., & Roser-Chinchilla, J. (2024). *Indicadores prioritarios en los planes de educación superior: del monitoreo a la prospectiva* (Policy Brief). Serie Análisis PES, UNESCO IESALC, número 3.
https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391349_spa
- Mendigutxia, A. (2024). *El papel de la educación superior en las estrategias nacionales de inteligencia artificial: una revisión comparativa de políticas* (Policy Brief). UNESCO IESALC, Serie Análisis de Políticas de ES.
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000392038>

AVAILABLE IN SPANISH

- Instituto de la UNESCO para el Aprendizaje a lo Largo de Toda la Vida. (2017). *Involucrar a las familias en la alfabetización y el aprendizaje* (Notas sobre política del UIL n.º 9). UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.
https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000249463_spa

AVAILABLE IN BOTH PORTUGUESE AND ENGLISH

- Bender, M. G., Longo, G. O., Luza, A. L., Aued, A., Segal, B., Ferreira, C. E. L., Cordeiro, C. A. M. M., Dambros, C., Vila-Nova, D., Barneche, D. R., Pinheiro, H., Quimbayo, J. P., Gonçalves, L., Eggertsen, L., Dias, M., Hanazaki, N., Luiz, O., Jr., Magris, R., Francini-Filho, R., ... Floeter, S. R. (2023). *Como garantir o futuro dos recifes brasileiros? Ações regionais no contexto de impactos globais*. SinBiose/CNPq.
https://www.gov.br/cnpq/pt-br/acesso-a-informacao/acoes-e-programas/programas/sinbiose-1/pdfs/Brief_REEFSYN_PORTTELA.pdf
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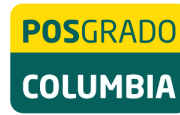
AVAILABLE IN PORTUGUESE

- Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada. (2021). *Atlas da violência 2021* (Em Questão: Evidências para políticas públicas, N.º 8) (Policy Brief).
<https://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/categorias/134-policy-brief-em-questao/8498-policy-brief-em-questao-evidencias-para-politicas-publicas>



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²Capella, A. C. (2018). *Formulação de Políticas Públicas*. Escola Nacional de Administração Pública (Enap). <http://repositorio.enap.gov.br/handle/1/3332>

³Bali, A. S., Howlett, M., Lewis, J. M., & Ramesh, M. (2021). Procedural policy tools in theory and practice. *Policy and Society*, 40(3), 295–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2021.1965379>

⁴OECD. (2021). *Applying Evaluation Criteria Thoughtfully*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/543e84ed-en>

⁵Herman, L. (2018). *Tips for Writing Policy Papers: A Policy Lab Communications Workshop*. Stanford Law School. <https://law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/White-Papers-Guidelines.pdf>

⁶Young, E., & Quinn, L. (2002). *Writing Effective Public Policy Papers: A Guide for Policy Advisers in Central and Eastern Europe*. Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative, Open Society Institute. <https://caw.ceu.edu/sites/caw.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/116/writingeffectivepublicpolicypapersyoungquinn.pdf>

⁷Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). (2011). Preparing policy briefs. In: *Food Security Communications Toolkit*. FAO. <https://www.fao.org/4/i2195e/i2195e03.pdf>

⁸Munger, M. C. (2000). *Analyzing Policy: Choices, Conflicts, and Practices*. W.W. Norton & Company.