Guidelines & toolkits

NiPN
National Information Platforms for Nutrition

Practical considerations for communicating evidence to policy makers: identifying best practices for conveying research findings

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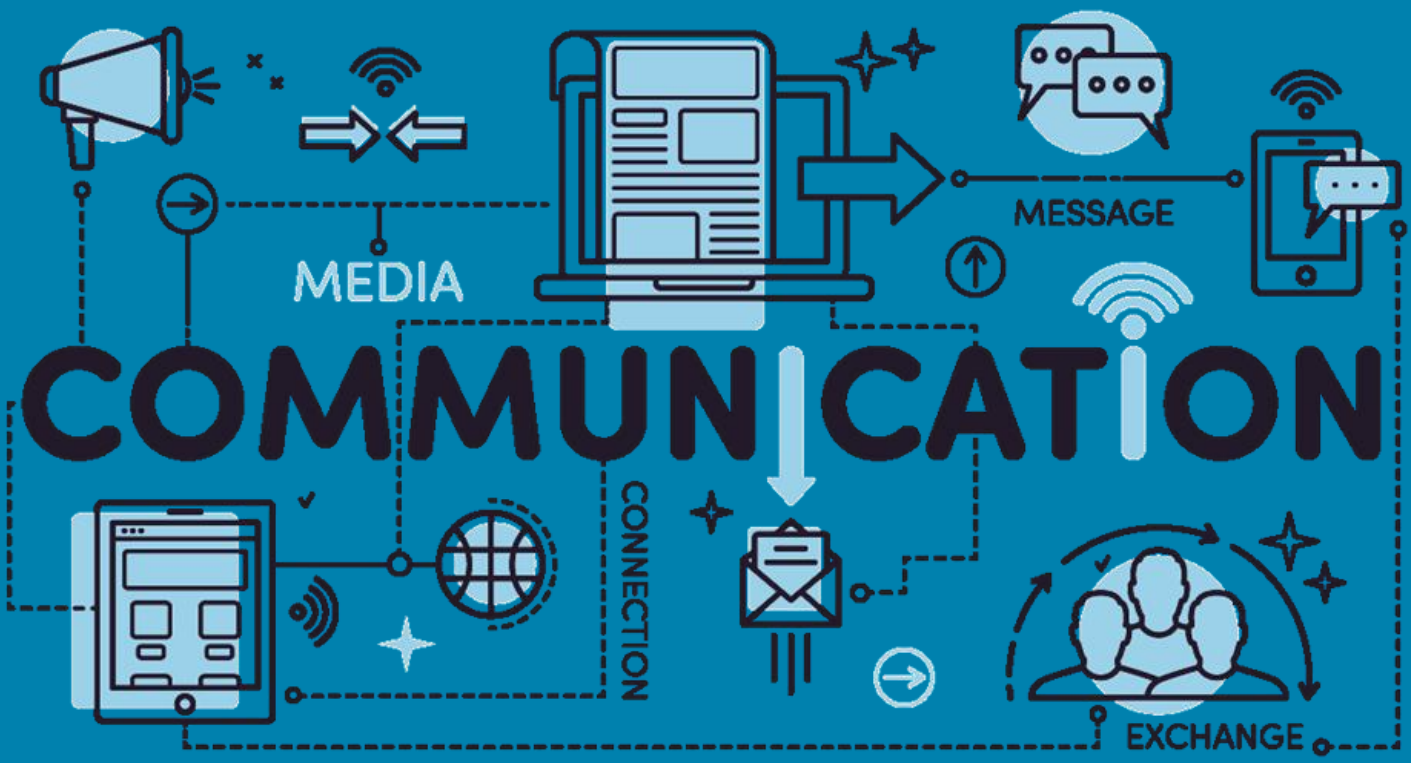
Institute of Development Studies



ABOUT THE NIPN INITIATIVE

National Information Platforms for Nutrition (NIPN) is an initiative of the European Commission supported by the United Kingdom Department for International Development and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The initiative aims to strengthen national capacity to manage and analyse information and data from all sectors which have an influence on nutrition and to disseminate and use information so as to better inform the strategic decisions countries are faced with to prevent undernutrition and its consequences. A Global Support Facility has been set up by the European Commission to coordinate the NIPN initiative, managed by the Agrinatura alliance and hosted by Agropolis International.

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Summary and key recommendations

An important part of the work of National Information Platforms for Nutrition (NIPN) is to produce evidence-based analysis to inform national policy makers and programme planners and to support their decisions. This review provides an overview of the factors beyond simply producing high quality analysis that could influence the likelihood that such evidence is used in designing and implementing policies and programmes. Based on a review of the literature, on interviews with key informants, and on the analysis of a range of information products in the field of nutrition, it identifies the best practices to apply when producing any materials, in order to ensure that outputs are seen, understood by, and hopefully acted upon, by their intended audience. The key recommendations, intended for those who are looking to develop effective materials to influence policy making, are summarized below.

- *Policy makers are busy, so evidence needs to be presented as clearly and effectively as possible.*

What stage of the policy process are you trying to influence?

One of the key barriers for policy makers to consider research in their decision making is that research outputs are not aligned with the policy-making process.

You need to identify the point in the policy process that you are trying to influence and consider the specific timeline during which key decisions will be made. As policy makers often have many competing priorities, make sure the purpose of your policy brief is clear and that it addresses a specific issue that they are currently facing. This requires regular engagement with policy makers to find out about the decisions they are making and their timelines, and then producing analysis to meet their needs.

- *What decision am I trying to influence? When will decisions be made? When is evidence most likely to be used in this process?*

Now you know what policy decision you are trying to influence and the timeline for action, can you clearly define the problem you are trying to address and identify who you are trying to influence?

Being clear about the problem your analysis is addressing and knowing its intended audience saves the reader precious time. Policy makers need to quickly understand the challenge or problem. Framing problems in terms of practical considerations, such as the costs of action or inaction, can be effective.

- *Think about how you are describing the problem - can you summarise what the problem is in two sentences? What are the costs of inaction? What are the consequences of action?*

Different people will have different data needs. Are you trying to reach a generalist working at the national level? Or someone with specialist technical knowledge who will want more detail? Will this person be interested in sub-national data, for example, about their region or constituency? Make sure the evidence you include speaks to the interests of your audience.

Now that you have identified the specific policy need, the main audience, and clarified the problem, how will you capture people's attention?

- **Develop "sticky" messages**

One of the best ways to do this is through information that is new, unexpected, surprising or different. This will engage the reader and make the message something that is more likely to be shared.

- **Telling stories**

Remember that public policies are ultimately about bringing positive change to people's lives, so stories are a good way to connect with policy makers. Can you include a story that shows the human side of the data or evidence included in the analysis? Is there a way to demonstrate how people's lives will be positively affected by a suggested policy?

- **Assembling the evidence jigsaw**

A single study or piece of evidence is unlikely to have a policy impact. However, researchers can play an important role bringing together various pieces of evidence in support of a particular policy.

You have managed to catch the attention of a busy policy maker, but what they really want to know is what can be done about this problem. Have you presented clear, actionable recommendations?

Policy makers are often overwhelmed by large amounts of data and information. You must be able to take the complex and nuanced findings of your research and turn them into clear, actionable recommendations that are concise and memorable. If the recommendations are too complex, they will often be over-simplified.

Are the methods clear?

Providing a (short) list of sources of information and publications that were drawn upon in the analysis can be helpful. However, giving a detailed description of the methods is neither helpful nor necessary. As one study found: "researchers are preoccupied with controlling for bias, but the [policy makers] aren't interested in the details, they just want to know what works". You need to be clear about where your data is from, but you do not need to explain the methods in detail.

- *Is the policy brief clear about where the evidence was drawn from? Is it from a single study or a synthesis of studies?*

Have you established your credibility?

Policy makers pay attention to who produces a policy brief. Establishing the credibility of your organisation over a long period is much more important than a specific piece of research.

Design and presentation are important, and influence credibility

Policy briefs need to be clearly written, easy to follow and attractively designed. Dense, disorganised text which is hard to follow will not be read. Good design is important, so make use of headings, subheadings and lists to guide readers to the key points and make the information easy to find and read. Creating an attractive design is also important for building credibility.

- **Keep it short, with key messages highlighted**

Policy briefs should be no more than 1500 words and some argue that all your key points should be on the first page. For some types of complex information, in might be necessary to disseminate a longer, more technical report. However, this should be provided with a 1 page document with the key messages followed by a summary or policy brief, and finally the full report. This offers readers multiple formats, depending on their time, interest and expertise.

- **Avoid jargon; use plain language**

Can your brief can be easily understood by an educated person without a technical background in the subject?

- **Avoid too much detail**

Statistics such as P-values or unnecessary figures are best left out of a policy brief as they can cause confusion and detract from your overall message. One researcher who was sharing findings with policy makers recounted that "during the meeting, I had one of the policy makers next to me ask, what does "n" stand for?"

- **Design simple messages which are unlikely to be over-simplified**

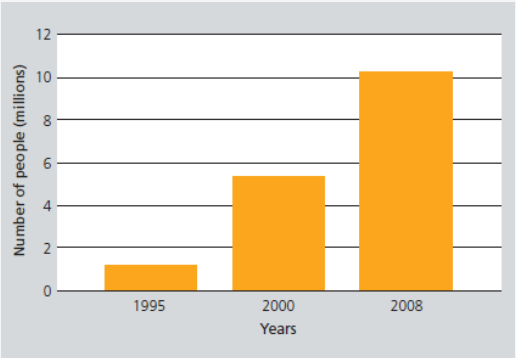
If you include lots of warnings in your messages, these are often likely to be overlooked. Writing a message like "this will require a three part strategy…" reduces the likelihood that messages are oversimplified rather than adding caveats at the end.

- **Is it in the correct language for the target audience?**

In some contexts, people's knowledge of English, especially at the sub-national level, will be limited. Make sure that documents are accessible to the audience you are trying to reach, so are translated correctly.

- **Would your message be clear in an image?**

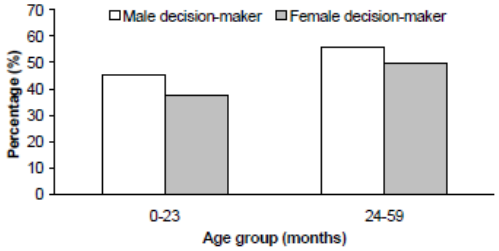
Quickly, what is the graph showing?



Diabetes is rapidly increasing in Bangladesh

Source: Bangladesh Institute of Research and Rehabilitation in Diabetes, Endocrine and Metabolic Disorders.

***Figure 3**. The percentage of stunted (z-score height-for-age <-2 SD) children aged 0-23 months (n=26,158) and 24-59 months (n=37,051) by the sex of the household decision-maker in rural Bangladesh in 2000.[b]*



How will you get your findings into the hands of policy makers?

A plan for communicating research is needed and should begin at the start of a project, rather than waiting until the end to share findings.

- *Have you developed a plan for engaging with policy makers throughout the research process? What methods will you use?*

Have you chosen the correct messenger?

Who is best placed to share your findings? Is there a specific organisation whose opinion is valued or has the ear of the government? Sometimes it is more effective to find a supportive policy maker in government who can also promote evidence from within. Can you work with them to share the findings of analysis? Also, remember that policy products represent a type of participation and power. It is important that the role of the person or organisation producing the brief is accurately represented.

NiPN National Information Platforms for Nutrition

National Information Platforms for Nutrition is an initiative of the European Commission's Directorate General for Cooperation and Development, also supported by the United Kingdom Department for International Development and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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Introduction

All politicians, policy makers and implementers are challenged by how best to improve public services. Whilst "using knowledge" is a practice as old as humanity (1), one of the most frequently mentioned challenges is how to make better use of evidence to improve both the delivery of specific services and the functioning of overall systems. An important part of the work of National Information Platforms for Nutrition[1] (NIPN) is to produce evidence based analyses that are seen and clearly understood by their intended audiences, who may include national policy makers, programme planners and district health staff. The aim of this review was to identify best practices for conveying complex information to policy makers, programme planners and professionals in sectors related to nutrition and to produce a set of guidelines for National Information Platforms for Nutrition to apply when producing any materials. The recommendations are drawn from a review of the literature, interviews with key informants and the analysis of a sample of nutrition information products. The methods used are described in the appendices.

The field of enquiry variously known as knowledge translation, research utilisation, knowledge transfer, knowledge mobilisation, knowledge-to-action, knowledge brokerage, knowledge exchange, and a host of other terms, has advanced considerably over the last few decades from its origins in rural and medical sociology (2). Increasingly, the use of evidence is seen as a process, or often as multiple processes, rather than as an event, and it is widely acknowledged that evidence generation does not happen in isolation before it is passed on to those who will use it (3). Furthermore, it is recognised that different cultures of evidence prevail in sectoral, organisational or other contextual settings (4). We mostly seem to accept that evidence does not by itself solve problems (5). The many elements of context – including the subtle but determining roles of power and politics – are recognised as critical.

While the literature on the use of research evidence, particularly relating to public health and medicine, has grown significantly in the last decade, this literature so far has rarely acknowledged that the use of evidence in the sphere of public policy is an extraordinarily complex phenomenon and is only one part of a complicated process that also uses experience, political insight, pressure, social technologies, and judgment (6).

This is largely due to the complexity of the policy development process. There are multiple conceptions of this process. Some suggest that it is a purely linear activity, moving from agenda setting, to decision making, then finally to implementation. Others argue that it is a largely random process, with influences coming from multiple directions. There seems to be a growing consensus that both of these conceptualizations offer some truth: the overall process is somewhat linear, however there is significant evidence that the policy process is much messier than this model suggests, and there is rarely a direct linear relation between a specific piece of research and policy change (7). Additionally it should be kept in mind that the policy process is inherently political, influenced by information coming from many directions, and decisions are based on multiple factors of which evidence is only one (8). As Pelletier et al. (9) discuss, interpretations of knowledge and evidence are linked to "professional and institutional values, incentives, agendas and rivalries" and are often a result of competing interests rather than constraints on knowledge.

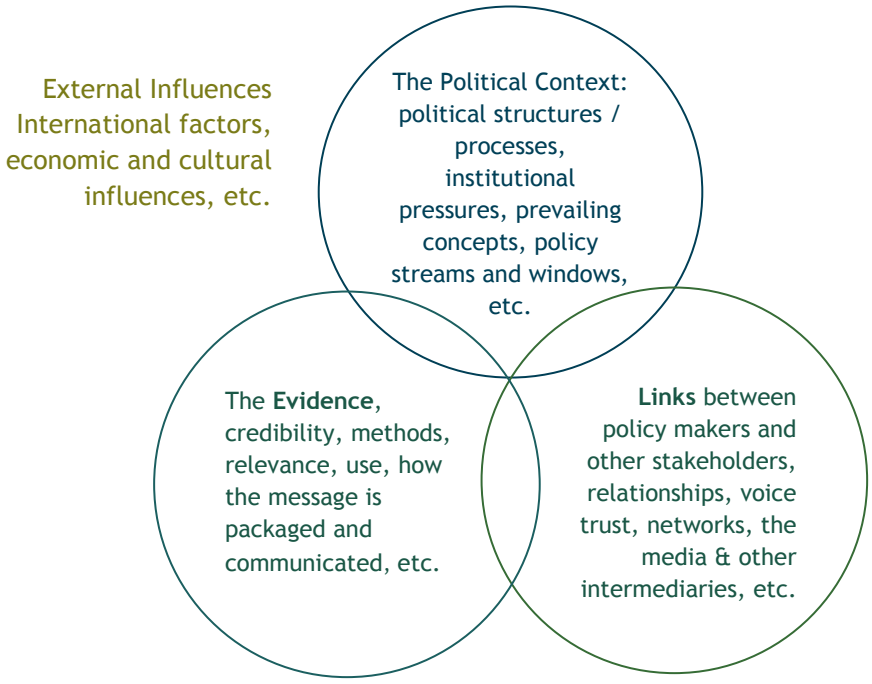
[1] www.nipn-nutrition-platforms.org

While it has been possible to learn some lessons from supporting evidence based decision-making, it has proved much harder to institutionalise and reproduce this learning in practice in other contexts. However, there has been significant research into the nexus between evidence and policy which has identified a number of best practices which increase the likelihood of research being used in policy. The next section presents some of the critical elements of getting research into the hands of policy makers, translating that research into something that is accessible, and considering the multiple factors that influence the likelihood that this research is then used to guide policy decisions.

Evidence into policy: what are the key ingredients?

While the focus of this paper is on developing effective communication products and strategies for sharing and disseminating those products, it is necessary to keep in mind other factors which influence the likelihood that evidence is used in policy decisions. Being aware of these factors is useful for many reasons, including being able to tailor and target briefs and other outputs more effectively and for developing engagement and communication strategies to increase the likelihood that the research will actually inform decisions about policies and programmes.

The Overseas Development Institute, drawing on lessons from over fifty case studies, developed a conceptual framework of three critical and overlapping areas – context, links and evidence – all of which influence the likelihood that research is used by policy makers (10). It is critical to think about the context in which evidence is being presented (and all the other factors, beyond evidence, which influence if, how and why evidence is used in policies) and links between policy makers and researchers. Jones et al. (6) elaborated on this framework and added a fourth element: the processes which mediate between policy decisions and knowledge, for example the role of knowledge brokers and intermediaries. This section will briefly discuss the elements which must be considered to increase the likelihood that research evidence is used in policy making, before considering best practices for conveying complex technical information and how to integrate these other considerations into products, including how, when and with whom these products are shared.



The RAPID Framework for Assessing Research-Policy Links
Source: Jones and Walsh, 2008 (11)

Context

The prevailing political narrative and the ideas, beliefs and knowledge that shape how a specific issue is thought about, will significantly influence the utilization of particular research findings. Evidence is more likely to have an impact if it is seen to fit into a broader range of what is considered to be “good advice” (10). Evidence that goes against or challenges the prevailing understanding of an issue must be careful not to alienate readers, as this can lead to readers simply dismissing the evidence (11). The prevailing narrative and discourse around specific issues will significantly affect how open policy makers will be to new evidence (10). This may be a barrier when trying to present new evidence that might challenge the prevailing paradigm. For many people, nutrition has traditionally been considered to be a health issue. Changing to a new approach, in which nutrition is presented as a multi-sectoral issue, can be much more challenging than simply presenting a new piece of evidence that supports the traditional view. This may perhaps explain some of the challenge in integrating nutrition into agricultural programmes, for example. An example of how research that challenges the existing paradigm is less likely to be accepted can be found from a large scale programme in Malawi to increase food security in rural areas, which involved carrying out nationwide surveys, conducting participatory research and developing a series of cases studies. This research produced a large body of evidence about the causes of food insecurity in the country, but many of these findings challenged previous assumptions. Only some of the findings were used, for example those which supported providing subsidized inputs, which were compatible with the current understandings of issues by staff in the ministry of agriculture. Other findings, such as how to better support small scale, sustainable agriculture, were ignored, despite the evidence, as they did not match current understanding of the issues (10).

Framing

Shiffman and Smith (12) developed a framework to attempt to understand why some global health issues become both national and international priorities, and others do not. They identified four key factors which are necessary for an issue to gain political traction. One of these is what they call “ideas” and relates to both the internal frame, which they define as “the degree to which the policy community agrees on the definitions of, causes of, and solutions to the problem” as well as the external frame or “public portrayals of the issue in ways that resonate with external audiences, especially political leaders who control resources” (12). Any issue can be framed in multiple ways and nutrition is no exception. Over the past five to ten years there has been increasing coalescence within the nutrition community around the internal framing of nutrition, supported by key publications such as The Lancet series of papers in 2008 and 2013 on maternal and child nutrition as well as global movements such as the Scaling up Nutrition movement. However, there are a range of frameworks which are commonly used to present nutrition: as a public health emergency, using messages based around child deaths; as an issue of political will, which is often used by the Scaling Up Nutrition movement; or as an issue of the economic cost to society of failing to address undernutrition, developed by the Global Nutrition Report and the World Bank Cost of Hunger studies (13–15). Choosing one framework over another can be useful for reaching a specific type of audience. For example, the external framing of nutrition around the costs and consequences of inaction can also be an effective way of reaching policy makers who are often concerned with pragmatic decisions about budgets (7,12).

- ***Tip for a NIPN:*** *as a NIPN is expected to be multi-sectoral, thinking about how solutions are framed is critical, especially to ensure that sectors that have not traditionally been associated with nutrition can understand the issue and can act upon findings. Moving away from framing nutrition specifically as a health issue is likely be key to ensuring the engagement of other sectors.*

Policy makers' demands for evidence

The demand for research by policy makers is a key element in terms of research being used: when policy makers have commissioned research, they are much less likely to ignore the findings (10). Working with policy makers to define the research questions at the start will help to increase the likelihood of the research being used.

In many countries, the effort of the government is largely focused on the details of administering programmes, which means that the demand for, and the use of research to inform policy debates remains low (16). This is exacerbated by the generally limited capacity of civil society to produce evidence or effectively disseminate research findings. This was echoed in interviews with key informants. For example one interviewee reported that there is not a culture of evidence based policy making, especially for nutrition, which is aggravated by a number of challenges faced in attempting to access evidence, including a poor understanding of English among government staff, few research findings translated into the local language, and limited access to the internet, especially at sub-national level (Interview, Laos).

In solving this challenge, thinking about how to improve policy makers' demands for evidence will be key. Creating a supply of new evidence is not going to be effective if there is limited demand. As the head of the Evidence into Action team at DFID[2] put it "many of the initiatives which aim to drive evidence informed policy (…) are often based on the assumption that if only research was more accessible and beautifully packaged then decision makers would inevitably use it. But this interpretation rather dumbs down the role of decision makers; portraying them as mindless consumers who will be influenced by whoever has the glossiest policy brief" (17). Newman suggests that three factors are necessary to develop a culture of demand among policy makers for evidence: increasing the capacity of policy makers and ensuring that they understand the scientific method and the advantages of using research findings; incentives, remembering that policy making is highly political, and often policy makers need an incentive from senior leaders; and working with the many systems that shape the how policies are formed (remembering the point above, policy making is rarely a linear process) (17).

- ***Tip for a NIPN:*** *building strong relationships with policy makers is a critical first step. This is the role of the NIPN policy advisory committee, which constitutes the link between the NIPN analysis unit (generating evidence from data) and policy makers in nutrition-specific and -sensitive sectors (generating the demand for information). NIPNs will increase the supply of evidence for policy makers looking to answer specific questions about nutrition within a particular context. This needs to be coupled with increasing the demand for evidence by policy makers, including factors such as capacity building for policy makers around the scientific process so that they are better able to understand and use the evidence which is generated.*

[2]UK Department for International Development

Audience context specificity

Policy makers in different sectors and levels of government have different needs, priorities and uses for information. Research shows that there is a need for policy briefs which focus on the sub-national level, including regional and community levels. It may also be necessary to develop multiple policy briefs for different policy actors, depending on where they are situated (national, sub-national, local) and if they are elected officials or civil servants (11). This strategy has been used by projects such as Operations Research and Impact Evaluation (ORIE)[3], which developed separate briefs for different state government officials as well as for officials working at the federal level in Nigeria. Ensuring that the brief is accessible to the intended audience also requires considering elements such as language, because English and regional languages are less likely to be spoken at a sub-national level, and the means of dissemination, because access to the internet may be limited.

- ***Tip for a NIPN:*** *analysing sub-national data will be important. Using sub-national data to produce analysis that is useful to those working at the sub-national level may be an important role for a NIPN, especially to highlight regions within the country in which problems are particularly acute. Extra efforts should be made to ensure that outputs are accessible to those working at the sub-national level including translation into the local language and dissemination through the best channels to reach people working at those levels.*

Country context specificity: understanding the political economy

The policy process is specific to each country, and the system of government, the culture of using evidence and the degree to which researchers and policy makers can interact, must all be considered to develop products which are most appropriate for the context.

In a synthesis of 50 country case studies looking at key factors which influence the use of research evidence in policy making found that countries which have open political systems, in which researchers can freely gather, assess and communicate evidence, are important to the use of evidence in policy making (10). However, this is not always inherently easy to classify, and the openness of the government will depend on a number of factors beyond simply the type of government. For example, Viet Nam, a single party state, has a strong dialogue between researchers and policy makers whereas Kenya, a parliamentary democracy, has limited uptake and use of research knowledge by policy makers (6). Understanding the nuances of the political economy of a particular country context are key. Some question to consider include: how are powers separated between the legislature and the executive? What is the electoral process and other forms of political involvement? Are there other processes besides the formal policy process that are important? What is the capacity of political institutions to absorb change? (6).

[3] http://www.opml.co.uk/projects/nutrition-programme-operational-research-and-impact-evaluation-orie

In some contexts it is only the technical staff who interact with the evidence, politicians and other political party members also make policy decisions. Finding the people who can serve as internal champions is necessary to get evidence into the hands of those who make the ultimate policy decisions. In contexts where decisions are made behind closed doors, finding people who may have the ear of key decision makers, and meeting them to ensure that they understand the material, helping them anticipate key questions and supplying them with materials such as presentations or, even better, videos that can be used in meetings, are all essential to ensure that the evidence gets to those in a position to bring about change (Interview, Laos).

Understanding the incentives and competing priorities of officials at various levels of government is also important. In Tanzania for example, budgets are supposed to be set at the district level, the lowest level of government. However, nutrition is not a "visible" problem because stunted growth, although affecting more than a third of children, is not something which the community is concerned about due to low levels of awareness and is thus not an issue that will win votes. This means that local political officials, when faced with choosing how to prioritise a limited budget, will focus on activities which win votes such as such new health facilities or wells rather than funding nutrition-specific projects or investments to improve the current functioning of existing health facilities. Local technocrats are then unable to implement nutrition programmes because they lack funding, even if there is strong evidence for the effectiveness of such programmes.

In other contexts there might be an official body to whom research should be submitted and endorsed, often an organization that is affiliated with the government. Research channelled through this body is much more likely to reach policy makers. Additionally, using data which has been approved by the government is critical for acceptance in many countries. In Bangladesh, the Food Planning and Monitoring Unit (FPMU) gathers data from 17 different agencies, analyses it and generates an annual monitoring report for the Ministry of Food, the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock and the Ministry of Women and Child Development. The policy briefs created by the FPMU are based on the data gathered, sub-national level pilot studies and also on success stories from other countries. For example, Somalia was using the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), which was subsequently implemented in Bangladesh. In addition, the FPMU creates policy briefs on specific issues which they would like the Minister to address. These briefs are used to inform the Minister of the issue and provide some clear recommended actions. These briefs can then be used in planning meetings to develop specific action plans for different departments (Interview, Bangladesh).

- ***Tip for a NIPN**: choosing the correct host for the NIPN analysis unit and the correct vehicle for the NIPN policy advisory committee is key to ensuring that the data are accepted and the analysis is seen. Understanding the politics surrounding where the platform is hosted and ensuring that there is buy-in from all relevant parties is also critical. The policy process is never simple and it is unlikely that outsiders would be able to understand or know which factors influence decision making. Choosing the correct messengers and working closely with them to develop effective products and ways of presenting messages, such as a slide show that can be used in a meeting, is especially important.*

Timing

Timing is critical for policy makers, who often have a small window of opportunity to use evidence and influence a policy. Researchers and others producing that evidence need to know what is happening in government departments, and ensure that the evidence is presented in a way that is consistent with the decision being made. The research process needs to be happening and then communicated in step with the policy making process (10,18). A systematic review of the problems policy makers face in using evidence found that a lack of timely research outputs was one of the key barriers to using evidence in policy (19). This can be a challenge for researchers, who often operate on much longer timescales than the policy process allows. However, if researchers are actively engaging with the policy process, they can take previously generated evidence and repackage it if an opportunity to influence policy comes up, relieving some of the tensions between research and policy timeframes.

Links

Evidence is only useful if it reaches those who have the power to make decisions. This section examines the importance of links between researchers and policy makers and how best to foster engagement between the research and policy communities.

Links between researchers and policy makers

Direct contact between researchers and policy makers is critically important throughout the research process. This builds a culture of trust, legitimacy, and openness (7). The term that has become commonly used is “knowledge transfer”, which takes into account the fact that the genuine use of knowledge requires substantive interactions between researchers and decision makers (18). Two systematic reviews of factors that facilitate and inhibit the use of evidence by policy makers also support the importance of this interaction, with the most commonly reported feature of facilitation being personal contact between researchers and policy makers (7,20). Using both official and unofficial networks is also important to connect to the policy process.

One example of direct interaction cited in the interviews was for the launch in 2013 of the most recent Lancet series on maternal and child nutrition. Before the launch, materials including a detailed information pack and summary briefs were shared. For the launch event, the entire research team travelled to Kenya to explain the methods used and answer questions, thereby increasing policy makers’ understanding of the evidence and its potential for adoption into policies (Interview, Kenya).

Finding and using the correct messenger

Finding supportive policy makers who can also promote specific evidence from within, ensuring that the evidence reaches the correct people who can make decisions, can be also be effective (10). In some contexts it will be very challenging, if not impossible, to meet the political officials and party members who are actually responsible for making decisions. These policy decisions are often made behind closed doors to ensure that the political elite maintain their power (6).

In choosing who to engage with and who might be supportive, it is important to consider the interests of various actors. If policy makers’ interests are not aligned with the suggested policy change, it is unlikely that they will be searching for evidence. Different types of actors will give more or less weight to certain types of information and arguments or to people with specific expertise and experience. This means that certain groups or networks who have the correct experience and expertise will become more integrated in the policy-making process (6). However, this may create a challenge for multi-sectoral working as the type of knowledge valued by the health and nutrition community, such as medical expertise or evidence from randomized controlled trials, may not be the type of knowledge that is valued by other sectors, for example those working in agriculture.

The role of knowledge brokers

There has been increasing interest in the role of knowledge brokers or knowledge intermediates in the last ten years. Knowledge brokers are organizations or individuals who serve to facilitate interactions between researchers and policy makers, supporting both groups to better understand the goals and professional culture of the other, creating better links and partnerships, and ultimately leading to improved evidence for informed policy making (21). Knowledge brokers also support researchers by translating and adapting findings to the local context (22). In a recent study seeking to understand the role of knowledge brokers in translating research from technical meetings about maternal and new-born heath, those participants who view their role as knowledge brokers play an important role in translating research findings to advocate for policy changes or to influence the design and delivery of programmes (21).

- ***Tip for a NIPN**: experience from the National Evaluation Platforms[4] (NEPs) showed the critical importance of having someone employed specifically in a knowledge broker role to facilitate the uptake of information coming from the NEPs. Given the broad constituency that the NIPNs are trying to work with, this role to help link the analysis from the NIPNs and the policy makers and end users may be even more essential.*

Research communication needs to be built into the project and to use multiple channels

A plan for communicating research evidence needs to be included from the start of a research project, rather than waiting until the end to disseminate findings. Evidence shows that research programmes are much more likely to be able to successfully influence policy and practice if a clear communications strategy is implemented throughout the research programme (10). A recent systematic review of reviews by the Alliance for Useful Evidence identified a number of best practices for communicating complex information to policy makers including using narrative to communicate complex material, using social media, creating a recognizable and respected brand, and using a combination of communication channels (23).

[4] http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/institute-for-international-programs/current-projects/national-evaluation-platform/

Evidence

This section considers the credibility of the evidence itself, including how credibility is built, the approach and research methods, how research methods are conveyed, and how evidence is presented and packaged.

Credibility

Users of policy briefs and other research products pay attention to who has produced it, and this influences the likelihood that the argument and evidence is accepted (11). Because of this, establishing the credibility of your organization over a long period, is more important than the rigour of a specific piece of research (10). International organizations and professional bodies are often considered the most legitimate knowledge intermediates (11). This is supported by multiple interviewees who stated that data needed to come from a reliable source and be validated by an organization such as the WHO, UNICEF, the World Bank or by the government itself (Interviews, Kenya and Laos). Politics or other influences may also be a factor in what is viewed as a credible source. Evidence generated by neighbouring countries will often have more weight than data drawn from countries viewed as highly dissimilar (Interview Laos, and author's own).

Local, national, global

Local needs for evidence are often different than national needs, especially on issues such as health inequalities, which tend to be geographically clustered and require disaggregated data (7). This finding is echoed by others, who have found that research often needs to be specific and detailed initially, which allows researchers and policy makers to come to a common understanding of a problem (24). Interviewees also stressed this point. A respondent from Kenya said that while the international data are useful for setting guidelines, they need to be adapted to the Kenyan context.

Keep it simple but not simplistic

A more subtle point that has emerged from the literature on how to package information correctly is around ensuring that information is presented in such a way that prevents the findings from being over-simplified or distorted, while still remaining accessible. While researchers tend to qualify their findings, evidence has shown that these cautions are often lost when conveying messages to policy makers (24).

There are two potential strategies to combat the challenge of over-simplification. The first is to engage continually, communicating and repackaging evidence for both new and old policy audiences. The second is to package and frame evidence in a way that prevents one section from being omitted, as the World Bank did with its "three legged poverty reduction strategy of opportunity, empowerment and security". This frame ensures that all three elements are remembered, as once you have said "three legged policy reduction strategy", it is hard to omit the three elements (24).

Another challenge around developing effective messages is to ensure that you are able to communicate the uncertainty inherent in the research process, but not in a way which makes the findings sound too vague. One approach is using words to create a narrative and verbal categories such as likely or very likely, which are easy to understand but can sound vague, in combination with more specific statistics, which are often misinterpreted on their own but make findings sound more exact and less vague (23).

Develop "sticky" messages

In developing messages it is important to catch the attention of your audience and interest them in an idea. One of the best ways to do this is to focus on information that is new, unexpected or surprising so that it will be remembered by one policy maker and shared with others. Trying to change the frame of the information can also be highly effective, but must be considered carefully to prevent alienating the audience. In order to be shared effectively, messages need to be easily remembered and retold (16).

Good examples

Illustrating how a specific policy change will lead to a desired outcome (as well as illustrating the potential harmful outcomes of failing to implement a specific policy change) can be an effective way of engaging policy makers. One such example cited in an interview was a video about the consequences of poor nutrition in Laos (a link can be found in the list of reviewed documents). The video used "a story of two villages" to illustrate visually the consequences of failing to implement a package of nutrition interventions. In one village, where families implement the interventions such as exclusive breastfeeding and ensuring dietary diversity, the children are happy, healthy and growing well. In the second village, where the package of interventions is not implemented, children are sickly and do not grow well or do well in school. The video was cited by an interviewee as being successful in sparking a conversation about the causes and consequences of poor nutrition.

Assembling the evidence

Evidence shows that one particular piece of research is unlikely to lead to policy impact (10). However, one key role which researchers can play, which supports the use of research in policy making, is to bring together many pieces of evidence which support a particular policy change (25). One example of drawing together evidence from multiple sources is a systematic review. However, systematic reviews can also be challenging for policy makers to understand. A systematic review of the enablers and facilitators of using systematic reviews found that the key elements were: provide a one-page summary of key messages; present the findings in a concise way, bearing in mind that the users of the evidence may have limited skills and time to appraise the evidence; use visuals well; and provide a set of clear, context specific actionable recommendations that are tailored to the needs of the target audience (26).

- ***Tip for a NIPN:*** *a NIPN may be very well situated to perform this role, bringing together new analysis of national data with international data and packaging these outputs in a clear, concise way for policy makers. NIPNs should avoid simply producing their own analysis but show how findings from the country are supported by the international evidence base.*

Visually engaging

Policy briefs must be visually appealing. A study carried out by the ODI found that policy makers will spend only 30-60 minutes reading about a particular issue and briefs must be able to quickly draw readers in and present information in a stimulating and easy to remember way (11). Using graphics, images, charts and pictures can also be an effective way of making information more visually appealing (16,27).

Types of formats

There are many formats that can be used to present research findings to policy makers. The three main formats preferred were identified through the key informant interviews and the various times one format might be preferable.

- **Policy briefs**

Policy briefs are short documents, generally not more than 4 pages, that present the findings and recommendations of some analysis or research specifically to non-specialist policy makers (11). They should be used when trying to reach policy makers, especially non-technical staff from ministries of finance or planning. Policy briefs should be written to influence a specific policy decision or an opportunity which can be clearly articulated. They should always contain specific, actionable policy recommendations.

- **Technical reports employing graded entry formats**

Technical reports are much longer documents used to convey more complex material to a technical audience such as programme managers who may want specific details about a research finding or outcome. Even when producing a longer technical document, a graded entry format should be used. This means that a short, one page document with key messages is presented first, followed by a slightly longer summary, and finally the full report, allowing policy makers to select the correct amount of detail for their needs (27).

- **Presentations and videos**

These were specifically highlighted to be of value in contexts in which the researcher and evidence producers will rarely, if ever, be included in policy discussions. In this context, producing a set of slides, or even better, a video, that can be used in discussions with policy makers, is very useful. A video allows the researcher to have more control over the message and how it is conveyed. In the context of developing a slideshow or presentation, efforts should be made by the researcher to brief the messenger and support them by anticipating potential questions and discussing the possible answers.

Having actionable recommendations

Research products and summaries need to have actionable recommendations in order for evidence to be considered when developing policies (7,10,16). A study carried out by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, which spoke to health policy makers about what makes them use evidence, found that "researchers are preoccupied with controlling for bias, but consumers [policy makers] are not interested in the details, they just want to know what works" (7). Policy makers need to be presented with very clear recommendations which take into account the constraints, for example the financial considerations, that policy makers face. The specific point about knowing the cost was highlighted strongly by one interviewee, who said that the biggest gap in most policy briefs is a section which highlight the cost of action or inaction (ideally both), laying out specifically how much it will cost to implement a specific intervention, and how much it will save the health care system in the long term (Interview, Kenya).

One example of this being done successfully in nutrition is through PROFILES, which was developed by Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance (FANTA) project. This uses computer simulations to model the effects of malnutrition as well as the potential savings by preventing various outcomes of malnutrition including lives saved, disabilities averted and productivity gained. The model also includes the costs of implementing a comprehensive set of nutrition interventions over a specific time period. The models can be used to show two scenarios, one in which the nutritional status of the population remains the same and another in which nutritional goals are achieved within a 5 year period (28). The outputs of PROFILES, in particular a set of slides which presented both the costs of action and inaction, were cited as being particularly useful for convincing policy makers by an interviewee from Kenya, as they included the often missing element of cost which are critically important to policy makes deciding how to allocating scare resources (Interview, Kenya).

- ***Tip for a NIPN**: while both the literature and interviews suggested that presenting the findings in terms of the cost to implement projects and the costs of inaction as being essential to engage policy makers, the analysis of products which contributed to this review found that this very rarely happens in practice, making recommendations hard to actually implement. A NIPN should think about how recommendations are packaged to make them truly actionable.*

Conclusion

The aim of this review is to identify the critical elements of translating analysis or research into something that is accessible to policy makers; getting it into the hands of the people who make policy; and considering the many factors that influence the likelihood that it is then used to guide policy decisions. When developing products to convey complex material to policy makers, using the conceptual framework of context, links and evidence, will ensure that products are developed in a way that considers important contextual factors which influence the likelihood that evidence is used to inform policy development and implementation. Thinking about the processes that mediates the relationship between the evidence and policy makers is also important.

There are several key areas which have been identified by the literature as essential but which policy briefs continue to lack. While there a number of good examples of policy briefs which include many of these elements which were evaluated as part of this review; few if any of the 15 products did an adequate job of addressing a few key issues. These include:

- **Being very specific about who the brief is for and recognizing that this may require producing multiple briefs on the same material for different audiences.** For example, "this brief is for policy makers and their support staff and other stakeholders with an interest in the problem addressed by the evidence brief" (WHO, EPHI, 2014[5]) is much too broad. Who, really is the brief for? Have you written it for national technical health staff? Or is it for elected officials working at the sub-national level? The tone, the material, and the language used will likely be very different depending on which audience is the target.

- **Having actionable recommendations.** In the advocacy world, this is referred to as an "ask". What do you want the policy maker to do as a result of reading this brief? Do you want them to allocate more resources for a specific intervention? Which one? How much, and what will be accomplished by doing so?

- **Address a key opportunity.** Most of the briefs examined do not address a specific policy window or implementation gap that they are aiming to influence with their analysis or research (or at least one that was not apparent when reading the brief). What piece of policy is being considered that this research finding will be useful for? Which implementation challenge will this research address? This should be clearly spelled out in the brief or made clear in a presentation or other type of material.

- **Costings.** Despite evidence that research must be framed around practical consideration that policy makers are constrained by, few of the briefs included specific examples of the costs of what they were proposing, or of the costs to society of inaction.

[5] http://www.who.int/evidence/sure/esimprovingskilledbirthattendanceethiopia.pdf?ua=1

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Appendix A: Methods

Literature review

The narrative draws upon an initial desk review of the literature on the uptake of evidence into policy. It considers the literature focused on international development as well as the literature on health policies and health inequalities from high, middle and low income country contexts. It includes academic literature, comprising of systematic reviews, individual studies and reviews of case studies on how to improve evidence use in policy formation. This was supplemented by some practitioner focused literature including "how-to" guides for researchers and other knowledge brokers working in the research into policy space. Additional literature, which specifically examines challenges around conveying complex research about health (and to a lesser degree nutrition since there is very little focused literature on nutrition research specifically) was also reviewed.

Interviews with key stakeholders

Six interviews were carried out with key informants in relevant countries where NIPN will first be rolled out, including Kenya, Laos, and Bangladesh. Interviews focused on how these stakeholders like to receive information, where they source information, and gaps in meeting their needs for evidence. Significantly more stakeholders were contacted, but few agreed to be interviewed for this research. Since this project did not have the time or capacity to interview a larger, more representative sample, these interviews are used to supplement and validate the findings from the literature review. Interview questions are included in appendix B.

Product analysis

From the literature review, a conceptual framework was identified for assessing products intended to inform policy makers. This conceptual framework was chosen based on its comprehensiveness, bringing together the critical elements of context, links and evidence. Additionally, the majority of the literature on effective policy briefs draws heavily on this framework or has very similar elements. A search was conducted for sample products to review using the framework, these include: policy briefs, infographics and videos. Products were chosen based on topic (nutrition or health related), level of focus (international, national, sub-national) and accessibility. An attempt was made to obtain a range of products from multiple organizations which aim to convey complex material around nutrition or health more broadly. Efforts in particular were made to find materials developed by southern organization, but some developed by larger international organizations including the World Bank, World Health Organization and the Global Panel on Food and Agriculture are also included. During interviews, interviewees were specifically asked to think of any research products which they had found particularly memorable or useful in generating policy debate among other actors. Any products mentioned were also included in the review. An overview of all products and links to these products is included in appendix C.

Each product was discussed for relevance and independently assessed by two members of the research team, who assigned a score to each element of the product, using the conceptual framework described below. Once each of the products was independently assessed, the mean score was calculated and products were ranked based on this score. The reviews were then analysed and emerging themes and key elements were drawn out from the highest and lowest scoring products. These themes and key elements are outlined.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Intro on the project, NIPN, use of evidence, etc.

1. Who/what are the most trusted sources of nutrition information/data in your country?
2. Can you describe the process of policy or nutrition plan formation in your country?
    a. How does data/evidence feed into the design of nutrition policies and implementation plans? Who compiles the data/information required?
3. When was the policy/plan last updated?
    a. How often is data from the sub national level incorporated in a policy/programme cycle?
4. Where did the data you need come from? (academic journal? Social media? Policy brief? Trusted researcher?)
    a. How was it presented to you?
    b. Do you rely on international data more or is data from your own country more relevant?
    c. How do you use routine monitoring data gathered to adjust your programmes?
    d. Why do you select these sources? (trust [direct source or person/organisation who gave it to them], quality, accessibility, cost, etc.)
    e. How do you assess this information? Criteria? How do you evaluate the quality of a data source?
5. Where do you feel there are gaps / no sources when looking for information and evidence?
6. What do you feel are the constraints which affect you in finding research evidence for decision making?
    a. Do you feel you get too much information, not enough or the right amount?
7. Did the LANCET series on nutrition inform the package of interventions you provide?
    a. If yes, did you find the full papers useful or was there a brief or summary that was better?
8. How do you prefer to receive research? (policy brief, events, presentations, etc.)
9. Can you think of a (brief/presentation – whichever they mentioned above) that has made an impact on you?
    a. What drew you to it? What made it stand out?
    b. What key messages did you draw from it?
    c. How did you find that product? (sent to you, newsletter, regularly visited platform?)
    d. What actions did you take as a result?
    e. Can you send us the product (or a link?)
10. How much information do you want? Full statistics (p values, etc.) or a summary of the top line findings?
11. Can you recommend anyone else we can speak to?

Appendix C: Products reviewed, rationale and assessment

Fourteen sample products, including policy briefs, infographics and videos, were assessed and scored using the framework presented in the table below. Key elements which make a good product and those which do not were drawn out of this assessment. This framework was originally developed by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) as part of the Rapid Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA) developed by ODI over 10 years looking at how to best integrate evidence into policy in over 50 case study examples.

Conceptual framework used to assess and score the communication products Adapted from Jones and Walsh 2008 (11)

Domain	Criteria	Nature of the assessment	Score
Context	Audience context specificity	Written to address a specific context and the needs of a target audience	/10
	Significance of issue	Addresses a current and significant contextually relevant questions	/10
	Actionable recommendations	Clear and feasible recommendations on next steps to be taken	/10
Link	Presentation of evidence-informed opinions	Presentation of authors own views about policy implications of research findings, but clear identification of argument components that are based on opinion	/10
	Clear language/writing style	Understandable by educated non-specialist	/10
	Appearance/design	Visually engaging, presentation of information through charts, graphs, photos	/10
Evidence	Persuasive argument	Clear purpose; cohesive argument; quality of evidence; transparency of evidence underpinning the policy recommendations	/10
	Authority	Messenger (individual or organization) has credibility in the eyes of the policy-maker/ evidence user; brief helps establish that authority through tone and presentation style	/10
Total points			/80

Each product is briefly introduced along with the rationale for choosing that product (including if it was recommended by an interviewee). We aimed to get a broad selection of videos, infographics and policy briefs. We have also included the average score based on two independent assessments using the conceptual framework presented above. Each score is out of 80.

Themes from the highest and lowest scoring briefs, infographics and videos

The following themes were drawn out from the highest scoring products and provide examples of good practice in a product:

1. The problem/need for action is clearly outlined and the product has a clear narrative often drawing on multiple sources of evidence.
2. A short section on where the evidence is sourced and the strength of evidence including reliable sources such as the Lancet or a systematic review.
3. Produced by a well-known, credible international organisation such as the WHO or FAO in collaboration with national institution.
4. Clearly specifies who the product is written for and who will be best placed to take actions forward.
5. Clear recommendations which are set apart from the body of the text using bullets or sub headings, immediately making it easy for the reader to identify the recommendations.
6. The product identifies actionable steps and barriers and provides implementation guidance.
7. Draws out tangible benefits of implementing the recommendations (e.g. X number of child lives could be saved, X amount of money could be saved).
8. Jargon is avoided, and the product makes very selective use of statistics explaining clearly what the statistics mean. If graphs are used they are very simple, well labelled and clear and used to illustrate a point that can be better made visually.
9. The brief or product is short, 2-4 pages for a written product, 3 minutes for a video or employs a graded entry approach, which includes a one page summary of key messages, a longer, perhaps 2-4 page summary and finally a longer report with more technical details.
10. They don't cover too much and have pick the key issue/message/purpose and focus on that.
11. The brief or product is written to target a specific policy window or opportunity (for example the post MDG agenda as the SDGs were being developed).

The following elements were common in the lowest scoring products:

1. They lacked a defined audience and it was not clear who the product was aimed at or who was best placed to take forward the recommendations.
2. They lacked specific and actionable recommendations. Recommendations tended to be vague with little clarity about what, specifically, should be done about the problem.
3. They contained jargon or too many statistics which are hard to understand, for example p-values. They are not written to be easily understood by a non-specialist with limited time.
4. The design and text use is very dense, graphs are complex, poorly labelled and hard to understand.

List of products reviewed

Author	Title	Description	Link	Score
Videos				
Generation Nutrition	Sanitation and nutrition: Let's break the vicious circle!	Animated video conveying fairly complex information on the effects of open defecation on nutrition. Video uses narration, infographics, sound bites and statistics (sparingly). The language used in the narration is very simple and avoids terminology.	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWIr-eJ8FAs	66
Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index (HANCI)	Hunger and undernutrition : What do we know?	Animated video with music and infographics to tell the story. Use of statistics and clear written messaging along with animated people. Very emotive, and clever use of the music. Clearly conveys the issue. This is more of an advocacy/marketing tool for the index itself and does not try to convey data here, but point you to it and has been used successful in a policy environment to generate a discussion.	http://www.hancindex.org/	72
World Bank	Stunting in Laos	This video was recommended by an interviewee in Laos as an example of a product which has had an influence on policy dialogue. Strong points include using stories (this is a tale of two villages) to connect people to the topic, explaining stunting in very clear terms (showing specific children and how much each should grow in a year) and linking improved nutrition to later health and education outcomes. The movie is also in Lao language so will be understandable to the key audience. Weak points: while it was used in a meeting to generate a discussion, the messages are more for behaviour change than policy makers. Additionally the movie is quite long (15 minutes) for a policy audience.	https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B471ltGz26zaWmdta0lLZjhmRnc/view	74
Infographics				
World Bank	Agriculture in Bangladesh: A Key Poverty Reducer	National level focus. Clear and to the point. Conveys a little on the issue and sets out clear priority actions. Not over crowded with text.	http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2016/05/17/agriculture-in-bangladesh-a-key-poverty-reducer	58
MamaYe! (Evidence for Action)	Infographic on breastfeeding 2016	Based on the Lancet series on Breastfeeding 2016, aiming to make a large number of evidence based recommendations accessible. Interested as it is specifically trying to convey information from the Lancet series and is able to get across a large amount of technical information quickly. Weak points: it does not have specific policy recommendations, but it might be effective in getting a policy maker interested to read a brief with more specific recommendations, especially if facts like the number of children who die each year due to suboptimal breastfeeding practices is domesticated.	http://www.mamaye.org/en/evidence/mamaye-infographic-breastfeeding-2016	69

Policy Briefs with a global scope				
The Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition	Climate Smart Food Systems for Enhanced Nutrition	Gets all the key messages on one side, leading with the key facts that a policy maker needs to know and then a list of key recommendations. Additional information on the second side, and finally directs you to the full paper. Easy to read, not too much text or complex tables, clear recommendations.	http://glopan.org/sites/default/files/pictures/GloPan%20Climate%20Summary%20Final.pdf	69
CMAM Forum	Should we have height cut-offs to define children with Severe Acute Malnutrition?	A short, highly technical brief aiming to get across complex nutrition information. It was one of the only "briefs" featured on the CMAM forum that was actually brief, all the other are very long (over 200 pages) reports. This brief does a good job of addressing a specific audience (those setting guidelines for CMAM programmes) with very specific advice and backs up the evidence. However, it could be much clearer and designed in a more engaging way.	http://www.cmamforum.org/Pool/Resources/FAQ-Height-Cut-off-CMAM-FORUM.pdf	60.5
The Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition	Improved metrics and data are needed for effective food system policies in the post-2015 era	This is a technical brief summarising messages for decision makers. This brief ranked among the highest in our analysis for as it manages to get a significant amount of information across in a very limited space without seeming too simplistic. It was also one of the only briefs that was written for a specific policy window (developing the SDGs).	https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08977ed915d622c000221/Metrics_Summary.pdf	72
Policy Briefs with a national scope				
The Ifakara Health Institute	Spotlight: High Risk of Maternal Deaths in Southern Tanzania	This brief was selected as an example of a product developed by a Tanzanian research institute. This brief score lowest in our assessment using the conceptual framework as it lacked clear, audience specific actionable recommendations. Also, because it relied on data from only one study, the findings were not as strong as they could have been pulling in other available data. It was also quite technical and used too many complex graphics that would be hard to understand by an educated non-specialist audience.	https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B5m8WsB-74NackE5SENNaGNfaDg/edit	45.5
Helen Keller International	When the decision-maker is a woman: does it make a difference for the nutritional status of mothers and children?	This brief was recommended by the commissioner of the research. This brief scored the second lowest in our assessment because it was too complex, with many graphics that were challenging to understand. Additionally the text was quite dense and recommendations came all the way at the end instead of upfront to draw the reader in. The methodology was too specific, a brief overview would have sufficed. The brief did a good job of showing the source of the evidence and backing up recommendations.	http://knowledge.hki.org/publications/NSP%20Bulletin%208.pdf	51
Food Policy and Monitoring Unit	Healthy rice policy brief, Bangladesh	This brief was recommended by an interviewee from the FPMU as an example of an influential brief. This brief does a good job of having a quick overview of the brief's key messages at the start and showing how diabetes is an increasing public health problem with clear, easy to understand graphics. However, specific policy recommendations and audience are less clear and some of the evidence underpinning their argument is perhaps questionable.	http://fpmu.gov.bd/agridrupal/sites/default/files/Healthy%20rice_Final.pdf	69

WHO/EPHI	Improving skilled birth attendance in Ethiopia	This brief was included as an example of how to convey a significant amount of complex material in an understandable way and because it's a good example of a graded entry format. This brief scored among the highest in our analysis because it explicitly says who the brief is for (although this could be more detailed) and includes a list of key messages followed by a more detailed summary and finally the full report, which is still quite accessible by a non-specialist. The fact that it is produced by the WHO in combination with EPHI also increases its legitimacy and credibility.	http://www.who.int/evidence/sure/esimprovingskilledbirthattendanceethiopia.pdf?ua=1	72.5
Sikika	Fight against Malaria: Use SMS for Life System	This was chosen as an example of a research brief produced by a southern research institute. One of its strongest elements was having very specific, actionable recommendations, some of which would be quite easy to implement. One of the weaknesses is that the main topic, which is really about drug availability, is discussed until later in the text but which could potentially draw in a much wider range of stakeholders interested in the challenge of stock-outs but not necessarily malaria.	http://sikika.or.tz/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ALU-Brief-2-fold-630-x-297-copy1.pdf	59
RTM Bangladesh	Scaling Up Nutrition Interventions in Bangladesh: A Policy Brief	This was included as an example of brief which focused on the costs, based on the finding that focusing on framing which include cost is an effective way to engage policy makers and few briefs included any element of costing and framing inaction around the costs and consequences to society.	http://www.fantaproject.org/sites/default/files/resources/Bangladesh-Policy-Brief-for-Parliamentarians-Aug2013_0.pdf	53

NiPN
National Information Platforms for Nutrition

Summary

A vital component of the work of the National Information Platforms for Nutrition (NIPN) is to analyse information and data to inform national policy makers and programme planners and support their decisions. This review provides an overview of the factors, beyond simply producing high quality analysis, which will influence the likelihood that data are used in designing and implementing policies and programmes. Based on a review of the literature, on interviews with key informants and on the analysis of a range of information products in the field of nutrition, it identifies best practices and key recommendations for National Information Platforms for Nutrition to apply when producing any materials, in order to ensure that outputs are seen, understood by, and hopefully acted upon by their intended audience.

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