

Assignment 3: Policy Brief (200 Points)

We all struggle to distinguish between personal opinions, ideologically based concepts, and science-based conclusions. It is hard to practice “critical thinking” and to distinguish critical thinking from criticizing. Students in this course have struggled with this in previous years, which is to be expected when dealing with a topic like “sustainable development” that has become in many regards an ideological statement rather than a concept used to stimulate public discourse about problems, issues and needs confronting contemporary societies. Public discourse by definition requires that you present your ideas, the logic that informs them, and the evidence on which you base your conclusions AND that you sincerely and systematically listen to and consider the ideas of others, especially those whose ideas are very different than your own. I hope these instructions will help you.

Please note that a policy brief is NOT the same thing as a lengthy policy analysis. A policy analysis is typically presented to an informed audience. The writer can assume that the readers will know the issues and be able to understand technical language and are well informed about and deeply involved in trying to solve the specific problem, issue or need. ***A policy brief is for an informed and active public audience – decision-makers and citizens who participate in the public sphere.*** The audience may not and often does not have technical expertise or extensive prior knowledge about the problem, issue or need. Many of these individuals are busy – elected officials, local citizens who take time from family and work to contribute to the public good, or professionals whose work in the public or private sphere makes enormous demands on their time. In short, policy briefs are for busy people with many responsibilities, little time to waste, and ***for whom the problem, issue or need of interest to you is only one of many they are trying to address.*** They have little time to devote to individuals who come to them “pushing” a particular perspective. If your objective is to win these individuals over to your own specific beliefs, values, norms, opinions, ideas, or passions, they will not want to devote much time to listening to you. That may work with specific individuals *who already share your beliefs or opinion*, but you will fail to become a sought-out resource person for a community as a whole because they all have individual ideas of their own. They do not need you as an expert to tell them what to think or inform their ideological or political stance. They ***do need thoughtful evidence-based and accessible information*** because these individuals form groups that have to reach enough consensus to make decisions. They will listen to you if you are useful in this way – that you synthesize a lot of ideas and information, present it cogently to them, include multiple perspectives, carefully delineate between alternatives, and provide a balanced set of recommendations that reflects the options most likely to succeed based on expertise and well-developed critical thinking skills. Policy briefs must therefore be easy to understand without extensive background knowledge, written clearly and succinctly without technical jargon, and lay out alternative options for actions or strategies in a way that allows decision-makers to select among the alternatives.

Assignment 3 builds on the first two assignments in this class. In Assignment 1, you presented an argumentative analysis about which of many activities we humans have created that you think affect planetary processes, ultimately focusing on the kinds of activities that you have concluded have the greatest impact in terms of creating the Anthropocene Epoch. In Assignment 2, you developed a concept map that shows the complex interactions between social, economic, technological and environmental factors that affect a problem issue or need. Since then, we have examined alternative frameworks – really theories of change -- that are proposed for creating the ecological, economic, technological and social changes needed to achieve sustainable community development. Your task in this assignment is to prepare a policy brief that would provide decision-makers **two contrasting strategies** to address a threat to sustainability or to

take advantage of opportunities to enhance sustainability, focusing on a problem, issue or need you want to address.

I am not sure that what you do in Assignment 2 always prepares you for this assignment. The PINs identified are often very broad and in some cases are more “causes” or contributing factors to PINs than PINs in and of themselves. Those kind of broad PINs will not work for this assignment. You need a PIN that is something that “real people in real communities experience every day,” something that citizens in many places try to address in their communities. For example, “availability of clean drinking water” is a PIN that affects many communities. Traditionally considered primarily a problem in developing nations, we have now seen that this is a major problem in large cities in industrial nations as well (like Flint, Michigan). There is evidence that we should expect that more cities and towns will face this problem. Limited access to agricultural inputs is a problem that affects many agricultural communities in developing nations, while contamination from agricultural inputs has become a major problem in both developing and industrial nations. ***Provide evidence that the phenomenon of concern has been identified in government publications or similar sources of information.*** This PIN could be related to the challenge you identified in Assignment 2, but make it specific for this assignment. Otherwise, you will not be able to complete the assignment successfully.

Do not confuse the policy brief with a short-term plan or a planning process. Rather, you are trying to provide community leaders with alternative **strategies** that a community or a group of communities can pursue over the next two to three decades. Assume that the PIN you want to address is “urban expansion into prime farmland.” This occurs all over the world – cities grow up where food can be raised, the good land for farming in many cases. Eventually the cities start to “take over” the farmland degrading or even destroying the resource. In this case, one strategy you might propose could be a “de-growth or no-growth” approach to infrastructural development in a region. That strategy would then guide the development of a much more specific action plan, such as deciding where to build, how much building to allow, land use restrictions to prevent sprawl, land taxes, etc.). However, **developing an action plan is NOT your objective. Your objective here is to provide community leaders with an assessment of alternative policy approaches, each of which would be necessary to implement one of two contrasting strategies.** Your task is to offer the two very different strategies and give citizens the information they need to reach conclusions about which strategy will “work best” for their communities.

In our case, I want you to consider strategies that grow out of the contrasting frameworks for understanding why and how threats to or opportunities for enhanced community sustainability arise. Keep these three components in mind. (1) A **framework** consists of those broad explanations of “how things work” that we discussed in the first and second modules of this, and that you presented in your concept map. Your map was “an explanation” of what causes or contributes to an identifiable, documented threat to sustainable communities – a sort of visualized explanation. (2) Each framework will foster several possible **strategies** for reducing a threat or taking advantage of an opportunity. Module 3 of the course focuses on such strategies, comparing at least two quite distinct strategies in each of the four discussion sessions, such as a “no growth” versus a “green economy” strategy for economic development. Your presentation must be balanced, science-based, and **include at least two strategies that draw upon different aspects of sustainability – economic, environmental, technological and social.** **E.g., you cannot present two economic strategies or two technological strategies. The two strategies must be based on these very broad components of sustainability.** You must present both the positive and the negative aspects of each strategy. Expressing your personal opinions or ideas is **not** the goal. You are trying to inform people, not argue them into agreeing with you. (3) A **policy** is a set of rules or regulations that are put into place to favor or foster a specific strategy. These policies lay out the “rules of the game” that govern what individuals and

organizations can and cannot do and that reward (perhaps through tax breaks) or punish (through higher costs for a public good) what individual decision-makers do. Policies are designed to achieve specific outcomes. If we triple the cost of water, a lot of people will try to use less water which will achieve an outcome of reduced water use. So a public policy might be made to adjust the cost of water on a “sliding scale” instead of everyone paying the same – the more you use, the more each gallon costs, the farther the water has to go to get to you, the more each gallon costs, the older the water infrastructure in your community, the more each gallon costs (to cover repair costs), etc. The “policy” here is that we go from “one price for all” to “variable pricing.” In particular, policy changes are usually the most effective way of changing **systems, and many of the PINs that we experience are due to systems, not things**. Global trade is not a “thing” that you can just eliminate. Global trade is a system that meets needs – like getting food to people because they want or need it or both. It is not a thing that you can like or dislike – it is a response system to human desires and needs. You can change it by making subtle or even drastic changes to the “rules” by which the system operates. That’s what the WTO (World Trade Organization) does. It “makes rules” that then affect how global trade occurs. You are “nudging a system,” not “killing a thing that you do not like” when you create policy changes.

Consult these resources. The description of a policy brief provided by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is excellent and provides a good example of what you need to include (<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/policy-briefs/>). Additional excellent resources that may help you with this assignment are available at <https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/womens-and-childrens-health-policy-center/de/policy-brief/index.html>. The links at this site provide several materials including a lecture and explanations about how to improve a policy brief, how to translate a research article for use in a policy brief, and other helpful materials.

The primary audience (people you are trying to convince) for your policy brief are decision-makers, such as government officials at the state (province) or local level in the context that you describe in the introduction (see below) or other people who have decision-making power over the resources that your policy will address. For example, you would want to engage the construction and banking industries in any discussion dealing with policies that would affect infrastructural development. Whatever the PIN, the critical decision-makers are almost surely not scientists or experts in sustainable development, may know relatively little about the threat you have identified, and probably are people who have not been involved in discussions of the alternative approaches that we have studied. Write your brief in a way that is cogent and understandable to decision-makers who may have limited understanding of science, of technical terms and concepts, or of the scientific evidence pertinent to your ideas. Simply put – it has to be easy to read and easy to understand. Brevity, clarity, and a good visual presentation are critical. Use the resources you have consulted all semester, including required readings and the materials that you have found for yourself. Make sure your policy brief draws attention to the factors that contribute to the PIN (module 1 of the class); shows that the threat or challenge is well-documented in the scientific literature and in the public discourse and has serious potential implications for the future of the community (module 2 of the class); and can be addressed through highly divergent frameworks for addressing the threat (module 3 of the class).

Conclude each of the alternatives with one or more recommendations based on the material you presented throughout the document. Please do NOT make the mistake of deciding what you want to recommend BEFORE you explore and document the advantages and disadvantages of multiple alternatives. Avoid that trap of “my pre-determined idea that suits me and seems best to me is what I want to get people to do” in this assignment. You do not decide the best recommendation. That is not your role. It is critical that you include a good discussion of the different probable outcomes of putting into place the recommendations that flow from each of the three strategies you present. Then you put the

decision of what constitutes the desired outcome in the hands of the decision-maker, **not you**. You are serving as an expert advisor. You are not the elected official, president of the company, or founder of the nonprofit organization. You are an expert advisor to the **body of decision-makers** who will ultimately decide “what to do.” Your job is to advise them about the probable **social, economic and environmental costs and outcomes of alternative strategies**. For example, a “no growth” strategy to reduce resource use may be likely to produce low environmental costs, but also likely to increase deprivation among the poor. Be realistic and do not try to pretend that there are no differences in costs and outcomes among strategies or that one strategy will be “super low cost and also have great outcomes for everyone and everything.” Think critically, especially about your own favorite strategy. **Remember, these are not “laws we enact” or “programs to implement.” We are talking about strategies or approaches – foster a green economy or foster a no growth economy.**

Maximum length **excluding** Title Page, Table of Contents, Executive Summary, and Bibliography is 4,000 words. This is actually a LONG policy brief – most are about 1,500 words long, but longer is actually easier so I decided to allow up to 4,000 words. One single-spaced page in Times New Roman 12-point font is about 500 words – or an 8-page body for this document. You can (and probably should) include graphics in the brief – they not included in the 3,000 word body of the document. Submit the document under Assignment 3 on Canvas. Use the name Student1Name_Student2Name_Student3Name_Policy_Brief.

Required Elements in the Policy Brief

Title. The title is the first part of a paper readers see and it begins the process of communicating the message contained in the policy paper. An effective title of a paper should give readers a quick overview of the subject and problem addressed in the policy paper. A reader may use the title in deciding whether to read the paper or not. As a general rule, avoid titles of more than 10 words. (*Not included in word limit.*)

Table of Contents. The table of contents is a skeleton or overview of the structure of the policy paper. It shows the overall organization, the main sections and their sub-sections and page numbers to locate sections in the paper. (*Not included in word limit.*)

Executive Summary. The executive summary aims to interest readers in reading the whole paper. However, the main function of the executive summary is to satisfy the needs of readers who will not read the entire paper and readers whose main interest is in the key proposed policy recommendations. The executive summary provides a synopsis of all main parts and findings. (Maximum 250 words, *not included in word limit.*)

Background. The background sets the scene by presenting the **context** for the PIN. Describe the setting and the nature of the communities that are affected, e.g. make sure the reader can understand the “who, what, and where” of the PIN. The background demonstrates that the PIN exists. It is a very highly condensed, well organized and clearly written synthesis of the evidence you have amassed about the nature, extent, sources (causes), and probable effects of the PIN based on scientifically valid and reliable sources of information. Assume your readers are tired, busy, and address many problems every day. Your job is to wade through a mountain of information that describes and reduce it to an easy-to-read and understand statement. Be clear, precise, and succinct. Describe the **kinds of sources you used** briefly (two/three sentences) -- to show you are not just citing Joe Blow’s blog about the world and everything wrong with it -- and cite the sources of data you used. This establishes you as someone worth listening to.

Previous & Current Policies. This section tells the reader what **has and has not been done to**

address the PIN from a strategic perspective. This is not a description of projects or specific interventions or programs. Focus on the policies that have been *implemented or not implemented*. Remember that failure to implement any strategy or policy is also a decision, often the worst possible decision. This may include background information about the history of the threat, its causes, who is affected, descriptions of previous policies aimed at addressing the threat, and the outcomes of implementing those policies (positive and negative). It should also include a detailed and convincing description of the actual status of threat – the extent and impact of the problem now, who is affected now, the current policy and its successes and failures.

Strategic Approaches. This section presents each of the three strategies you chose as the basis for policy recommendations you will make (see below). You have to lay out the key aspects of the three strategic approaches briefly, in terms that will make sense to this body of “citizen decision-makers.” This section provides a concise synthesis of major findings about the strategies. However, this is more than a summary of the main findings. You should explain how your strategy will lead to and inform policy recommendations relevant to the threat. Remember, you are focusing on overall strategic policy-making, not developing a plan of action. For this assignment, you must use at least two different strategies taken from the strategic approaches we cover in module 3 of this course (e.g., degrowth, greening the economy, payment for ecosystem services, etc.). Do **NOT** limit this to a discussion of the strategy you prefer. Presenting the full range of options helps you build a comprehensive and convincing case for specific policy changes. It strengthens your recommendations because it shows that you have carefully considered several key approaches to addressing the PIN.

Policy Options. For each of the three strategies reflected in the policy options you pose, identify one or more *types of policies* that could be used to address the PIN of interest (not specific policies that would be voted on by a governmental body. My example of increasing the cost of a scarce resource like water is one strategy for reducing water use. Then clearly identify the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed policy (policies). Evaluate how each option will **increase or decrease the root causes of the PIN** – the likelihood of success in addressing the PIN. Do not overwhelm the decision-makers. Offer distinct policy options based on the two strategies, not a long shopping list of possible policy alternatives and not specific regulations or rules to support or not. This document informs strategic planning.

Conclusions & Recommendations. This section presents the case for your preferred policy alternative(s) to decision makers. First, present the strategy you think is best (not your favorite strategy). Do not fall back into “advocacy mode” for a strategy that you personally find particularly attractive for reasons of your own, like your own values and beliefs. You are testifying as an expert, as a scientist. Finally, provide a list of **no more than three policy recommendations** that must be implemented as part of the strategy. These are general policy recommendations, not the specifics of what would go into some referendum or legal document. For this assignment, this does not have to be highly detailed. Focus on the **key policies that are critical to the success of the strategy.**

Appearance counts – make good graphics for your presentation. NOT a Power Point slide full of a lot of words. I recommend the infographic type of presentation. You will present your brief in our last class session. You will have at most 20 minutes for this presentation (including questions and answers). Limit your presentation to 10 minutes. Allow 10 minutes for discussion. I will be tough on timing.

Grading Rubric for Brief

Component	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Points
Overall Presentation	<p>High visual appeal; avoids use of colors not recommend by ADA.</p> <p>Interesting title that conveys meaning</p> <p>Sections and sub-sections chosen to provide a clear overview of the paper and titles are descriptive of what is in each section</p> <p>Executive summary provides the “hasty” reader with the key points made, including key arguments</p>	<p>Moderate visual appeal, but follows some recommended practices for style and fonts</p> <p>Title is too wordy or too “cute” or frivolous</p> <p>Too few or too many sections and sub-sections</p> <p>Some titles provide information about content, but not all</p> <p>Executive summary is incomplete</p>	<p>Layout is unappealing</p> <p>Title does not convey information about what is in the document</p> <p>Subsections are poorly organized and titles for sections and subsections are not descriptive of the content</p> <p>Executive summary is essentially an outline</p>	30
Introduction & Problem	<p>States the specific PIN clearly – not a broad, vague pin like “overpopulation” or “insufficient resources.”</p> <p>Provides a sound explanation of how the problem developed in the specific context of interest (e.g., large cities, rural farming areas)</p> <p>Provides credible evidence that the consequences of the threat are damaging to the environment, people, and the economy in the context</p> <p>Explains the linkages between economy, technology, people and environment</p> <p>Describes what has been done to try to mitigate the threat (other policies and strategies tried)</p> <p>Offers explanations of why previous approaches have failed</p>	<p>PIN is described, but is not well-enough defined to address at the community level</p> <p>Provides some evidence about the consequences of the problem, but fails to include a robust discussion of all three (social, economic or environmental)</p> <p>Offers only general explanations of how the problem developed – a sort of generic description that is not specific to the context</p> <p>Describes few of the linkages between economy, technology, people and environment</p> <p>Descriptions of previous attempts to reduce the threat are vague</p> <p>Offers weak or vague explanations of why previous strategies failed</p>	<p>Little description of context</p> <p>Little discussion of why the PIN arises</p> <p>Very little evidence about the consequences of the problem is offered</p> <p>Does not explain how the problem developed, or makes only very general statements</p> <p>Focuses on one or a few linkages between economy, technology, people and environment</p> <p>No descriptions of previous attempts to solve the problem</p> <p>Does not offer explanations of why previous strategies failed</p>	50

Strategies and Recommendations	<p>Includes at least two very different strategies for addressing the threat</p> <p>Explains the underlying assumptions of each strategy and offers an explanation of why the strategy can be expected to address the threat</p> <p>Identifies the preferred strategy and justifies the preference based on the specific historical and current context of the communities at risk</p> <p>Clearly states at least four explicit policy recommendations that flow directly from the strategic alternative proposed for adoption</p> <p>Provides several key reasons based on logic and evidence for making the recommendation</p>	<p>Strategies discussed are similar – not distinct approaches to addressing the threat</p> <p>Limited or no discussion of the assumptions of the strategies presented and provides weak arguments about the potential efficacy of the approaches</p> <p>Explanation of how alternatives were evaluated is vague – insufficient for someone else to follow the same procedure</p> <p>Recommendations are vague or incomplete</p> <p>The reasons for making the recommendations are hard to understand and do not clearly rest on logic and evidence</p>	<p>Does not state distinctly different strategy options</p> <p>Does not discuss the environmental, social and economic aspects of the strategy</p> <p>No explanation of how alternatives were evaluated</p> <p>Recommendations are not specific to the context (vague, ill defined)</p> <p>No compelling reasons for the recommendations are offered</p> <p>Key decisions are not explicit and specific (vague, undefined)</p>	80
Style & References	<p>Included at least 15 references that represent a broad body of literature</p> <p>Credible sources in all cases</p> <p>Consistently used correct APA style both for embedded citations and in the bibliography</p> <p>No errors in grammar, spelling or punctuation</p>	<p>Included at least 10 references that represent a fairly broad body of literature</p> <p>Occasional use of a questionable source</p> <p>Was fairly consistent in use of APA style both for embedded citations and in the bibliography</p> <p>Few errors in grammar, spelling or punctuation</p>	<p>Included fewer than 10 references</p> <p>References were not representative of the body of literature</p> <p>Many references were questionable</p> <p>Errors in APA style C</p> <p>Common errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation</p>	40
Total				200