



WIDER Background Notes

Concept Note and Author Guidelines

What is it?

- 1,500 to 3,000-word paper
- Speaks also to the informed layperson, think tanks, development communities, media, etc.
- Written by an expert
- Lays out a problem, research topic, or current event at a deeper level.
- Is often more technical or more expansive than a blog
- It *either* supports an existing research or policy agenda, argues for a new research or policy agenda, *or* responds to an urgent need to mobilize knowledge triggered by new information or an extreme or atypical event

Description of publication type

A WIDER Background Note (BN) is a 1,500 to 3,000-word paper that provides background information, and develops new lines of argument and evidence on a topical issue. It accomplishes one of two possible objectives:

1. **Sets an agenda:** the BN provides an intelligently argued and evidence-based rationale for a research or policy agenda, *or* responds to an urgent need to mobilize knowledge sparked by an atypical or extreme event.
2. **Supports an existing agenda:** the BN compiles technically useful information or evidence to support a research or policy agenda. Examples of this include explanations on new or novel methods for gathering or interpreting evidence and/or tables and results of empirical or causal analysis using new or novel methods or datasets.

Who is the audience?

The WIDER Background Note speaks to those who want to understand a research topic or current event at a deeper level. Audience includes:

- informed layperson
- researchers
- development think tanks
- UN
- people involved in policy processes
- journalists/media

What is in a background note?

It may contain any number of the following: a deeper look at the current state of knowledge, knowledge gaps and arguments for reducing them, developing theoretical understandings, methods of analysis, empirical evidence, and potential implications.

It answers questions about a particular topic. What should we care about? Why should we care about it? Who, in particular, should care (is most affected, is most able to effect change)? What can my expertise, specifically, contribute to this topic? What are the next steps. What are the main things people need to know to be able to make informed judgements with currently available and future evidence from the field.

Who can write a background note and what is the publication process?

BNs are written by experts then (i) reviewed by a UNU-WIDER researcher for relevance and accuracy, and approved for publication; (ii) BNs are style- and content-edited for consistency as per the BN guidelines by a UNU-WIDER editor, usually from the Knowledge Mobilization Unit; and finally (iii) copy edited and published online by the publications team.

Process

1. Expert drafts the BN.
2. Senior UNU-WIDER researcher (not author) peer reviews and approves quality of scholarship.
3. Communications Associate edits for style (to ensure that product is in line with the style guidelines) and content (to align with institute-wide communications strategy).
4. Author reviews edits; accepts edits; discusses with editor edits they do not agree with.
5. Steps 3 and 4 are repeated as necessary until draft is finalized.
6. Author approves draft.
7. Copy editor edits for grammar, punctuation, and consistency.
8. Publications Associate adds metadata etc., finalizes, then publishes digital version.

Is what I am writing a background note, a working paper, a blog, or a brief?

Why a background note and not a working paper?

Due to the preliminary and explorative nature, BNs are typically not developed into peer-reviewed publications.

Most WIDER Working Papers—academic studies that pose a research question, then using existing knowledge and data, plus new findings collected in the academic enquiry process, give conclusions—are a step on that publishing path.

WIDER BNs collate existing findings to propose new paths for future research, outline some of the most important empirical findings in the field to date, provide technical information that supports an existing set of working paper(s) or journal publications. *Or*, advance a new research agenda with arguments that illustrate the benefits or drawbacks of a certain theoretical or methodological direction.

Why a background note and not a blog or a brief?

Both blogs and briefs are shorter with a word limit of 800–900 words. They mostly translate existing research knowledge. They are read in a single, short sitting and speak to a broad audience in clear and easy to understand non-technical language.

A BN is an ideal vehicle for deepening the audience's understanding of an important topic in which you are an expert.

A blog is better for increasing the awareness of a topic's importance, reaching a larger audience, providing commentary, and speaking to the well-informed and less-informed alike. Blogs generally assume a chatty and personable or journalistic tone and are better suited, especially, for content that relates to a 'trending' phenomenon, whereas BN is likely to be more 'evergreen' or 'up-and-coming'.

UNU-WIDER briefs, on the other hand, specifically summarize recent research findings and elaborate on what they might mean, in general, or in terms of better policy. They reference a specific publication or a specific body of work from a UNU-WIDER project.

A BN note is useful for exploring a topic at an additional or more general level of depth or detail and targets an audience that has at least a precursory level of understanding with the objective of deepening this audience's understanding by mobilizing existing knowledge (empirical evidence, theoretical arguments, and your expertise).

Other instructions

- Style of writing: the note should have the tone of an explainer combined with expert commentary. The language should be semi-formal, take the issue seriously, stay concise, and exclude jargon but respect the reader's intelligence. It should be useful to a broad range of audiences, including other experts.
- Please do include *illustrative* charts, graphs, and tables with the draft (maximum three figures/images, and three tables). Note that these should not be placed in the body of the text; please supply as separate files. For the inclusion of third-party content (figures, tables, photos) please respect prevailing copyright and/or [Creative Commons](#) license of the original content. Sources of (the data of) the tables, figures, and photos must be indicated.

Author's check list for a draft Background Note

- title
- author's name, affiliation, and email
- 1,500–3,000 words
- figures, tables, photos, etc. in separate files
- citations as hyperlinks in body of text; e.g., 'In [one recent proposal](#), experts argue for a universal development commitment.'

Here is the link to an example of typical Background Note: <https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/WBN/2020-8>

If you have any queries, please contact publications@wider.unu.edu.