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Future Forum Organization

Writing a Snapshot

Guidelines for writing at the Future Forum

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Writing a Snapshot for publication with the Future Forum necessitates a thorough and academically acceptable process. This is accomplished by a well structured and theoretically informed approach to research. This paper outlines the principles used by Future Forum staff to develop interesting, relevant and well written policy papers.

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Introduction

The Future Forum publishes a range of different policy papers, one of which is the *Snapshot* series, a short and highly condensed report. The other report series are longer, such as the monthly or quarterly *Research Reports* (15-20 pp), the shorter bi-monthly *Political Updates* (published in March, May, July, September and November) and the long and annual *Political Summary* (published in January each year), our flagship publication. This paper discusses the *Snapshot* and will outline what it is, how it is developed and the process surrounding it.

The paper has two parts, of which the first introduces the reader to the *Snapshot* as a Future Forum policy paper, while the second will provide a detailed description regarding the Snapshot format and how it is supposed to be written. This part will highlight the writing process and specifies responsibilities during the entire process.

This paper is aimed at Future Forum researchers, interns or affiliated researchers with the purpose of streamlining our publication series. It will be followed by similar papers outlining the structure of the other research products as well.

The Snapshot – a quick and relevant analysis of current affairs

Future Forum staff uses a measured, analytical and considered approach in all our dealings. The idea permeating all our work is that we shall conduct rigorous in-depth research that involves all stakeholders in finding concrete, creative and principled solutions to Cambodian policy issues. Future Forum's objective is thus to encourage intellectual research and thinking, to positively influence the policy narrative in Cambodia at a local, national and international level, employing evidence-based policy debate, analysis and recommendations to inspire Cambodian people – especially youth and young professionals – to achieve democratic, political and socio-economic change that will benefit all of Cambodia. Our series of publications reflect this approach.

The *Snapshot* is a short and highly focused analysis of some topic of concern. It is a two page highly focused policy paper aimed at bringing forth facts and issues of relevance and importance to senior policy makers, politicians and the wider public as well as chieftains of domestic and foreign industry and investment institutes and companies. The condensed format is chosen to resemble an executive summary in its character and each report is therefore very short. The purpose is to bring attention to issues of relevance rather than explaining or providing answers to complex subject matters.

Since our research is primarily aimed at issues located in the nexus between politics, economy and development a *Snapshot* should always use an analytical framework inspired primarily by what can be termed Political Economy Analysis (PEA). In our reading, such an analysis gravitates around issues of “social change and historical transformation” (Boyd Barrett, p. 186). Specifically, and ideally, the Snapshot should highlight social relations, especially those important “power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources” (Ibid, p. 186). In short, our focus should be on an analysis of “control and survival in social life”, especially within the context of domestic and current Cambodian politics (Ibid, p. 186). Being aware of the past, we strive to discuss the future, rather than the history, of the country.

The *Snapshot* process – who, what and when

Generally speaking, a *Snapshot* is supposed to be written quickly and around a highly focused and narrow but important topic. As such it must be very well structured and argued and saturated by a language that is short, to-the-point and “cost-effective”.

The sequence described below is set out to save time, to help authors and researchers to write in a condense and rich format that has the potential to reach readers on the absolute highest levels in society as well as the lay person interested in current Cambodian affairs.

The *Snapshot* process contains five clearly defined phases: the first is called “Tasking”, the second is “Scoping”, the third is the “Data collection and analysis” while the fourth is the “Writing phase”. The fifth and final is the “Publication”. Each and all of these processes are deemed of the same importance and may from this brief description seem to be noticeably divided from each other. In reality however, the process is iterative and the borders between each phase is often blurred. We find it imperative though, that the process is followed and used as a tool to assist during the entire writing.

Future Forum uses a staggered publishing approach to all its publications. Some of our products are published only once a year, while others are published bi-monthly or quarterly. Ideally, a *Snapshot* takes around two to three weeks to produce. Depending on the number of researchers and interns at the Future Forum we should be able to publish at least two to three *Snapshots* each month.

In order to reach that goal it is of immense importance that researchers and interns follow these guidelines.

Tasking

The first phase is defined by the moment when the researcher or the individual researcher undertakes a new project. This phase can either be said to be driven by personal initiative or by organizational tasking. In the first instance, an individual comes up with a topic of his or her own while in the second a senior or a manager gives a task to a researcher or intern.

In both cases, the project must immediately be narrowed down into something that becomes a feasible undertaking, both in terms of time and resources required. Before any new *Snapshot* project is started, a Future Forum senior staff member must clear each project and allocate resources and time accordingly. It is either the Policy Advisor or the President of the Future Forum who approves any such new project, and thus gives clearance to proceed with a specific *Snapshot*.

One of the most important aspects of this phase is allocating time and creating a time-line for the project (see Appendix 1 for an example of such a timeline). The time-line shall identify the following milestones: start and end of project; set dates for at least two short working meetings (about thirty minutes each) with a senior researcher or manager; set the estimated date for publishing; and set date for final proof-reading by senior advisor, manager or president of Future Forum (the latter dependent on sensitivity of topic). This phase also means allocating resources in the widest sense to the designated researcher.

Scoping

The second phase is of utmost importance, and requires from the researcher/intern that the task given above is reduced into something that is feasible and possible to investigate under the given conditions. Basically this phase is about identifying the question asked, the data and the methodology used. The question asked here is: what is supposed to be done within this task?

Generally speaking, Future Forum asks questions related to democratic, political and socio-economic change and associated policy in Cambodia. Depending on the topic, data used can be both quantitative and qualitative in character. Unfortunately, the *Snapshot* format is not suited for research that necessitates the development of primary data. Instead, we have to rely on secondary sources. Criteria for choosing the data follow all normal academic and international standards. We strive to use qualitative, quantitative as well as comparative methodologies to drive our analyses. To identify social change we strive to use time-series data (i.e. quantitative) rather than in-depth and intensive surveys or studies.

The designated researcher/intern starts the project by quickly sketching the aim and purpose of the study in order to narrow it down to a very specific topic of relevance to the Future Forum and Cambodia. Implicit here is that the approach undertaken is inspired by a political-economy analysis and that it is relevant to the aim of Future Forum (see www.futureforum.asia). This part of the scoping can be guided by two principal questions: what are we trying to say; and what is the main argument we are trying to forward here?

Defining the question in such a way is paramount not only to writing a successful *Snapshot* with high impact, but also to the feasibility of the project as such. The phenomenon often referred to as “writers-block”, in essence when a writer does not know what to write, is most often associated to inadequate time spent on this first crucial phase. Basically, if you don’t know what you are going to write, you will not be able to write it. By allocating some time for this phase as early as possible the risk of ending up with a feeling of having “nothing to say” is reduced, thereby saving precious time.

Accordingly, start the project by hammering out the aim and purpose of your *Snapshot*. Why is this being written and for what purpose? What sort of data will the project require? Is the required type of data easily obtained? What problems do I foresee with this inquiry? Is the study even feasible to execute? This phase is not allowed to take more than three full days into account.

When these questions have been defined and answered in a satisfactory way, a meeting with the tutor/mentor is required. The purpose of the meeting is to revisit the time-table, and assure the road ahead. Before the meeting, the designated researcher sends a short e-mail to the tutor/mentor answering the questions touched upon here. After the meeting, and if the tutor and researcher agrees, the project can be allowed to move into the next phase.

Data collection and analysis

When the designated researcher is confident that the study is possible to conduct, the next phase concerns the collection of data and the subsequent analysis.

The researcher should now have a rough idea of the analytical tool to be used in this phase and how it correlates with PEA and Future Forum ambition. The first step in this phase thus entails developing an analytical framework that is useful.

Ideally, in this phase, the researcher should be fully confident about the task ahead and how the *Snapshot* will be developed. In reality, he or she will however most likely have to go back to the previous phase, scoping, and adjust the aims and purpose somewhat. It is frequently the case that encountered findings does not correlate fully with the original idea, thus requiring some small adjustments. If these adjustments necessitates for instance a re-phrasing of the original aim and purpose it is required that advice is being sought by a senior researcher or the policy advisor.

Somewhere in the middle of this phase it is required that the researcher calls for a meeting with the tutor/mentor to report on the progress. Ideally the meeting is only of a formal character to ensure that everything proceeds as planned. Sometimes, the researcher may need help or advice analyzing the data encountered.

Writing

When all data has been collected and thoroughly analyzed the *Snapshot* in itself must be written. Explicit, here then, is our understanding that the research and the writing of the report are actually two different activities, separated from each other in time. After the analysis has been concluded, the most striking features shall be put to paper in such a way that the results are communicated clearly and to the point. It is often advised that the writer imagines a reader and writes the text for that person.

Since the format of the *Snapshot* is limited to two (absolute maximum three) pages, economy of words is of utmost importance to success. Each paragraph should therefore consist of a core-sentence (usually the first or the last of a paragraph), stating very clearly the main argument of that part. The rest of the paragraph is used to substantiate the core sentence! Clarity in a *Snapshot* is as a consequence heavily dependent on the logic connecting these core-sentences.

At the Future Forum we employ an evidence-based methodology and therefore use footnotes where required. This ensures academic standards as well as it allows us to write short pieces. The interested reader can then use our research as a door opener into more in-depth research. When we use secondary data, we try to base as much as possible on previous research rather than anecdotal data.

Writing the 100% perfect paper is impossible. As a rule of thumb therefore, it is usually claimed that to get a paper that is finished to 80% to a pure 100% requires 80% of the total time spent on a project. *Snapshots* are supposed to highlight important and interesting topics, not solve major problems! Therefore, we strive to writing papers to a perfection of 80% only.

Publishing

When the *Snapshot* is finished it is sent to the Policy and Research Advisor or the President of the Future Forum for approval before publishing. Ideally it is immediately approved for publishing, but occasionally it will have to be revised according to instructions. The researcher will then be given a new date when the *Snapshot* must be resubmitted for an approval before publishing. The maximum amount of days spent on revision is limited to three.

The Policy and Research Advisor is responsible for publishing and any communications efforts in conjunction with any new *Snapshot* release. The President of Future Forum has the final approval authority for all publications.

Conclusion

Future Forum uses an analytical and critical approach to all our publications and all our work. The idea infusing everything we do is that of highlighting and discussing concrete, creative and principled solutions to Cambodian policy issues. Our objective is to encourage intellectual research and critical thinking and to positively influence the policy in Cambodia, everywhere, at all times and at all levels. This is done by employing evidence-based policy methodology to provide recommendations that can inspire the Cambodian populace to achieve democratic, political and socio-economic change benefitting all citizens of Cambodia.

This paper has highlighted the principles for writing *Snapshots* at the Future Forum. As such, it shall be used by all staff, researchers, and interns as well as affiliated researchers, when writing a *Snapshot* on behalf of the Forum.

Appendix 1: Generic example of writing process

This generic example assumes that the researcher works on a full time basis. If employment/position is on half time, the time table should be adjusted accordingly.

Week 1

Monday: Initiating meeting with supervisor/tutor; tasking and preliminary scoping

Tuesday: Scoping; aim and purpose; main question defined; identifying possible data sets to be used

Wednesday: Meeting 1 with supervisor/tutor; scoping continues; data collection begins

Thursday: Data collection

Friday: Data collection; preliminary analysis started in parallel

Week 2

Monday: Data Collection; analysis starts

Tuesday: Analysis; outline of report sketched

Wednesday: Analysis; meeting 2 with tutor

Thursday: Concluding analysis; start writing *Snapshot*

Friday: Writing *Snapshot*

Week 3

Monday: Writing *Snapshot*

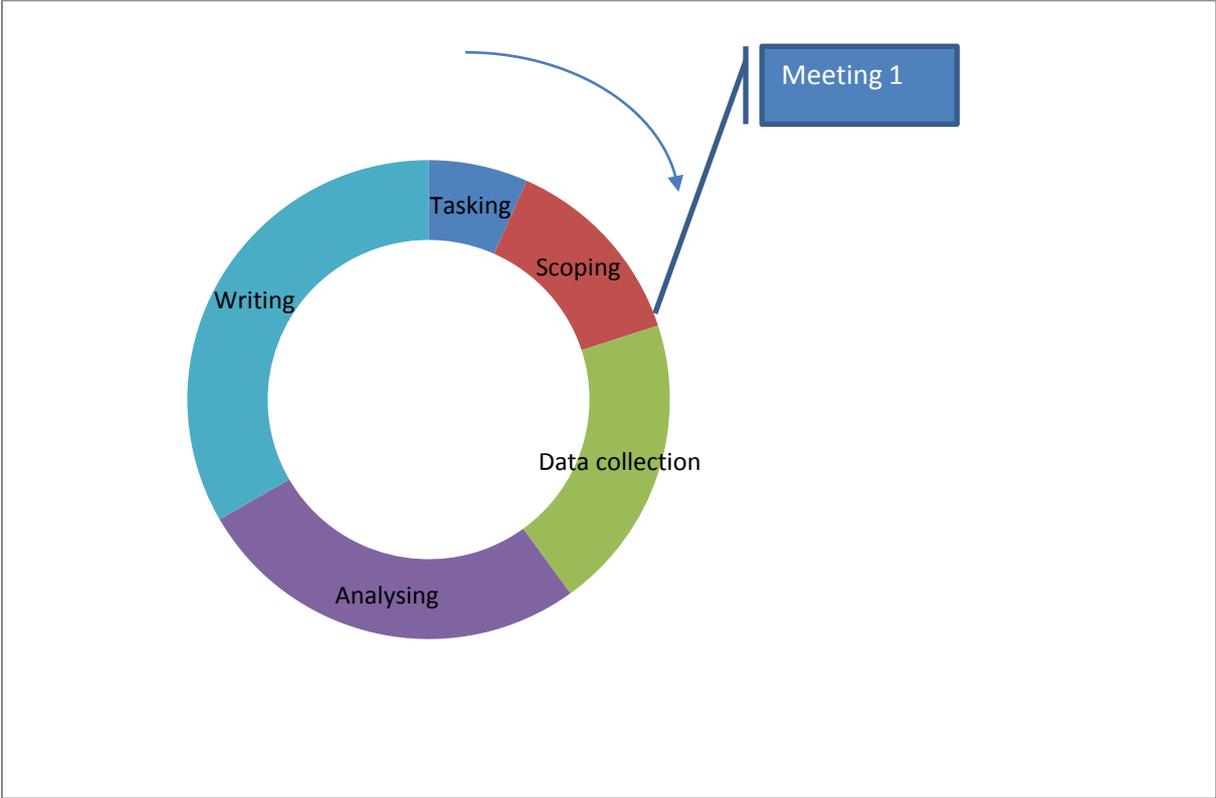
Tuesday: Writing *Snapshot*

Wednesday: Submit *Snapshot* to tutor/mentor/manager for approval before publishing

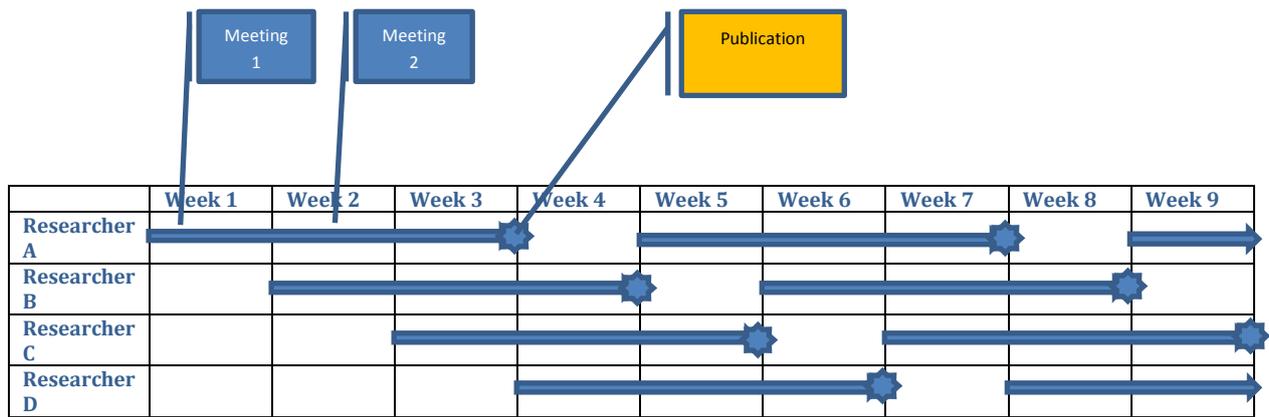
Thursday: *Snapshot* revised according to instructions for approval before publishing

Friday: *Snapshot* published

Appendix 2: Generic example of cycle of writing



Appendix 3: Generic example of publishing process



Ideally, each researcher will be able to publish one *Snapshot* every four weeks, in essence spending no more than three weeks on each assigned *Snapshot*. This makes it possible for Future Forum to publish four to five policy papers each month!

Appendix 4: Generic example of format of Snapshot

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