Kinder's Vetting Framework:

A guide to Stages 1 & 2

KINDER

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kinder.world

Contents

Please note that The Kinder Vetting Framework is continually evolving. Since we ask the same of organisations, we periodically reflect on our work based on feedback, new research findings and developments within the non-profit sector.

Introduction to Kinder and the world of doing good

Philanthropy is far from a modern phenomenon. Progress has always been one of the prominent aspects of the endeavour of our species and is arguably essential to our survival. However, there are many disparate understandings of what progress entails, just as there are numerous ideas and strategies about how to achieve it. Aspiration to move forward inspires passionate speeches and applause, compels pragmatists to devise innovative enterprises, and determines decisions across desks in nonprofit organisations, corporate boardrooms, and aged chambers of parliaments.

Eventually, those talking points and plans of progress need to connect with civil society where individuality and the common interest of the collective is equally felt and actions stem from having a stake in the results. Civil society is there to assure progress is inclusive and sustainable. Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher, defines civil society as "a web of autonomous associations independent of the state, which bind citizens together in matters of common concern, and by their existence or actions could influence public policy."

Philanthropy, individual donations of time, money and resources, is a clear example of civil society in action. Taking part in the philanthropic sector is how people act on common concerns they are bound by. Participation for participation's sake, however, is not sufficient. For actions to lead to real progress, participation needs to be impactful, all actors need to measure their methods and approaches for effectiveness. Global progress can only be sustained through effective interventions. And effective interventions thrive on information, evidence and evaluation – the lifeblood of a strong charity sector.

Regrettably, there is a shortage of this information, evidence, and evaluation in the sector, preventing charitable organisations from reaching their full potential. Lack of knowledge about the sector leads to decisions that are driven only by emotions. This compromises solid giving strategies, creating unstable and unsustainable income sources for many organisations in the sector.

And, perhaps more importantly, the absence of information on the workings of charities causes a general mistrust in the philanthropic sector.

Kinder's mission

Kinder is an independent organisation that aims to bring about a movement for knowledge-driven philanthropy and boost the altruistic capacity of civil society by serving both donors and charitable organisations. In short, we seek to connect with charitable organisations and help them develop evidence-based practice and effective interventions, and, we aim to promote charitable organisations that deserve recognition. We do this in particular by encouraging our growing network of concerned global citizens to give to highly determined charities worldwide.

We believe transparency and accountability should be essential elements of the charitable sector, especially in the current historical context where the number of active organisations keep growing exponentially. In Kinder world we're aiming to build, charities are trusted, transparent, accountable and impactful. And donors feel empowered to make evidence-based choices about where to spend their time and money.

How are we building a Kinder world?

At the heart of our efforts to disrupt the charitable sector is the Kinder vetting framework, designed to provide charitable organisations with a fair and unified evaluation system. As part of our vetting process, charities are assessed on how transparent they are, their accountability on delivering promises, and how far their internal structures facilitate consistent learning and improvement. Along with this unified evaluation system, Kinder gives each organisation advice and information tailored to their specific strengths and weaknesses, supported by best practice examples.

This system not only enables organisations to check and align their internal strategies and plans, but it also strengthens their communications with external stakeholders like donors and beneficiaries.

The vetting framework currently consists of two stages, with two more to be added in the future:

- The initial step is an introductory basic analysis, based on the information organisations provide on their website, to evaluate them on transparency and accessibility.

- The next step is an in-depth process, based on exploratory analysis, to understand the operational and conceptual frameworks of charitable organisations. The focus is on strategy, programs, research, and ethical principles that a charitable organisation employs to pursue its mission.

Kinder's research team and network of vetting associates, assess each charitable organisation on a rolling basis, going through the framework step by step. Based on the data they gather, the research team detects areas that need further development and creates tailored advice. This feedback helps charitable organisations to recognise their shortcomings and understand how they can improve.

Kinder also keeps track of organisations once they've gone through the vetting process and identifies the ones that are eager to learn and follow through with the feedback. How an organization reacts to this challenge is a further factor Kinder uses to distinguish organisations committed to progress.

Developing Kinder's Vetting Framework

The vetting framework, which has taken one year to create, is a combination of desk research, collaboration with the Impact Centre Erasmus (ICE) of Erasmus University, and regular trials and refinements. The team consistently reflects on developments in the sector and adjusts the framework to ensure it's up to the highest standards.

Kinder's research team started this process by establishing sector benchmarks based on review studies and existing research. This process helped the team identify four key pillars for the framework: Strategy, Programmes, Research and Responsibility. Underpinning these pillars is the overarching criteria of trust and effectiveness.

The following sections go into more detail on how each of these criteria is defined and measured, starting with an overview of existing literature on assessing charitable organisations.

Charitable organisations, effectiveness and evaluation

The number of active charitable organisations in the world keeps on growing at an increasing pace. Meanwhile, the body of evidence on their effectiveness and their capacity to implement evidence-based interventions (EBIs)[1] remains sporadic[2,3,4]. An organisation must either adopt programs and practices that are proven effective by evidence or invest in evaluation services to prove that their methods, practices, and programs make a measurable impact on their target population.

Several databases have been established that provide a collection of interventions and programs that are "proven to work"[5,6,7,8]. What Works Network, Project Oracle, Blue-prints for healthy Youth Development, and Diffusion of Evidence Based Interventions (DEBIs) are amongst such databases. These resources can enable charitable organisations to adopt and implement programs with a high effectiveness rating, as indicated by scientific evidence and the literature indicates that organisations often adopt others' evidence-based practices (EBPs)[9].

However, there are downsides to adapting pre-existing interventions, especially for smaller organisations[10]. Using evidence-based practices developed and tested by another organisation may weaken the identity and "differentiating" qualities of an organisation's work. Moreover, it is important to consider that the source of evidence that addresses the effectiveness of an intervention is tailored or tested for a specific target group; when the intervention context and the target group change, effectiveness can no longer be guaranteed or assumed.

It's also important to remain aware of the difference between efficacy in an academic context, and effectiveness in practice[11]. The question to whether the intervention manages to have real world outcomes or not depends on the efficacy of an intervention in the experimental setting, coupled with the implementation of said intervention in the field.

High quality evaluation of interventions and their effectiveness depends on having sufficient vetting systems in place. Solid evaluation frameworks are vital for promoting effectiveness. A variety of different internal and external measures that have been developed to assess effectiveness, transparency, and accountability of charitable organisations already exist. These measures include certification and rating systems, infrastructure and management capacity tools, self-regulation, codes of conduct, and other monitoring and evaluation practices[12]. These measures share key features like collecting information about the goals and ambitions as well as actual performance and achievements of organisations.

Some external evaluation methods also assess whether an organisation practices internal assessment, through self-monitoring and evaluation, which is an indication of transparency and accountability[13]. These evaluation methods inform stakeholders about organisations' accountability and ability to delive on program objectives.

All external evaluation systems rely on organisations making access to information about their work easy, which is in itself an indication of transparency.

Data has long been a key part of evaluation in the nonprofit sector, and over the last decade there has been a deeper focus on data and analytics for evaluation and strategic learning[14,15]. However, for there to be a meaningful move to consistent, high quality evaluation in the sector, data culture needs to change towards a more progressive way of collecting and analysing information. This means getting to a point where data collection and analysis goes beyond the basic, technical criteria and begins to answer more abstract, exploratory questions about performance.

Internal staff and donors alike are also calling for more systematic and robust evaluation in the sector. According to a study by the Center for Effective Philanthropy[16], program officers who evaluate nonprofits for grant applications, think that organisations can achieve meaningful change through strategically planning and designing evaluation frameworks. Similarly, donors too, seek to support organisations that use evidence to solve problems[17].

At Kinder, we are dedicated to contributing to this progressive data culture and have embedded these news ways of collecting and interpreting data in our own framework.

Accountability, transparency and trustworthiness

An organisation is considered accountable and transparent in the eyes of the public, donors, and regulators when it provides easy access to information such as its mission, performance reports, financial statements, use of resources and assets, and management of the organisation[17-23]. Furthermore, when charitable organisations address certain concerns and make promises, expectations arise. With significant promises comes serious moral and legal responsibilities where beneficiaries and donors are important associates.

Organisations are expected to accept moral and legal responsibility to do their best in fulfilling their promises, in particular when it comes to the expectations of donors and beneficiaries[24-27].

In fact, it has been argued that organisations that don't put enough emphasis on gaining the trust of their beneficiaries, compromise their performance and programme sustainability[28]. While the necessity of involving beneficiaries has been widely discussed in the field, actual beneficiary participation mechanisms raise some concerns. A study of several charity organisations indicates that "satisfaction surveys and formal complaint mechanisms are the most frequently implemented formal evaluation and participation mechanisms"[29], but a significant number of staff are not aware of the existence of such mechanisms in their organisations and the engagement levels of participants has shown to be poor in terms of providing feedback after taking surveys. Additionally, not all board members and managers are open to including beneficiaries or their representatives in policy-making. At Kinder, we believe that early inclusion of beneficiaries from the identification phase, including them in decision making, and collaboration are key to defining an organization as accountable[30].

In general, transparency, accountability, and trustworthiness sit at the core of the Kinder Vetting Framework. The first thing we expect of organisations is to provide external stakeholders with information required for them to be able to make judgement calls on the organisation's workings. This kind of transparency signs to accountability and a steady record of both makes organisations trustworthy in the eyes of the general public, amongst them potential donors.

Strategy

There is significant literature about the importance of strategic planning on the performance of nonprofits. A very large number of nonprofit organisations claim they undertake strategic planning[31]. While this demonstrates that strategic planning is becoming standard practice, research indicates that planning techniques are failing to meet the desired goals.

The approach chosen in strategic planning plays a crucial part in the effectiveness of interventions and the success of the organisation in achieving desired goals.

Strategic planning should link planning with implementation on an ongoing basis[31] and generate tools for evaluating organisational effectiveness[32]. Excellent strategic planning should also act as a unifier, bringing staff and board members together towards a single goal, and acting as a catalyst for a positive change in work culture[33].

Other issues appear at the point of implementation; if the key decision makers of an organisation lack the skills, resources or commitment to engage in deliberative strategic planning or if the implementation of the plans is highly improbable, chances of success get exceedingly low. Managers and strategy planners need to be able to strengthen strategic insight and thinking in the organisation, and they should be aware of the present issues and those on the horizon. Implementation of plans is therefore as crucial and often more challenging as development[34]. Many challenges that surface in the planning process are the result of disconnection between strategy development and implementation.

The planning process should give charitable organisations the opportunity to clarify where they are, where they are headed and the obstacles to getting there[35]. Failure to acknowledge and manage obstacles will lead to failure in implementation[36]. It's important that strategic plans account for changing timelines and therefore changing, and unexpected obstacles.

One obstacle organisations often face is that implementation of strategy takes longer than planning in general. Breaking down strategy into small, nuanced steps with short term operating objectives and metrics can mitigate against this.

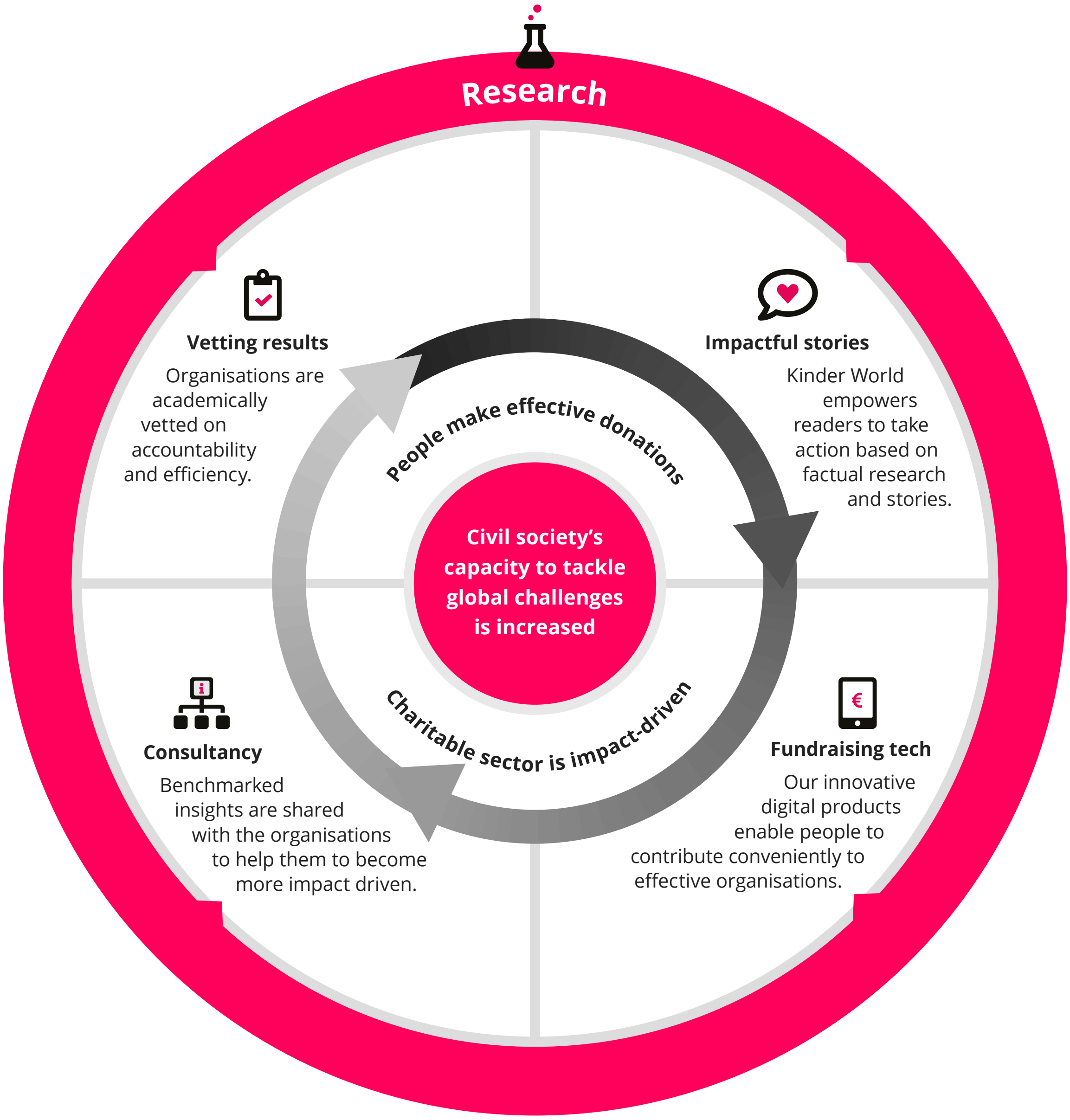
An organisation needs to develop goals that are planned on a short-term basis, are measurable, and consistent with the organisation's strategy. A processes for updating plans is crucial for strategy implementation. Identifying and planning key actions, like how and when to do research, identify stakeholders, initiate relationships, frame priorities, write up and evaluate plans, increases the success of strategic planning processes[37].

This process can be difficult and calls for an articulate societal change model. We consider the Theory of Change (ToC) an exemplary logic model to help with this process and move the work forwards[38,39]. Adaptation of this model helps nonprofits explain how a collection of short and intermediate objectives and accomplishments set the stage for long-term results.

One of the strengths of the ToC model is how open to adaptation it is, because of this, the model can be used in vastly different ways[40,41]. Despite its adaptability, there are still a few stable components to the ToC model, like evidence checks and specific ways of calculating resources and designing plans. A strong ToC also clearly links all the early and intermediate programme outcomes to the organisation's long-term goals[42]. The ToC model can be highly instrumental in designing programs where interventions are evaluated to assess impact. It defines how a program is intended to work and establishes measurements and the kind of data that should be collected for effective evaluation.

Using the ToC model is a strong indicator that an organization is working within our criteria, thus, employing a ToC is a factor considered in our vetting framework. You can read our guide to adopting the ToC model for more information.

Kinder's Theory of Change



Measurement and evaluation of effectiveness

Charitable organisations are established to resolve global or local concerns; they represent a promise of positive change and attract support from people and entities who are similarly dedicated. This support comes in different forms of resources for the organisation. Appropriately allocating resources towards achieving the organisation's goals is a crucial part of the presupposed promise of positive change, indicating the "integrity" of an organisation. And when a valuable use can be found for each of the resources it shows "efficiency". Effectiveness on the other hand, is a more difficult concept to quantify. In short, the ability to obtain the maximum amount of value from the overall stock of resources, demonstrates the "effectiveness" of an organisation[43].

Charitable organisations are expected to show the effectiveness of their programmes through measurable results, using data and evidence, but they also need to demonstrate these programmes have a positive impact on their beneficiaries. Beyond measuring performance against objectives through the Theory of Change process, it is also vital to evaluate actual performance[44]. While performance measurement elaborates on what a program did and how well it progressed, performance evaluation gives an insight about the effect of the programme on beneficiaries. Performance evaluations question if a programme has positive outcomes for the beneficiaries, regardless of effectiveness.

Academics and practitioners alike are increasingly becoming more interested in developing optimal performance measurement systems for charitable organisations. This growing interest provides organisations with new resources about best approaches, measurement methods, and validating their practices. This is particularly useful because of the growing pressure on charities from government, donors, and stakeholders to show their impact[45]. A strong performance measurement systems helps charitable organisations argue their case, employing evidence to counter criticism. This is especially crucial when working on complex social problems where 'success' is not black and white.

Defining clear criteria can facilitate performance assessment and help organisations better understand their performance. Traditionally, a broad range of measurable criteria is defined and applied for evaluating performance, such as fundraising efficiency and financial reserves[46]. But as performance criteria and measurements evolved, the role of nonprofit stakeholders has become better understood as critical elements performance measurement[47-52]. The purpose of performance measurement defines the methods applied including the timeframe for data collection, the set of indicators and measures, and the methods of analysis[53]. The performance measurement keeps track of measures such as beneficiary satisfaction, outputs, inputs, activities[53,54], public value, network, and legitimacy[58]. It can also track the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of an organisation and gather information from external and internal stakeholders[53]. By measuring outputs, it is possible to assess how far an organization is progressing towards its intended goals[55].

The data extracted from overall performance measurement cannot, however, give detailed insights about the impact of a programme. This type of insight can only be gathered by systematically collecting information about the programme's activities and their outcomes[60]. This facilitates understanding about the effectiveness and efficiency of a programme, and helps improve programmes, offering valuable lessons, and direction for future resource allocation[56].

Despite the increasing expectation that charitable organisations will evaluate their impact and performance, there is still some progress to be made in terms of the amount of nonprofits actually doing so. This can be explained in part with the struggle of many nonprofits in assessing their activities[1].

Research indicates that the main factors in preventing evaluation are a “lack of financial resources, technical capability and evaluation literacy and challenges around identifying relevant evaluation systems and outcome indicators.” This research views the main ‘facilitators’ of evaluation as “getting appropriate support to evaluate, having an organisational culture and management in favour of evaluation and the pursuit of accountability.” It also highlights an unfortunate side effect induced by the expectation that organisations will thoroughly evaluate their work: organisations produce evaluations simply to satisfy funding bodies, without taking meaningful learnings from the process[57,58,59].

Monitoring and evaluation of programmes and interventions is critical to identifying problems, making adjustments and facilitating change – all of which leads to improved services and better chances of reaching desired outcomes[60]. Given this, subpar evaluation carried out to meet a funder’s, rather than an organisation’s needs is an inefficient use of time. Strong monitoring and evaluation should be carried out through regular follow ups, data collection and reporting: the data of a program’s inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts[61]. Inputs are required for implementing the activities of a programme, defining the activities themselves, and their outputs (i.e., immediate effects). These outputs are then followed by outcomes (i.e., intermediate effects) that in turn lead to impacts (i.e., long-term effects). Acknowledging the distinction between different types of data that a program can create is critical for understanding the early, intermediate, and long-term effects of a programme and intervention. It’s important that data is clear and remains relevant to the metrics measuring the programme and its context, in order to properly measure effectiveness. Moreover, the use of monitoring and evaluation of data gives new insights into the strengths and shortcomings of an organisation, bringing new learning and sharing opportunities, which can serve as evidence of the accountability and transparency of the organisation[62].

A further factor to consider when analysing an organisation’s effectiveness is the aim they have set. Many charity organisations have relatively abstract, big picture purposes, such as to reduce hunger or prevent HIV. Whilst they may well interact with beneficiaries through programmes as they work towards this end goal, instant benefits to those who are affected is not the same as achieving their purpose. The satisfaction of famine victims may not indicate long-term reductions in hunger[20]. To get around this issue, it is important to check for a mismatch between interventions and the desired goals and to set short- and long-term goals for interventions, so that efficacy can be properly assessed.

Research

“The credibility of research results has been long discussed as a necessary condition for the use of research outcomes within decision making in policy and practice[12].”To gain a better understanding of the conduct and use of research in charity sector, it would be helpful to look at past and current projects; this could provide insight into how to build a culture of research. However, there is a lack of systematic information about the current state of research efforts by charitable organisations[62]. A review study attempted to provide an overview by asking how research knowledge is used in decision making in the health and social care areas, and what the implications of this research are for both the research community as well as the organisations themselves[63]. This review study collated the findings of previous research investigating organisations which varied in terms of size, beneficiaries, expertise and resources, as well as organisations with differing degrees of understanding and use of research. Different factors facilitating and impeding knowledge mobilization are introduced in this overview such as “costs of journal subscriptions, staff skills and time to search, access, adapt and apply research to the organisational context and a lack of time for reflective practice.”

There are many documented ways in which research in charitable organisations can be flawed. For example, in some cases research knowledge fails to take beneficiaries into consideration. This is for a few reasons, namely finding it difficult to adapt the evidence-based intervention, or the research knowledge with practitioner and beneficiaries’ experiential knowledge. Then there is the issue of the organisations’ varying perception as to what credible research “knowledge” is, meaning there is no standard way of identifying optimal research consumption, conduct, and allocation[64].

There is also confusion as whether to use local, internal or external evidence.

Best practice research in the sector include features such as case studies, looking at similar organisations and their work, and reaching out to experts while decision making. The most valuable research in the sector was relevant to organisational culture and the contexts of the interventions. Easier access to resources such as research summaries or evidence synthesis appeared to bring higher engagement with the research – these resources reduce the time needed to access and understand the research. These findings complement those of another report65, which identified time to read and having access to research and evaluation papers as critical enablers or barriers depending on context. Overall, these factors are important in encouraging better usage of research and evaluation findings.

Direct links to external researchers and research organisations is also a factor that enables successful research, because of the enriched pool of resources to which such connections offer access. Knowledge of how to conduct research and availability of resources such as research assistants and funding is also vital for strengthening research efforts[65]. It is also important for researchers to communicate their research outcomes in efficient ways, articulating their findings in summary as well as full formats, and making use of channels like social media to reach out to more beneficiaries, so that they too can learn and benefit from research findings.

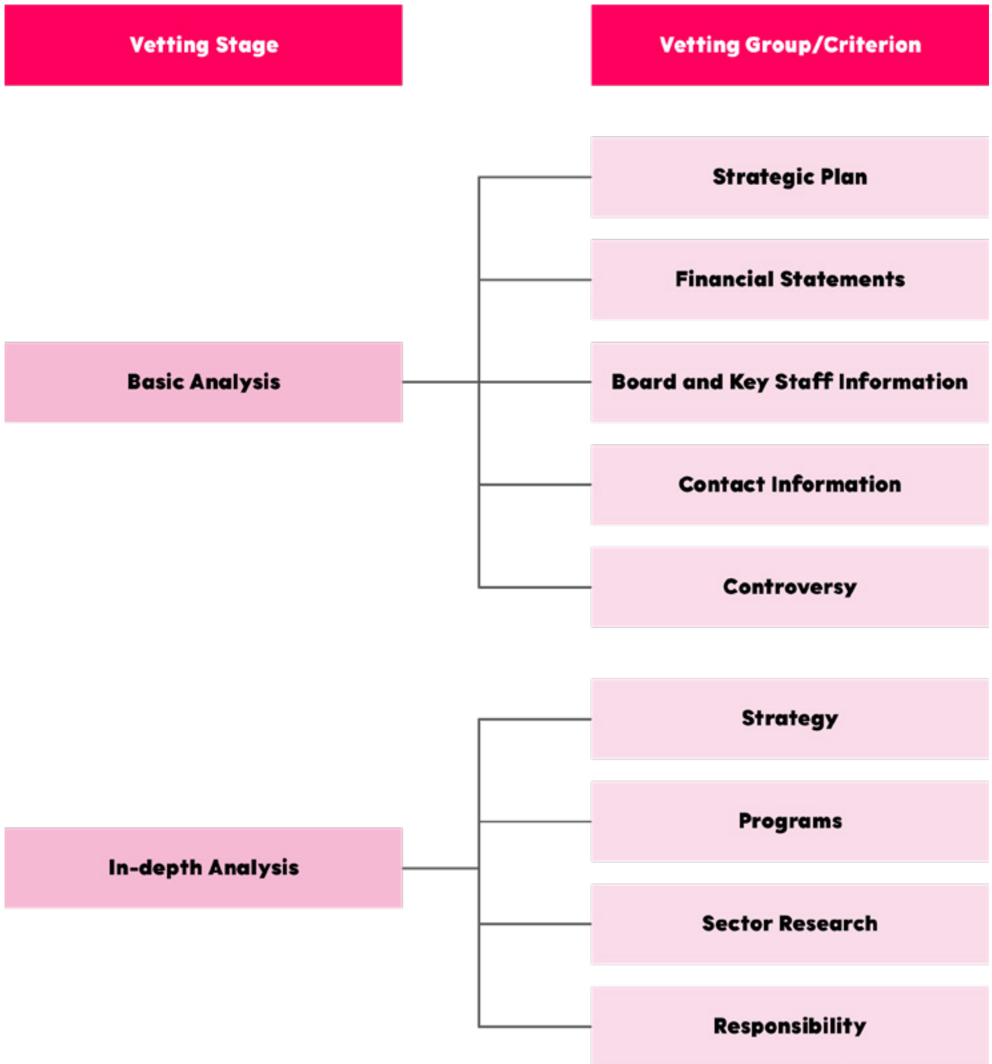
Fundamentally, we think that charitable organisations need to embrace a culture of learning, develop an understanding of research methods and build a meaningful volume of evidence over time – all of which is possible with persistence and commitment.

Kinder's Vetting Framework structure

The vetting framework consists of different Vetting Stages. Vetting stages are groups of questions with a specific common goal. We currently distinguish two Vetting stages:

- Basic Analysis
- In-depth Analysis

Each vetting stage can have multiple Vetting Revisions. These revisions are used to be able to make changes to a Vetting Stage while keeping the old data.



The framework in action

Kinder is made up of dedicated, like-minded individuals committing their skills and experience to a good cause. The recommendations and advice we give to charities also apply to our internal practices. We aim to embody the characteristics we seek in other organisations and lead by example.

Our vetting framework is built upon validated research on accountability, effective planning, and performance and aims to provide an unbiased, independent metric for excellence in the charitable sector. These characteristics are our most cherished values. We will continue to ensure this framework acts as a measure for excellence, working closely with our stakeholders, observing as organisations apply our recommendations and use our observations to continuously improve. As the charitable sector evolves, our vetting framework, too, will progress to accommodate its needs.

Along with full-time research staff, the Kinder research team consists of international volunteers. Each volunteer is trained and mentored by a member of Kinder research staff before starting to vet organisations on their own. Ultimately, our goal is to make our vetting process open source. This innovative approach means that people from all over the world, speaking different languages, will be able to contribute to the improvement of the charitable sector. In the end, this approach will enable Kinder to provide our audience of potential donors with an all-inclusive database of charities. Making this process open source will also increase the transparency of our own internal processes.

We are open to comments on our framework and vetting process. If you have any questions or concerns please reach out to Behdokht Hosseini, Head of Research and Development at **support@kinder.world**

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Kinder's Vetting Framework:
A guide to Stages 1 & 2

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