



# INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF PHILANTHROPY AND SOCIAL INVESTMENT

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## REVIEWER GUIDANCE MANUAL

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A Comprehensive Guide to Conducting Peer Review for the IRPSI

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## 1. Welcome and Purpose of This Guide

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Thank you for agreeing to serve as a reviewer for the *International Review of Philanthropy and Social Investment* (IRPSI). Peer review is the bedrock of scholarly publishing, and the quality of our journal depends entirely on the rigour, fairness, and constructiveness of our reviewers. You are the gatekeeper who ensures that what reaches our readers meets the standards of intellectual seriousness that the study of philanthropy and social investment demands.

This guide has been prepared to support both new and experienced reviewers. It provides a comprehensive framework for evaluating manuscripts, a section-by-section walkthrough of what a thorough review report looks like, an annotated exemplar drawn from an actual editorial decision (anonymised), and a practical checklist you can use before submitting your report. Whether this is your first peer review or your fiftieth, we hope this guide sharpens your craft and deepens your contribution to the scholarly enterprise.

The IRPSI publishes original research on the intersection of philanthropy, social investment, civil society, and development across Africa and the Global South. We welcome theoretical, empirical, and policy-oriented work. Manuscripts may employ quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. What unites them is a commitment to rigorous inquiry into how societies mobilise and deploy resources for collective well-being.

## 2. The Philosophy of Peer Review at IRPSI

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At the IRPSI, peer review is not an adversarial exercise. It is an act of scholarly generosity: you are investing your expertise to help a fellow researcher strengthen their work. Even when you must deliver critical feedback, the tone should be that of a senior colleague who wants the paper to succeed, not a critic who wants it to fail.

### The Editor-in-Chief's Guiding Principle

“To address does not mean to amend the paper to fit exactly what vision the reviewer has for the paper, but rather to respond convincingly to the feedback.” — This means your review should identify problems clearly, explain why they matter, and where possible suggest directions for improvement. But it should not dictate a single correct way to fix every issue. Respect the author's intellectual autonomy.

### Three principles guide our review process:

**Developmental, not gatekeeping.** Our default posture is to help authors improve their work. A recommendation of “major revisions” is not a rejection—it is an invitation to resubmit. We reject only when the fundamental premise, methodology, or contribution is irreparably flawed.

**Substantive, not cosmetic.** We expect reviews that engage with the intellectual substance of the work—its theoretical grounding, methodological rigour, analytical depth, and contribution to knowledge—not merely its formatting or grammar.

**Specific, not vague.** Every criticism should be actionable. “The methodology is weak” is unhelpful. “The sampling strategy raises questions about representativeness because the paper does not explain the criteria used to select the 11 interviewees from the 77 surveyed organisations” is actionable.

### 3. What Makes a Good Review? The Five Pillars

A thorough review evaluates the manuscript across five dimensions. You do not need to structure your report around these five pillars explicitly, but every competent review should address all of them in substance.

Pillar	What to Evaluate	Key Questions
1. Contribution	Originality, significance, and relevance to the field of philanthropy and social investment	<i>Does the paper tell us something new? Would the IRPSI’s readership care?</i>
2. Theory	Theoretical grounding, conceptual clarity, logical coherence of the argument	<i>Is the theoretical framework appropriate? Are concepts clearly defined and consistently applied?</i>
3. Methodology	Research design, sampling, data collection, analytical techniques, ethical considerations	<i>Could another researcher replicate this study? Are the methods appropriate for the research questions?</i>
4. Analysis	Quality of data presentation, depth of interpretation, robustness of findings	<i>Do the findings actually support the claims? Are alternative explanations considered?</i>
5. Presentation	Writing quality, structure, tables/figures, referencing, adherence to journal style	<i>Is the paper clearly written? Are tables and figures informative and well-labelled?</i>

### 4. Structure of a Review Report

Your review report should follow a four-part structure. This structure mirrors the format used in the IRPSI’s editorial decision letters and ensures consistency across reviews.

#### Part A: General Comments

Begin with a brief summary of the paper’s purpose and approach (2–4 sentences). This confirms to the editor that you have read and understood the submission. Then provide a balanced overall assessment: acknowledge the paper’s strengths before identifying its weaknesses. This is not mere

diplomacy—it calibrates your critique. A review that opens with recognition of what works establishes the reviewer as a fair reader, making the subsequent criticism more credible and more likely to be received constructively by the author.

**Part B: Major Issues**

Major issues are substantive problems that, if left unaddressed, would prevent publication. These typically concern theoretical foundations, methodological design, analytical rigour, or the validity of central claims. Organise major issues by manuscript section (Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Discussion/Conclusion) so that authors can locate and address them systematically. For each issue: (1) identify the problem precisely, (2) explain why it matters, and (3) where possible, suggest a direction for improvement. This section constitutes the core of your review and will typically comprise 60–70 per cent of the report.

**Part C: Minor Issues**

Minor issues are problems that should be fixed but do not individually threaten the paper’s publishability. These include: inconsistent terminology, unclear phrasing, missing references, mislabelled figures, or scope-related suggestions. Present these as a concise list. Do not inflate minor issues into major ones or bury major issues in this section.

**Part D: Recommendation**

Conclude with one of the recommendation categories explained in Section 8 of this guide. Your recommendation should follow logically from the issues you have identified. If you have raised multiple major issues, a recommendation of “Accept” would be inconsistent. If you have identified only minor issues, “Major Revisions” would be too harsh.

## 5. Section-by-Section Guidance

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### 5.1 General Comments

Your general comments should accomplish three things in roughly half a page:

**First, demonstrate comprehension.** Summarise the paper’s central argument, method, and contribution in your own words. If you misunderstand the paper, the author and editor will know immediately—and your subsequent critique will lose credibility. A sentence like “The paper examines how armed conflicts in Burkina Faso have affected the financial resource mobilisation strategies of NGOs, using a mixed-methods design combining survey data from 77 organisations with 11 in-depth interviews” shows the editor you engaged with the substance.

**Second, acknowledge strengths.** Every manuscript submitted to IRPSI has passed an initial editorial screening, meaning the editor has already judged it to be within scope and potentially publishable. Your review should begin from this premise. Identify what the paper does well: perhaps it addresses an under-researched region, uses an innovative data source, or proposes a novel theoretical extension. These are not pleasantries; they signal to the editor which elements of the paper should be preserved through revision.

**Third, preview the diagnosis.** Indicate the overall nature and severity of the issues you have identified, so the editor can calibrate expectations before reading the details. For example: “While the paper addresses an important and timely topic, I have identified several concerns regarding the theoretical framework’s development, the operationalisation of key variables, and the depth of statistical analysis that, taken together, require substantial revision before the paper is ready for publication.”

#### Example of Effective General Comments

The paper presents a contribution to the study of how armed conflicts affect financial resource mobilisation among NGOs, particularly in Burkina Faso, a region experiencing severe instability. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data, which ideally should enrich the depth and breadth of the findings. By leveraging primary data from 77 NGOs and secondary data from multiple reports, the study offers a dataset that allows for both generalisable insights and contextual nuance. Moreover, the study’s focus on the under-researched Sahel region and its innovative exploration of NGO adaptation strategies, such as hybrid funding and thematic shifts, represents a fresh and timely addition to the literature. However, there are several specific issues within the paper that raise concerns about its rigour, clarity, and overall suitability for publication in this journal. These issues will be outlined in the following sections. — Note how this reviewer (i) summarises the paper, (ii) identifies clear strengths, and (iii) signals that substantive issues follow.

### 5.2 Major Issues

This is the most demanding section of your review. Below, we provide guidance on evaluating each component of a typical manuscript.

### 5.2.1 Evaluating the Introduction

A strong introduction should accomplish four things: (1) establish the topic's importance, (2) identify the specific gap in the literature, (3) state the paper's purpose and research questions, and (4) preview the contribution. When reviewing, ask:

- Is the gap clearly and precisely identified? "There is little research on X" is a weak gap statement. A strong gap statement explains *why* the absence of research on X matters and *what* is lost by not having it.
- Are the research questions clearly stated and answerable? Vague questions produce vague answers.
- Is the contribution articulated with sufficient specificity? "This paper contributes to the literature" says nothing. *How* does it contribute? Theoretically? Empirically? Methodologically?
- Does the introduction adequately contextualise the study? For IRPSI, this often means situating the study within broader debates about philanthropy, aid architecture, civil society, or social investment in Africa.

#### Exemplar Critique of an Introduction

"The introduction highlights the literature gap, but it is somewhat vague. The paper claims to address a unique gap concerning the effects of armed conflict on NGOs' funding in Burkina Faso, yet does not provide sufficient detail on how the current study diverges from past literature. Ensure that you clearly articulate how this research builds on or deviates from existing literature." — This critique is specific (identifies vagueness in the gap statement), explains why it matters (insufficient differentiation from prior work), and offers a direction for improvement (articulate how the study diverges from existing literature).

### 5.2.2 Evaluating the Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The literature review should not be a catalogue of everything ever written on the topic. It should be a purposeful, critical synthesis that builds the conceptual foundation for the study. Ask:

- Is the review focused on the specific research question, or does it wander into tangential territory?
- Does it critically synthesise the literature (comparing, contrasting, identifying patterns and contradictions) or merely summarise it study by study?
- Is the theoretical framework appropriate for the research question and the context?
- Are the theoretical concepts operationalised in a way that connects them to the empirical analysis?
- Are the sources current and relevant? Flag reliance on outdated references (typically more than 10–15 years old) unless they are foundational or classic works.

- Does the review include comparative perspectives? For studies of specific countries, the review should draw on evidence from similar contexts to situate the contribution.

### 5.2.3 Evaluating the Methodology

Methodological evaluation is where many new reviewers feel uncertain. You do not need to be a methodological specialist to conduct a competent review. Focus on the logic of the research design: do the methods fit the questions? Here is a checklist of common issues:

#### For quantitative components:

- Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Can the reader assess representativeness?
- Are key variables clearly operationalised? Ambiguous definitions (e.g., “armed conflict” without specifying the intensity threshold or data source) undermine the study.
- Are the analytical methods appropriate for the data and research questions? Descriptive statistics alone are rarely sufficient for studies claiming causal or correlational relationships.
- Are reliability and validity measures reported (e.g., Cronbach’s alpha for survey instruments)?
- Are robustness checks or sensitivity analyses conducted?

#### For qualitative components:

- Are the interview selection criteria clearly stated and justified?
- Is the analytical approach (e.g., thematic analysis, grounded theory, content analysis) explicitly identified?
- Is there evidence of rigour (e.g., coding procedures, inter-coder reliability, member checking)?

#### For all studies:

- Are ethical considerations addressed? Studies involving human participants, particularly in conflict zones, must discuss informed consent, confidentiality, and ethical clearance.
- Is triangulation attempted? Mixed-methods designs should demonstrate genuine integration of data sources, not merely parallel presentation.
- Is there a discussion of limitations? Every study has them; their absence suggests lack of self-awareness.

### 5.2.4 Evaluating the Analysis and Findings

This is where you assess whether the evidence actually supports the claims. Key questions:

- Do the findings address the research questions directly?

- Are claims proportionate to the evidence? Watch for overclaiming: asserting causation from correlational data, or generalising from a single case.
- Are alternative explanations considered? If the paper claims that armed conflict reduces NGO funding, has it considered other concurrent factors (economic crises, policy changes, global funding shifts)?
- Are tables and figures informative, clearly labelled, and correctly referenced in the text?
- Is the language precise? Flag imprecise language, especially terms that carry scientific meaning (e.g., “correlation” should not be used unless a correlation coefficient has been computed).

#### Exemplar Critique of Analytical Claims

“The paper makes strong claims regarding the relationship between armed conflicts and reductions in NGO funding, but the reference to ‘correlation’ seems misleading. There is no correlational analysis (in a statistical sense) in the study. Rather, the data analysis relies on visual plots. The correlation between armed conflicts and funding reduction is suggested but not rigorously tested. Without more rigorous statistical tests, these findings could be critiqued as suggestive rather than conclusive. This is a major flaw.” — This is an exemplary critique: it identifies the exact problem (misuse of ‘correlation’), explains its severity (the claimed relationship is untested), and makes the implication clear (the finding is suggestive, not conclusive).

#### 5.2.5 Evaluating the Discussion and Conclusion

The discussion should interpret findings in light of the theoretical framework and existing literature. The conclusion should provide actionable implications. Ask:

- Does the discussion go beyond restating the results? It should explain *why* the results look the way they do.
- Are the findings connected back to the theoretical framework?
- Does the conclusion offer concrete policy or practice recommendations, not merely restatements of findings?
- Are limitations honestly acknowledged?
- Are suggestions for future research specific and actionable?

### 5.3 Minor Issues

Present minor issues as a concise, numbered list. Examples of minor issues include:

- Inconsistent use of terms (e.g., switching between “financial resource mobilisation” and “fundraising” without clarification)
- Missing or outdated references

- Unclear figure labels or table formatting
- Typographical and grammatical errors (mention the general problem; you are not a copy-editor)
- Missing geographic or temporal context
- Suggestions for additional references or comparative cases

## 5.4 Recommendation

Your recommendation should be consistent with the issues you have raised. See Section 8 for the full explanation of each category.

## 6. The Art of Constructive Criticism

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The difference between a review that helps an author and one that demoralises them lies not in the severity of the critique but in how it is delivered. Here are principles for delivering criticism constructively:

**Be specific, not sweeping.** “The methodology has problems” tells the author nothing. “The paper does not explain the criteria used to select the 11 interviewees from the 77 surveyed organisations, which raises questions about whether the qualitative sample captures the diversity of NGO experiences” gives the author a clear target for revision.

**Explain the “why.”** For every problem you identify, explain why it matters. “The operationalisation of ‘armed conflict’ is too broad” is less helpful than “The operationalisation of ‘armed conflict’ is too broad: without specifying the intensity threshold, it is impossible to distinguish between regions experiencing low-level insecurity and those in full-scale war, which may have very different effects on NGO operations.”

**Suggest directions, not dictate solutions.** You can suggest that authors consider multivariate regression without prescribing the exact specification. You can recommend engaging with decolonial aid debates without specifying which authors to cite. Leave intellectual choices to the author.

**Use professional language.** Avoid sarcasm, condescension, or dismissiveness. Phrases like “the authors clearly do not understand” or “this is a fundamental error” can be replaced with “the paper would benefit from a clearer articulation of” or “this aspect requires further development.”

**Flag inappropriate terminology with sensitivity.** If a paper uses a term that may be perceived as unprofessional or offensive, suggest a neutral alternative rather than condemning the author. For example: “The paper introduces ‘NGO prostitution’ in a moralistic tone that could alienate readers. The authors could replace this with a more neutral and precise descriptor, such as ‘mission drift’ or ‘strategic realignment.’”

## 7. Common Pitfalls to Avoid

1. **The “I would have written a different paper” review.** Your job is to evaluate the paper the author wrote, not the paper you would have written. If the author has chosen to study Burkina Faso, do not fault them for not studying Mali—unless the omission of comparative context genuinely weakens the argument.
2. **The “everything is wrong” review.** If every element of the paper is fundamentally flawed, the appropriate recommendation is rejection, not a 10-page catalogue of deficiencies masquerading as “major revisions.” Be honest about irredeemable papers.
3. **The “only cosmetic” review.** A review that mentions only typos, formatting issues, and missing references has not engaged with the substance. The editor needs your assessment of the paper’s intellectual contribution, not its proofreading needs.
4. **The “no strengths” review.** Failing to acknowledge any positive aspect of the paper suggests either that you did not read it carefully or that you are not a fair evaluator. Every paper has something worth recognising.
5. **The “jargon without explanation” review.** Telling an author to “address endogeneity” or “engage with intersectionality” without explaining what this means in the specific context of their paper is unhelpful.
6. **The delayed review.** Timeliness is a professional obligation. If you cannot complete the review within the agreed timeframe, notify the editor immediately so alternative arrangements can be made. Authors are waiting.

## 8. Recommendation Categories Explained

Category	Meaning	When to Use
<b>Accept</b>	The paper is ready for publication with no or only trivial changes (e.g., minor typos). This is rare for first submissions.	No substantive issues remain. The contribution is clear, the methods are sound, and the analysis is convincing.
<b>Minor Revisions</b>	The paper is fundamentally sound but requires specific, bounded revisions that do not alter the paper’s structure or central argument.	You have identified issues that are real but manageable: missing references, unclear explanations, additional analysis, or presentation improvements.
<b>Major Revisions</b>	The paper addresses an important question and has potential, but significant problems in theory,	Multiple substantive issues exist, but none is

	method, or analysis must be resolved before publication.	individually fatal. The paper can be fixed with serious effort. This is the most common recommendation at IRPSI.
<b>Reject and Resubmit</b>	The paper's premise is interesting but the current version is too far from publishable to be revised within a single round. The author is invited to reconceptualise and resubmit as a new submission.	Fundamental redesign is needed: the methods may need to change, the theoretical framing may need to be rebuilt, or the analysis may need to be conducted afresh.
<b>Reject</b>	The paper is not suitable for the journal. This may be because it is out of scope, the contribution is insufficient, or the flaws are irremediable.	Use sparingly and always with respect. Explain clearly why the paper cannot be salvaged for this journal.

## 9. Annotated Exemplar Review

Below is a condensed, annotated version of an actual review report used in an IRPSI editorial decision. The annotations (in green boxes) explain what makes each element effective. Use this as a model for structuring your own reports.

### REVIEW REPORT

*Manuscript: "Fighting for Survival: Armed Conflicts and their Effects on Financial Resource Mobilisation among Non-Governmental Organisations in Burkina Faso"*

#### A. GENERAL COMMENTS

The paper presents a contribution to the study of how armed conflicts affect financial resource mobilisation among NGOs, particularly in Burkina Faso. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining survey data from 77 NGOs with 11 in-depth interviews. The study's focus on the under-researched Sahel region and its exploration of adaptation strategies such as hybrid funding and thematic shifts represents a timely addition to the literature. However, there are several issues concerning rigour, clarity, and suitability for publication that are outlined below.

##### Why this works

The reviewer summarises the paper accurately, acknowledges clear strengths (mixed methods, under-researched region, novel adaptation strategies), and signals substantive concerns—all in one paragraph.

#### B. MAJOR ISSUES

**Introduction:** The literature gap is somewhat vague. The paper claims to address a unique gap but does not provide sufficient detail on how the current study diverges from past literature. The expansion of NGO reaction theory by categorising reactions based on budget size is not well contextualised within the broader theoretical framework. The justification is underdeveloped: the authors do not convincingly argue why findings would be relevant beyond Burkina Faso.

##### Why this works

Three distinct problems are identified in one section (vague gap, weak contextualisation of theoretical contribution, insufficient justification for broader relevance). Each is specific enough to be actionable.

**Methodology:** The sampling strategy for both the survey and interviews is vaguely discussed. More details on the selection criteria for the 11 interviewees should be provided. The operationalisation of "armed conflict" and "resource mobilisation" is ambiguous. There is limited discussion on pre-testing procedures and no reliability measures. The study relies heavily on self-reported data without accounting for social desirability bias, recall bias, or strategic misreporting. Triangulation between primary and secondary data sources is insufficient. No ethical considerations are discussed.

**Why this works**

The reviewer identifies seven distinct methodological concerns, each specific and actionable. Note the progression from sampling to operationalisation to validity to ethics—a logical sequence that helps the author work through revisions systematically.

**Analysis:** The statistical analysis is relatively weak. Descriptive statistics alone are insufficient for a study of this complexity. The word “correlation” is used but no correlational analysis exists—the data analysis relies on visual plots. Without rigorous statistical tests, findings are suggestive rather than conclusive. The analysis lacks robustness checks or consideration of alternative explanations. The term “NGO prostitution” requires replacement with a neutral descriptor such as “mission drift.”

**Why this works**

The reviewer catches a critical misuse of statistical terminology (“correlation” without correlation analysis), flags the absence of robustness checks, and sensitively addresses inappropriate language—all with concrete suggestions for improvement.

**C. MINOR ISSUES**

- Include a clearer justification for focusing solely on Burkina Faso.
- Explicitly acknowledge limitations, including self-reported data biases.
- Strengthen the conclusion with concrete policy recommendations.

**D. RECOMMENDATION****Major Revisions Required****Why this recommendation**

The reviewer identified multiple major issues across introduction, methodology, and analysis—but also recognised clear strengths (timely topic, novel data, interesting adaptation strategies). This combination warrants major revisions rather than rejection: the paper has potential but requires substantial work.

## 10. Checklist for Reviewers

Before submitting your review, verify that you have addressed each item below.

✓	Section	Item
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>General</b>	I have summarised the paper's purpose and approach in my own words.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>General</b>	I have identified specific strengths of the manuscript.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>General</b>	I have previewed the overall nature and severity of my concerns.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Major Issues</b>	I have evaluated the clarity and precision of the literature gap.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Major Issues</b>	I have assessed the theoretical framework's appropriateness and development.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Major Issues</b>	I have evaluated the methodology: sampling, operationalisation, analytical methods, and ethics.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Major Issues</b>	I have assessed whether the findings support the claims made.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Major Issues</b>	I have checked for misuse of statistical terminology (e.g., 'correlation' without correlation analysis).
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Major Issues</b>	I have considered whether alternative explanations or robustness checks are needed.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Major Issues</b>	I have flagged any inappropriate or imprecise terminology.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Minor Issues</b>	I have listed minor issues concisely and separately from major issues.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Recommendation</b>	My recommendation is consistent with the severity of the issues I have identified.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Tone</b>	My review is specific, constructive, and professional throughout.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Tone</b>	I have suggested directions for improvement, not dictated solutions.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Practical</b>	I have completed the review within the agreed timeframe.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Practical</b>	I have checked my review for clarity, accuracy, and completeness.

*Thank you for your service to the IRPSI and to the scholarly community. Your careful, constructive engagement with the work of your peers is what makes rigorous, impactful scholarship possible.*

**Prof Imhotep Paul Alagidede**

*Editor-in-Chief, International Review of Philanthropy and Social Investment*