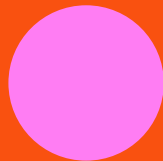


TO DESIGNING

SYMBIOTIC

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN JOURNALISM AND CIVIL SOCIETY





PUBLICATION CREDITS

**Guide to Designing Symbiotic Relationships
Between Journalism and Civil Society**

2025

**Ceper Uniandes / Fundación Avina / InnContext
News Agency / Pulitzer Center**

**The text was written by María Paula Martínez
Concha with the support of Ricardo
Corredor Cure, Pablo Baños, Jonatan
Rodríguez, and Florencia Tuchín.**

Graphic design: Nefazta (Johana Galindo)

**This work is shared under a Creative Commons
Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International
License (CC BY-SA 4.0).**



Just as in nature certain species thrive only when connected to others—such as clownfish and anemones, or crocodiles and the little birds that clean their teeth—journalism also finds its greatest strength in symbiosis. Collaborating does not just mean joining forces: It involves creating mutually beneficial relationships that broaden perspectives, amplify impact, and generate more resilient ecosystems.

This guide offers tools for thinking about, planning, and executing partnerships that strengthen collaborative, investigative, and expansive journalism aimed at generating real impact and actively engaging civil society and audiences. In times of information overload and fragmentation, building networks is an act of survival, but also of renewal: Each partnership extends the life of a story and the transformative power of journalism.

This guide is the result of a **strategic alliance** between **Fundación Avina** (Pablo Baños), InnContext News Agency (Florencia Tuchin), **Pulitzer Center** (Jonatan Rodríguez and Intan Febriani), and the **Center for Journalism Studies (Ceper) at Universidad de los Andes** (Ricardo Corredor Cure and María Paula Martínez).

Over several months, the partner organizations brought together diverse voices in three virtual meetings with **nine women and six men** from media outlets and civil society organizations in **nine countries in the region**, which served as key input for the development of this guide. In Colombia, participants included Laura Bonilla (Fundación Pares), Alejandro Gómez (La Liga contra el Silencio), Saruy Tolosa (Fundación Friedrich Ebert in Colombia), and Miguel Montes (Fundación Gabo). They also included Iván Brehaut (Pulitzer Center Fellow) joined from Peru; Tatiana Dias (The Intercept Brasil) from Brazil; and Alejandra Higuera (La Malvestida) from Mexico. We also received contributions from Melianny Pérez (Aguayo Lab, Venezuela), Florencia Aza (SembraMedia, Argentina), Frida Manuela (Mullu TV, Ecuador), Michelle Soto (Periodistas por el Planeta, Costa Rica), and Paula Díaz (Climate Tracker, Chile). Finally, Carlos March (Fundación Avina), Marco Calvo (Hábitat), and Carlos Guyot (Red de Periodismo Humano) made valuable contributions at the regional level.

THIS GUIDE INVITES US TO IMAGINE NEW WAYS OF DESIGNING SYMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN JOURNALISM AND CIVIL SOCIETY AS A MEANS OF SUSTAINING THEIR PUBLIC AND DEMOCRATIC FUNCTION IN A NEW REALITY.

TEN RULES

FOR COLLABORATION BETWEEN JOURNALISM AND CIVIL SOCIETY.

“This approach necessarily requires us to change paradigms, and forget what has too often shaped us: We must move from the “lone wolf” model to that of partnership, serving an editorial project that goes beyond the scope of one’s own news outlet.”

-Laurent Richard, Forbidden Stories

1 TRUST IS THE STARTING POINT

It is not imposed, it is cultivated. Collaboration is born when there is transparency, reciprocity, and clear ethical agreements. Without trust, all collective effort vanishes.

2 DESIGN WITH TENSIONS, NOT AGAINST THEM

Differences in time, language, or approach are not obstacles: They are raw material. The strongest alliances do not eliminate tensions; they understand them and transform them into learning opportunities.

3 PURPOSE PROVIDES DIRECTION

Every collaboration needs a reason for being. Being clear about the “why” allows us to define common strategies, roles, and paths. Without purpose, there is no movement; with purpose, there is meaning.

STAIRS, NOT SHORTCUTS

Collaborations grow in stages: First they inform, then they influence, and finally they mobilize. Thinking about this ladder of impact helps to measure, sustain, and amplify change.

COLLABORATE TO ACHIEVE THE IMPOSSIBLE

There are stories about corruption, migration, and the climate crisis that no one can tell alone. The most ambitious projects are born from diverse teams that think and act as a network.

SHARING IS MULTIPLYING

Sharing resources, databases, or lessons learned is not losing control: It is gaining collective capacity. Collaboration turns scarcity into ingenuity and competition into community.

IMPACT IS MEASURED IN ECHOES, NOT CLICKS

Metrics are maps, not destinations. What really matters is how long a story lasts, what it changes, who it touches. Collaborative journalism measures its success in social resonance.

INNOVATION IS HYBRIDIZATION

The future lies in mixing: data journalism and territory, research and art, science and emotion. Collaborations are laboratories where new narratives and ways of storytelling are experimented with.

COLLABORATING ALSO MEANS TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Networking protects. Sharing risks, visibility, and responsibilities creates a system of collective security against censorship, pressure, or precariousness.

CREDIBILITY IS BUILT IN THE PLURAL

Public trust does not come from individual perfection, but from shared work. Cross-checking, openness, and diversity make journalism what it always was: a common good.



COLLABORATION AS

A COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE:

LESSONS FROM THE 2025 GABO AWARD

The Gabo Award not only recognizes quality but also serves as a lens through which to see where journalism is headed in Ibero-America.

When analyzing the nominated works, five paths emerge that illustrate why collaboration is not just an option, but an essential strategy:

1

LISTENING TO MARGINALIZED VOICES AND SUPPORTING THEIR RESISTANCE.

Many of the selected projects do not merely portray excluded communities; they give them a voice, accompany them in the narrative, and respect their

2

DOCUMENTING ENVIRONMENTAL COLLAPSE AND ECONOMIES OF DISPOSSESSION.

Ecological crises are described as complex networks, not only in terms of damage, but also in terms of territorial struggles, local resistance, and global interdependencies.

3

INVESTIGATE ABUSES OF POWER AND DENOUNCE IMPUNITY.

Multilayered projects that cross judicial archives, institutional discourses, and violated territories to expose networks of complicity.

4

RECOVER HISTORICAL MEMORY AND OPEN PATHS TO REPARATION.

Some works delve into the past to understand the present, rescue silenced voices, review official accounts, and point toward symbolic justice.

5

FROM THE LOCAL MAP TO THE REGIONAL HORIZON.

The geographical distribution of the nominated pieces reveals an expansive view, with diverse geographies, multiple voices, heterogeneous formats, cross-border collaboration.

THESE FIVE PATHS ALLOW US TO UNDERSTAND THAT MANY OF THE MOST OUTSTANDING WORKS NOT ONLY TELL POWERFUL STORIES, BUT ALSO CONNECT CAUSES, DISCIPLINES, LANGUAGES, AND COMMUNITIES.

COLLABORATION DOES NOT APPEAR AS "ADDITIONAL GOOD PRACTICE" BUT AS THE ENGINE THAT ENABLES NARRATIVE DEPTHS THAT WOULD OTHERWISE BE UNATTAINABLE.

ALL EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION BETWEEN JOURNALISTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS BEGINS WITH A GOOD QUESTION.

OR RATHER, WITH SEVERAL.

BEFORE ACCEPTING OR PROPOSING A JOINT PROJECT, IT IS WORTH TAKING THE TIME TO ANSWER SOME KEY QUESTIONS HONESTLY. AMONG THEM, ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT:

WHAT CHANGE OR IMPACT DO WE WANT TO ACHIEVE?

BEING INTENTIONAL ABOUT IMPACT FROM THE OUTSET HELPS TO GIVE MEANING TO THE COLLABORATION, GUIDE EDITORIAL AND STRATEGIC DECISIONS, AND ENSURE THAT SHARED EFFORTS GENERATE PUBLIC VALUE.

ASKING THESE QUESTIONS EARLY ON AVOIDS CONFLICTS, ALIGNS EXPECTATIONS, AND LAYS THE FOUNDATION FOR A TRANSPARENT, SUSTAINABLE RELATIONSHIP THAT RESPECTS EACH PARTY'S MISSION.

IMPACT

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE COLLABORATING

1

WHAT IS THE REAL PURPOSE OF THIS COLLABORATION?

It is not enough to “do something together.” Every alliance needs a clear and shared purpose: Is it to raise awareness of a cause, influence public policy, strengthen capacities, or innovate in formats?

Defining the *purpose* from the outset allows for the design of coherent strategies and editorial and ethical decisions aligned with the common goal.

2

WHAT IMPACT IS EXPECTED AND HOW WILL IT BE MEASURED?

Every collaboration should begin with a clear intention for change. What transformation are we seeking to bring about and for whom? Each party needs to be clear about what “success” means from their perspective.

For journalism, it may be to open a public conversation, expand access to information, or generate media coverage.

For civil society, it may involve policy changes, community mobilization, or organizational strengthening.

It can also translate into **more transparent dialogue and decision-making between civil society, governments, and businesses**, with greater accountability; or into **a more aware and critical citizenry**, capable of actively participating in informed decisions on issues crucial to society.

Agreeing on **common impact indicators**—quantitative and qualitative—from the outset helps align expectations, share responsibilities, and jointly evaluate results.

3

DO WE RESPECT THE MISSION AND AUTONOMY OF EACH PARTY, AND HOW WILL WE MANAGE DISAGREEMENTS?

Good collaboration does not require giving up one’s identity. It is essential to review whether values, editorial principles, and institutional objectives are compatible.

In addition, anticipating tensions—related to time, language, or organizational cultures—and agreeing on ethical protocols or “roundtables” strengthens trust and the sustainability of the alliance.

4

WHAT DOES EACH ORGANIZATION CONTRIBUTE AND WHAT DOES IT NEED IN RETURN TO DO SO EFFECTIVELY?

Reciprocity is at the heart of any alliance. Putting resources, strengths, and limitations on the table from the outset—data, contacts, technical capabilities, territorial access, time, or budget—allows for the equitable distribution of responsibilities and ensures real conditions for executing the project.

5

WHAT PREVIOUS LESSONS CAN WE DRAW ON?

No collaboration starts from scratch. Reviewing past experiences, whether your own or others’, helps identify best practices, avoid mistakes, and strengthen joint capacities. A collection of case studies or repository of ideas can serve as a starting point to inspire new partnerships.

HOW TO MEASURE IMPACT IN TERMS OF RESONANCE

FOR A LONG TIME, THE MEDIA MEASURED ITS SUCCESS IN VIEWS, CLICKS, LIKES, AND SHARES. BUT WHEN A MEDIA OUTLET PARTNERS WITH A SOCIAL ORGANIZATION, THOSE NUMBERS BECOME INSUFFICIENT. A STORY MAY NOT GO VIRAL AND STILL CHANGE A LAW, A ROUTINE, OR A PUBLIC CONVERSATION.

THE INVISIBLE AGREEMENT

Every partnership needs its own compass. The media often talk about reach, organizations about impact. But the real meeting point is in defining together what it means to “have achieved something.” The Paraguayan media outlet *El Surti*, for example, does not ask how many people read an article, but whether that article served to move something: an idea, a policy, an awareness.

MEASURING MOVEMENT, NOT NOISE

The Intercept's Impact Score follows this logic. It measures both visible effects—debates, reforms, institutional reactions—and invisible ones: people who changed their minds or started talking about an issue they previously ignored. It is a way of measuring movement, not noise.

USEFULNESS AS A MEASURE OF VALUE

A podcast listened to by a thousand people can have more impact than an investigation with millions of views if it gets a community to take action. Value lies in usefulness, not quantity. Impact is not how many people listen to you, but who does something after listening.

REVEAL:

**MAKE SOMETHING
THAT MATTERS
VISIBLE.**

INFLUENCE:

**INFLUENCE THE
DEBATE OR DECISIONS.**

TRANSFORM:

**GENERATE REAL
ACTION OR CHANGE.**



**THREE
KEY STEPS**

WHAT YOU CAN'T SEE...

AND FINALLY, MEASURING IMPACT ALSO MEANS LEARNING TO SEE WHAT IS NOT SEEN. IN SOME PLACES, A STORY TRAVELS QUIETLY, PRINTED ON MURALS, SHARED IN ASSEMBLIES OR CONVERSATIONS. NO WEB ANALYTICS WILL RECORD THAT, BUT THAT IS ALSO WHERE JOURNALISM LIVES. PERHAPS THAT IS THE CHALLENGE TODAY: TO MEASURE JOURNALISM AGAIN, NOT BY ITS DIGITAL ECHO, BUT BY ITS HUMAN FOOTPRINT.

IMPACT CHECK LIST

CHECK	JOURNALISM	CSO	CHECK
	<p>ESTABLISH EXPLICIT AGREEMENTS FROM THE OUTSET Defining roles, timelines, use of materials, and ethical criteria prevents conflicts and protects the integrity of the process.</p>	<p>PROVIDE CLEAR SOURCES AND DATA Providing verified information, people-centered narratives, and access to diverse sources makes CSOs trusted allies.</p>	
	<p>ANTICIPATE, RECOGNIZE, AND MANAGE TENSIONS Differences in timing, language, or objectives are inevitable. Anticipating and discussing them allows for more conscious and sustainable processes.</p>	<p>BUILD SUSTAINED RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST The relationship with the media must transcend current circumstances. Long-term trust allows for more ambitious and less instrumental projects.</p>	
	<p>TRANSLATE COMPLEXITY INTO ACCESSIBLE NARRATIVES Journalism brings its ability to explain technical issues in human terms. This makes research understandable, useful, and part of the public debate.</p>	<p>CO-CREATE CSOs can go beyond providing data: They can co-create narratives with the media. This involves thinking together about how to tell a story—from the choice of approach to the language and formats—so that the story not only informs but also activates understanding. This narrative shift generates a sense of belonging and hope, rather than just outrage.</p>	
	<p>DIVERSIFY COLLABORATION FORMATS Reporting is not the only avenue for collaboration, nor is it the only possible format for presenting long-term research. Festivals, podcasts, exhibitions, and community gatherings expand audiences and strengthen social ownership of content.</p>	<p>ENSURE TRANSPARENCY AND ETHICAL RESPECT From the outset, agree on what information is shared and how. This protects communities and prevents their instrumental use.</p>	
	<p>SAFEGUARD THE MISSION AND EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE Autonomy is your greatest asset. Participating in projects that deviate from your editorial line can jeopardize your credibility. The priority must be the public interest, not the particular interests of CSOs.</p>	<p>MEASURE RESONANCE, NOT JUST VISIBILITY Measuring resonance—what ideas took hold, which actors took them up, what debates they generated—allows you to identify when a story really made a difference. Tools such as those offered by <i>The Intercept</i> or <i>El Surti</i> provide models for translating these intangible effects into qualitative indicators.</p>	

HOW ABOUT: MENTORING AND SKILLS TRANSFER PROCESSES

Investing in shared training strengthens collaboration, builds autonomy, and generates lasting trust.

HOW ABOUT: SHARED WORKSHOPS AND MUTUAL LEARNING

Bringing journalists and CSOs together allows them to understand contexts, learn new ways of communicating, and enrich both content and social impact.

IDEAS TO DO TOGETHER

HOW ABOUT: TRAINING IN NETWORKING, COMMUNICATION, AND SECURITY

Joint training in digital tools, strategic communication, and physical and digital security strengthens the resilience of both parties.

HOW TO CLOSE A PROJECT?

CLOSING A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT IS NOT SIMPLY AN ADMINISTRATIVE ACT: IT IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO REINFORCE THE LEGITIMACY AND ETHICS OF THE PROCESS.

GOOD PRACTICES INCLUDE:

1-RETURNING THE PRODUCT TO THE COMMUNITIES

Ensuring that the results of the collaboration, whether reports, videos, exhibitions, or other materials, reach the communities involved as an act of recognition and respect for their participation.

2-DOCUMENTING LESSONS LEARNED AND RESULTS

Systematically recording the findings, difficulties, and achievements of the project allows future partnerships to benefit from the accumulated experience, strengthening the institutional memory of both the media and CSOs.

3-CRITICAL REFLECTION ON TENSIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Jointly analyzing the challenges and successes of the project provides input for improving future processes and contributes to strengthening public dialogue and regional democracy, showing how journalism and civil society can act in a coordinated manner to address issues of public interest.

SYMBIOTIC EXAMPLES BETWEEN ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM AND CIVIL SOCIETY

1.

ANACÉ INDIGENOUS PEOPLE VS. TIKTOK DATA CENTER IN BRAZIL

Brief summary

In northeastern Brazil, the Anacé Indigenous community rose up against the installation of a giant TikTok/Casa dos Ventos data center on land they consider ancestral. They complained that they were never consulted or informed about the project, as required by law.

The journalistic investigation, combined with community mobilization, succeeded in getting environmental authorities to commit to holding public hearings before granting any permits.

Good practices in collaboration/symbiosis

- From the outset, journalists worked **side by side with Indigenous and local organizations**, integrating their voices, knowledge, and warnings into the investigation.
- They maintained a **constant and horizontal dialogue** with the affected communities, which strengthened the legitimacy of the report and its impact.
- The media pressure generated by the coverage **forced the authorities to open up spaces for participation and accountability**.
- The alliance combined **journalistic rigor** (requests for information, cross-checking of sources, document verification) with the **territorial knowledge** of civil organizations, achieving a more complete and fair view of the conflict.

2.

EXPOSURE OF THE SHARK MEAT TRADE IN BRAZIL

Brief summary

An investigation by *Mongabay*, supported by the Pulitzer Center, revealed that public agencies in Brazil were purchasing shark meat—often without identifying the species—to feed schools, hospitals, and prisons. The finding sparked a national debate: Congressmen called hearings and several cities announced that they would stop purchasing endangered species.

Good practices in collaboration/symbiosis

- The team built an **open and verifiable database** of public tenders, which was reused by environmental organizations to demand changes in purchasing policies.
- **Partnerships with marine conservation networks** amplified the report's reach and transformed information into collective action.
- **Media visibility prompted immediate institutional responses**, showing how investigative journalism can accelerate political decisions.
- The multiscale approach—from national analysis to local cases—**wove together a network of diverse actors**: journalists, scientists, activists, and authorities, united around a common purpose.

3.

REFORM OF THE SOCIOECONOMIC CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM IN PERU (MIDIS)

Brief summary

An investigation by *Salud con Lupa*, with support from the Pulitzer Center, uncovered a structural flaw in the MIDIS welfare system: More than 81,000 older adults living in extreme poverty had been excluded from the **Pension 65** program due to errors in their socioeconomic classification.

Following the publication, the ministry created an **official channel for citizens** to report and correct erroneous data in the system.

Good practices in collaboration/symbiosis

- Journalism went beyond reporting: **It humanized the data**, highlighting specific stories behind the numbers.
- The Invisibles project connected research with social empathy, showing the faces of those whom the state did not see.
- The institutional reaction was swift: MIDIS **adopted a concrete public policy** that opened up mechanisms for citizen participation and oversight.
- **Collaboration between media outlets and local organizations** strengthened the credibility of the report and enhanced its impact.



STRENGTHENING GRASSROOTS RECYCLERS AS ACTORS IN GLOBAL NEGOTIATIONS

Brief summary

In Latin America and the Caribbean, people who separate and sell recyclable materials on the streets were stigmatized and marginalized. Fundación Avina added to its Inclusive Recycling program a strategy **of positioning and advocacy through the media to change perceptions toward a dignified profession** with high social impact. In partnership with the Gabo Foundation, in-person and virtual workshops were held to train more than 3,000 journalists, and more than 50 journalism production grants were awarded to put the issue on the agenda.

Good practices in collaboration/symbiosis

- A partnership with a **relevant actor such as the Gabo Foundation** made it possible to generate conversation around an issue that was not on the agenda.
- Training sessions were organized to explain concepts, field visits were arranged to see cases firsthand, and **support was provided for journalistic production to generate visibility**.
- Experienced journalists with professionalism and the ability to broaden perspectives felt encouraged to explore a new issue, contributing the wealth of their experience in cross-cutting topics.
- Civil society **provided access to sources that are difficult to find due to their low visibility**. It also contributed data, as the lack of information is one of the major challenges in the recycling chain.