

# IA Blueprints: From Ecosystem to Impact

*A guide for funders beginning their journey to strengthen  
local news and information ecosystems*

---

**October 2025**

# IA Blueprints: From Ecosystem to Impact

This playbook was written by Rosemary D'Amour, M.A., and Lindsay Green-Barber, PhD.

Publication design by Abigail Chang with graphics from Del&Co and Lindsay Green-Barber.

© 2025 Impact Architects

Content may be reproduced, shared, or disseminated with appropriate attribution.

---

## IMPACT ARCHITECTS

### Who We Are

Impact Architects works at the nexus of research, philanthropy, and news and information. We support partners in developing high-impact strategies, clarifying purpose and goals, and measuring success.

#### ***About Impact Architects' News & Information Ecosystem Assessment Framework***

*In 2020, Impact Architects developed a News & Information Ecosystem Assessment Framework, with support from Democracy Fund, Knight Foundation, and Google News Initiative. The original framework is designed to use publicly available data to set a baseline understanding of the context and ecosystem health for community and information providers. This baselining identifies gaps and opportunities in the local news landscape. And because the framework is designed to be applied again and again, taking repeated measurements over time, it helps illuminate the impact of interventions in the ecosystem.*

*Now in its sixth year, the framework has been refined to include more indicators for civic engagement, voting, and democracy. Impact Architects has conducted ecosystem assessments in more than 20 geographies, including Chicago, Georgia, D.C., Wyoming, Vermont, and Yolo County, California.*

*You can read these and other ecosystem assessments at [theimpactarchitects.com/ecosystems](https://theimpactarchitects.com/ecosystems) and use our 2024 ecosystem assessment playbook to apply the framework in your community.*

# Introduction

This workbook is a roadmap — and directions! — for moving from a local news and information ecosystem assessment to a robust local strategy, including desired outcomes and indicators to measure change over time. Our goals in this work include:

- ▶ Providing clarity for local funders navigating complex local news and information ecosystems
- ▶ Creating consistency across local funders, while allowing for customization and adaptation to local contexts
- ▶ Establishing shared goals and measures of success across a network of local funders
- ▶ Supporting local funders to be local learning labs that contribute insights and learnings to their own local communities, as well as across the U.S.

## Developing a Local Strategy: Three Step Process

### Step 1: Using an Ecosystem Assessment to Identify Opportunities and Gaps

Local news and information ecosystem assessments surface information across three areas: context, information providers, and community information needs.

|                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Context</b>                     | Context includes demographics of residents, including preferred languages, identity and affinity groups, socioeconomic indicators, community infrastructure and connectivity (e.g., broadband), historical context, and more.  |
| <b>Information Providers</b>       | Assessments should include an accounting of all the journalistic organizations and/or individuals in a community — “supply-side,” including the platforms and mediums through which they reach and engage their audiences, business models, languages, collaborative infrastructure, and more. |
| <b>Community Information Needs</b> | Ecosystem assessments often include community, or “demand-side,” research to surface unique community information needs, barriers to accessing news and information, current levels of trust in information providers, and more.   |

### Step 2: Defining Success with an Impact Framework

Once opportunities and gaps are clear, the next step is to establish a shared vision of success for the local news and information ecosystem. During this phase, local funders will:

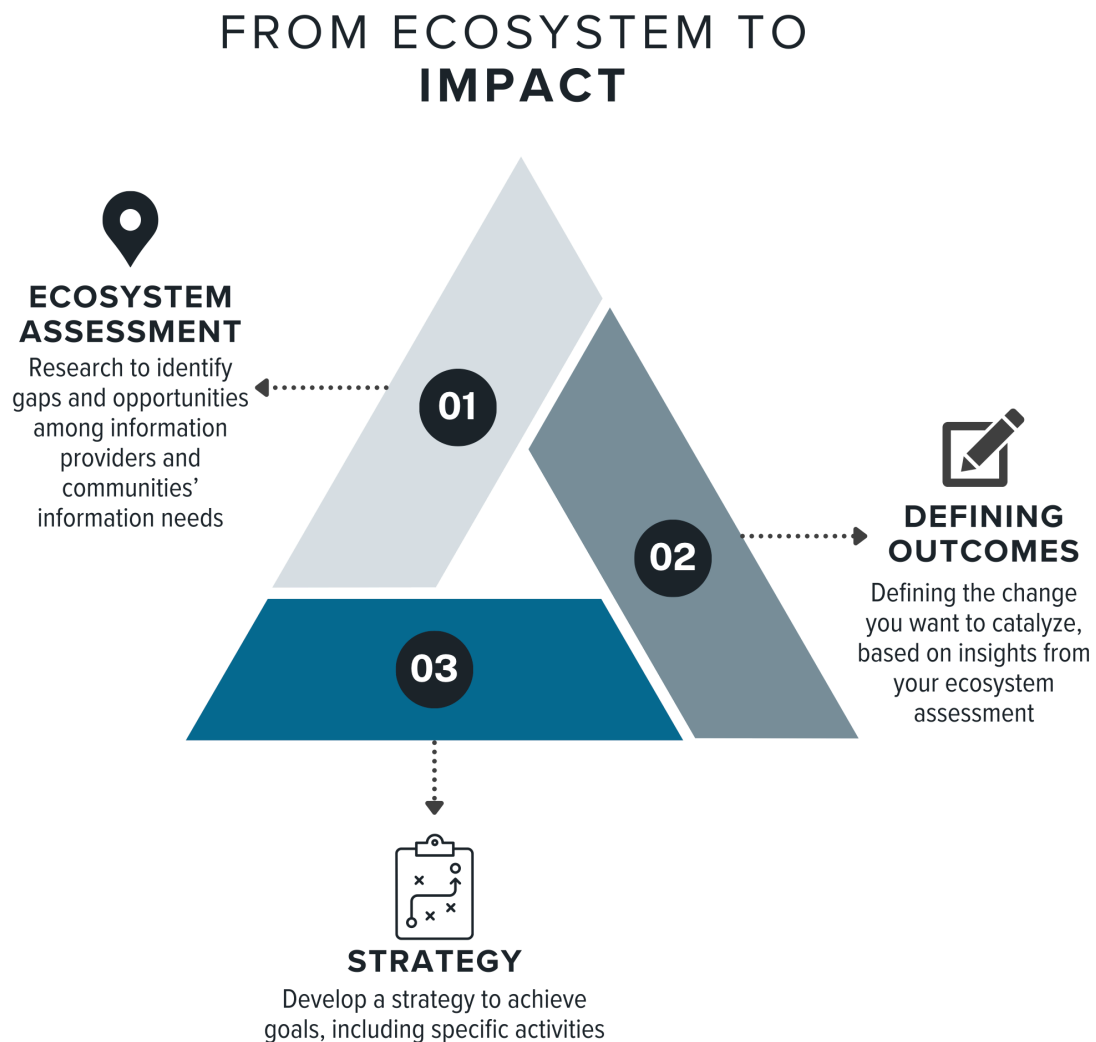
1. Set clear outcomes that address identified gaps and leverage opportunities.
2. Ensure outcomes reflect community needs, values, and priorities.
3. Identify measures — both quantitative and qualitative — to understand movement toward desired outcomes, such as increased community engagement, improved access to reliable information, or stronger sustainability of local news outlets.

**PRO-TIP: HOLD A RETREAT OR WORKSHOP SERIES WITH COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS TO CONNECT THE STAGES OF WORK.**

### Step 3: Developing a Strategy

Once outcomes have been clearly defined, the final phase focuses on designing actionable strategies and tactics to achieve success. This phase translates vision into practice through coordinated efforts. Key actions include:

1. Designing strategies that address systemic challenges while building on existing strengths
2. Developing tactical initiatives such as grant-making priorities, capacity-building programs, collaborative funding models, and community convenings
3. Creating a timeline and resource plan to guide implementation
4. Establishing mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation to ensure the strategy remains responsive to changing conditions.



# Step 1:

## Using an Ecosystem Assessment to Identify Opportunities and Gaps

**Goal:** Understand your community’s news and information ecosystem—its strengths, gaps, and opportunities.

In this section, you will consider:

- ▶ Challenges and opportunities among information providers in your ecosystem.
- ▶ Community information needs as surfaced through your community engagement.

Ecosystem assessments can help set a baseline for your work and strategy. They help you see “the big picture,” including existing community characteristics, assets, and challenges, understanding who and what is producing local news and information, who has access—and who doesn’t, and where gaps or inequities exist.

Ideally, ecosystem assessments provide both a deep understanding of your community, as well as data that, when gathered consistently and over time, provide a pathway to effectively measure progress year over year. Assessments can also ensure your funding strategies respond to what your community actually needs and values, not just on assumptions.

### Guiding questions:

#### Context

- ▶ What existing infrastructure is in your community? *Universities, public libraries, community spaces, etc.*
- ▶ Where are the inequities in access to information? *Consider language, geography, digital divide, affordability, etc.*
- ▶ What are specific community characteristics relevant to news and information?

#### Information Providers

- ▶ What does the existing information provider landscape look like? What are the strengths? Where are there gaps? Consider platforms and medium of production, business models, languages, community-serving media, etc.
- ▶ How are information providers connected, or not? Is there a backbone organization?

#### Community Information Needs

- ▶ What do residents say they need, trust, and value when it comes to local information?
- ▶ What are barriers to accessing local news and information? How are these barriers the same and/or different for diverse sectors of the community?

Check out the [Impact Architects ecosystem playbook](#) on how to assess your ecosystem, including data sources and tools.

**PRO-TIP: SHARE YOUR ECOSYSTEM FINDINGS AND IMPACT FRAMEWORK WITH ADVISORY GROUPS OR COMMUNITY PARTNERS TO GET FEEDBACK.**

### Exercise 1:

- ▶ Identifying ecosystem priorities. This focuses on the “what” or the “why” of ecosystem research.
  - After conducting your ecosystem assessment, identify the top 3–5 themes.
  - Capture them in a simple worksheet with three columns:
    - ▶ Key insight: What did you learn?
    - ▶ Why it matters: Why is this an opportunity or a gap?
    - ▶ Supporting evidence: Quote, data point, or other example.
  - *Note: This is not meant to capture **how** you will address gaps or opportunities — that comes later!*

|   | Key Insight(s) From Your Ecosystem Assessment   | Why it Matters  | Supporting Evidence (quote, data, example)   |
|---|---|---|--|
| <b>Information Providers</b><br><i>E.g. strengthened organizational capacity, community engagement, impact in community/institutional accountability, sustainability</i>  | No digital-first info providers   | No information available to residents who prefer digital content  | Media mapping exercise; interviews with media makers   |
|   | No freely accessible (\$) local news  | Cost barrier to accessing local news                              | Media mapping exercise; focus groups   |
| <b>Ecosystem</b><br><i>E.g. collaboration among local news and info providers, stronger shared infrastructure, alignment around community information needs, cooperation between media and civic institutions</i> | No backbone organization  | No actor coordinating the field and/or facilitating collaboration | Media mapping exercise   |
| <b>Community</b><br><i>E.g. increasing knowledge and awareness of issues, spurring civic engagement, catalyzing community cohesion</i>  | Spanish-speaking residents lack trusted, accessible news                                | Large portion of population underserved; equity concern           | Survey: 42% of respondents reported no reliable info in Spanish  |
|   | Rural communities feel disconnected from local coverage                                 | Civic participation and trust at risk in smaller towns            | Focus group: “We don’t know what’s happening in county government.”  |
|   | Residents want more coverage of schools and education                                   | Education is top community priority; strong link to civic life    | Listening sessions with parents; 3 of 5 groups raised this   |
| <b>Funders</b><br><i>E.g. building strong networks of local funders to support local news and information</i>   | Philanthropic investment per capita is lower than the national average in our community | Fewer resources available to support local news and information   | Funding data from national resources (e.g., Candid/Media Impact Funders database) or local sources (e.g., community foundation data) |
| <b>Systemic Change</b><br><i>E.g. improved enabling environment for local news</i>  | Journalists are under threat of physical and/or digital violence in our community       | Hinders reporters ability to do their work, threatens pipeline    | Data from the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker   |

# Worksheet: Local Funder Ecosystem Insights

Instructions: Summarize the most important themes from your mapping and listening work. For each, explain why it matters and include supporting evidence.

|                       | Key Insight(s) From Your Ecosystem Assessment | Why it Matters | Supporting Evidence (quote, data, example) |
|-----------------------|---|----------------|--|
| Information Providers |   |                |  |
|                       |   |                |  |
|                       |   |                |  |
| Ecosystem             |   |                |  |
|                       |   |                |  |
|                       |   |                |  |
| Community             |   |                |  |
|                       |   |                |  |
|                       |   |                |  |
| Funders               |   |                |  |
|                       |   |                |  |
| Systemic Change       |   |                |  |
|                       |   |                |  |

# Step 2:

## Building an Impact Framework

**Goal: Define what success looks like and how you'll know if your investments are making a difference.**

In this section, you will brainstorm ways to:

- ▶ Align your work around shared outcomes and indicators.
- ▶ Connect community information needs (from the Step 1 ecosystem assessment) with measurable impact goals.
- ▶ Build a framework that supports both accountability and storytelling.
- ▶ Use learning cycles to test, refine, and strengthen your framework over time.

When we talk about media impact, we mean the tangible and intangible ways that local news strengthens and serves communities. Impact is more than the number of stories published or dollars raised. It's about residents having access to the information they need and trusting the news they consume, institutions being held to account, and a more vibrant civic life. By defining impact clearly, local funders can move beyond tracking their activities and into measuring meaningful change. Local funders have an opportunity to define what that success looks like with and for their communities and for the organizations they support.

An impact framework helps provide a roadmap to clearly establish common goals for funders, grantees, and partners, and ensures that investments are connected to measurable outcomes. The exercises in this section will help you set a direction, test it, and find ways to refine it as you go.

### Guiding questions:

Every local funder will bring its own context and resources to its work supporting local news and information ecosystems. Some questions to consider as you're getting started:

- ▶ What are the most important outcomes for your community right now? (E.g., stronger collaboration among news orgs, better access to trusted info, increased civic participation)
  - Reflections from Step 1: What themes or needs stood out from the ecosystem assessment?
    - ▶ Which of those needs are most urgent or important for you to address in the next 1–2 years?
    - ▶ Are there strengths or opportunities you should build on (not just gaps to fill)?
- ▶ Which of the media impact categories matter most to you?
  - Information providers (grantees) (e.g. strengthened organizational capacity, community engagement, impact in community/institutional accountability, sustainability)
  - Ecosystem (e.g. collaboration among local news and info providers, stronger shared infrastructure, alignment around community information needs, cooperation between media and civic institutions)

- Community (e.g. increasing knowledge and awareness of issues, spurring civic engagement, catalyzing community cohesion)
  - Funders (e.g., building strong networks of local funders to support local news and information)
  - Systemic change (e.g., improved enabling environment for local news)
- ▶ How might you balance short- and long-term goals?
- What can realistically be tracked in the first year of your work?
  - Where do you need to lean on grantee reporting vs. independent data collection?

## Exercises:

### Exercise 1: Define success for your community

- ▶ Objective: Draft a shared vision of success.
- ▶ Prompts:
  - What would it look like if our work succeeded in strengthening local news five years from now?
  - What changes would we see among grantee organizations, communities, and civic life?
  - Identify 2–3 priority outcomes across categories.
- ▶ Example of outcomes:

| Selecting categories of impact               | Defining success and outcomes             |
|--|---|
| <b>Q: Who are the affected groups?</b>       | <b>Q: What change do you want to see?</b> |
| ➔ Ecosystem/Information Providers (Grantees) | ➔ Stronger collaboration among news orgs  |
| ➔ Community                                  | ➔ Better access to trusted info           |
| ➔ Community                                  | ➔ Increased civic participation           |
| ➔ Information Providers (Grantees)           | ➔ Organizational (grantee) sustainability |

### Exercise 2: Identify indicators

- ▶ Objective: Link outcomes to measurable signs of progress.
- ▶ Brainstorm session: For each outcome, ask:
  - How would we know this is happening?
  - What evidence would convince us (and others) that this change is real? (e.g. surveys, interviews, policy changes, engagement metrics, etc.)
- ▶ Examples of indicators

| Defining outcomes                         | Selecting impact indicators  |
|---|--|
| <b>Q: What change do you want to see?</b> | <b>Q: How will you know change has occurred?</b>                             |
| ➔ Stronger collaboration among news orgs  | ➔ # of joint projects, cross-newsroom reporting partnerships                 |
| ➔ Better access to trusted info           | ➔ % of residents in rural counties reporting that they feel informed         |
| ➔ Increased civic participation           | ➔ Voter turnout, participation in local forums, engagement around key issues |
| ➔ Organizational (grantee) sustainability | ➔ % of revenue from diverse sources, staff retention                         |

### Exercise 3: Test the framework

- ▶ Objective: Stress-test your framework with a real example.
- ▶ Choose one past or current grantee or project.
  - Apply your draft framework:
    - ▶ Does it capture the grantee's impact?
    - ▶ What is missing?
    - ▶ What's too difficult to measure?
  - Discuss what adjustments might make the framework more realistic or comprehensive.

| Project example                           | Outcomes it contributes to   | Indicators/evidence  | What's missing or hard to capture?                            |
|---|--|--|---|
| Community correspondents training program | Strengthened organizational capacity; Broader representation in news | # of trainees; % of stories produced by new reporters; languages represented | Impact on audience trust; whether correspondents stay engaged |
| Collaboration between two local outlets   | Stronger collaboration among news orgs; Deeper coverage of issues    | # of joint stories; cross-publishing metrics; new funding attained           | Capturing cultural shift (trust between orgs)                 |

**PRO-TIP: USE YOUR FRAMEWORK TO EVALUATE EARLY GRANTS AND REFINE AS YOU LEARN.**

#### Exercise 4: Learning cycles

- ▶ Objective: Build in time to revisit and adapt the framework.
- ▶ Set cadence: Every 3–6 months, review your framework as a group.
- ▶ Guiding questions:
  - Which indicators are useful? Which are too burdensome?
  - What stories can we tell with the data so far?
  - Where do grantees need more support (data collection, community engagement, sustainability)?
  - What should we keep, drop, or adjust?
- ▶ Capture changes: Document decisions so the framework evolves with your learning.

| Defining outcomes  | Selecting impact indicators   | Track impact over time   |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Q: What change do you want to see?</b>                          | <b>Q: How will you know change has occurred?</b>  | <b>Q: What specific data points would you need?</b>                |
| → Increased trust in news  | → % of community members reporting trust in local outlets   | → Community surveys; listening sessions                            |
| → Increased civic participation                                    | → Voter turnout; participation in forums; % reporting engagement on local issues                    | → Public records; community surveys                                |
| → Stronger community engagement                                    | → # of community events; # of partnerships with local orgs; % of coverage shaped by community input | → Event logs; grantee reports; content analysis; community surveys |
| → Strengthened organizational capacity (among grantees/media orgs) | → # of staff hired/retained; % of revenue from diversified sources; # of trainings completed        | → Grantee reporting; organizational surveys; financial statements  |

# Worksheet: Local Funder Impact Framework

Instructions: Work to fill in the blanks. Start with 1–2 outcomes in each impact area, then add possible indicators and methods.

|  |   |  |  |
|--|---|--|--|
| <b>Information Providers</b><br><br><i>How will your investments strengthen local media organizations?</i>     | <b>Outcome(s)</b><br><i>What change will you see?</i> | <b>Indicators</b><br><i>How will you know?</i> | <b>Methods/Data Sources</b><br><i>How will you measure it?</i> |
|  |   |  |  |
|  |   |  |  |
| <b>Ecosystem</b><br><br><i>How will your work improve the broader system of news and information?</i>          | <b>Outcome(s)</b><br><i>What change will you see?</i> | <b>Indicators</b><br><i>How will you know?</i> | <b>Methods/Data Sources</b><br><i>How will you measure it?</i> |
|  |   |  |  |
|  |   |  |  |
| <b>Community</b><br><br><i>What impact do you want to see for residents and community members?</i>             | <b>Outcome(s)</b><br><i>What change will you see?</i> | <b>Indicators</b><br><i>How will you know?</i> | <b>Methods/Data Sources</b><br><i>How will you measure it?</i> |
|  |   |  |  |
|  |   |  |  |
| <b>Funders</b><br><br><i>How will you strengthen the field and bring in more support?</i>                      | <b>Outcome(s)</b><br><i>What change will you see?</i> | <b>Indicators</b><br><i>How will you know?</i> | <b>Methods/Data Sources</b><br><i>How will you measure it?</i> |
|  |   |  |  |
|  |   |  |  |
| <b>Systemic Change</b><br><br><i>How will you improve the enabling environment for media through advocacy?</i> | <b>Outcome(s)</b><br><i>What change will you see?</i> | <b>Indicators</b><br><i>How will you know?</i> | <b>Methods/Data Sources</b><br><i>How will you measure it?</i> |
|  |   |  |  |
|  |   |  |  |

# Part 3:

## Designing Your Strategy

**Goal:** Turn insights into action by developing a clear and collaborative approach to strengthen your local ecosystem using funding, convening, and other tactics that build on your organization's unique strengths, networks, and capabilities.

In this section, you will:

- ▶ Connect ecosystem insights and impact goals to concrete activities and tactics, including grantmaking.
- ▶ Develop a high-level theory of change that crystallizes your organization's approach to strengthening the local news and information ecosystem.

After completing the ecosystem assessment (Step 1) and defining your impact framework (Step 2), your organization now has a clearer picture of the local information landscape and a shared understanding of what success looks like. Step 3 is about translating those findings into a strategy that reflects your community's needs and assets, your organization's unique strengths, and the opportunities identified for your ecosystem. This is where you can identify activities and funding mechanisms, and design a roadmap to guide your work over time.

### Guiding questions:

- ▶ Based on your assessment, which gaps/opportunities will you prioritize?
- ▶ What types of activities can you engage in to support your ecosystem beyond grantmaking: convenings, donor cultivation, or something else?
- ▶ What kinds of grants might have the biggest impact: capacity building, new initiatives, collaboration, or something else?

**PRO-TIP: DOCUMENT AND SHARE LESSONS WITH OTHER LOCAL FUNDERS.**

## Exercise:

**Exercise 1: Work backwards from your priority long-term impact and near-term outcomes to identify activities that you can implement.**

- ▶ What specific activities will your organization take on first?
- ▶ What immediate results do you expect from these activities?
- ▶ How will those results lead to near-term changes for grantees, communities, or the ecosystem?
- ▶ How do these outcomes connect to the long-term impact you defined in Step 2?

| <b>Activities</b><br><i>What you do</i>  | <b>Outputs</b><br><i>Immediate results</i>                     | <b>Outcomes</b><br><i>Near-term changes</i>  | <b>Impact</b><br><i>Long-term goals</i>                      |
|--|--|--|--|
| Examples: General operating grants, convenings, donor cultivation, research projects | Newsrooms funded, new collaborations launched, convenings held | Stronger newsroom capacity, more trusted info available, increased civic participation | A more sustainable local news ecosystem; stronger civic life |

# Worksheet: Local Funder Theory of Change

Connect your priorities to the impact you want to see. Use this exercise to make sure your strategy has a clear line from activities to outcomes.

| <b>Inputs/Activities</b><br><i>What you do</i> | <b>Outputs</b><br><i>Immediate results</i> | <b>Outcomes</b><br><i>Near-term changes</i> | <b>Impact</b><br><i>Long-term goals</i> |
|--|--|---|---|
|  |  |   |   |
|  |  |   |   |
|  |  |   |   |
|  |  |   |   |
|  |  |   |   |
|  |  |   |   |
|  |  |   |   |

# Your Local Funder Theory of Change

Work backwards from your priority long-term impact and near-term outcomes to identify activities that you can implement to achieve these goals. Fill in the boxes, then draw arrows to illustrate your thinking.

