

# Amplifying Accountability

Building a Culture of Collaboration  
with Media and Civil Society



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# Introduction

**M**edia plays a vital role in holding governments accountable to their citizens. To help media better realize this role, Reboot provides strategic, tailored support at the local level through the Reboot Media program. Our goal is to drive good governance all over the world.

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For three years, we have been [deeply engaged with local organizations in West Africa](#) to understand the unique challenges and opportunities facing media there today. In partnership with the MacArthur Foundation and its grantees, we are working to seize opportunities to foster a stronger accountability ecosystem—helping journalists and innovators to join forces with each other, with civil society, and even with government champions in strategic ways to hold the powerful to account.

This is long-term work, but early milestones on the road to impact include:

- The release of journalist Jones Abiri, who was detained (extrajudicially) for two years after criticizing the government, through a nascent **Media Alliance**.
- An emerging network of **data-driven, investigative journalists focused on the power sector**, through a monthly meet-up for journalists and editors to develop connections and knowledge to better access sector data and to investigate corruption.
- The prototype of a new, independent revenue stream to create a **shared fund for investigative journalism**, based in crowd-funding models.

This brief report offers case studies, stories, and lessons learned from this ongoing project—along with specific recommendations for donors and practitioners who want to increase their impact toward good governance.



# Background and Theory of Change

## The MacArthur Foundation Makes a Big Bet “On Nigeria”

The MacArthur Foundation has long been committed to improving development outcomes in Nigeria for those who need it most. Like most international development organizations investing in the region, MacArthur has previously taken an approach that focuses on better service delivery through grassroots impact. For example, the Foundation worked downstream, aiming to increase access to essential services for marginalized populations. However, thanks to leadership from the Foundation’s Nigeria office, MacArthur has recently shifted its strategy, in recognition of the fact:

***The real blockages to service delivery are governance challenges.*** These lie farther upstream, and are less visible, and yet they have significant influence over grassroots outcomes.

That’s why the Foundation took a bold new direction in 2015. Led by a staff team based in Nigeria and Chicago, the Foundation’s “On Nigeria” program is reducing corruption in the country by supporting Nigerian-led efforts to promote accountability, transparency, and good governance.

# Theory of Change: Catalyzing Accountability

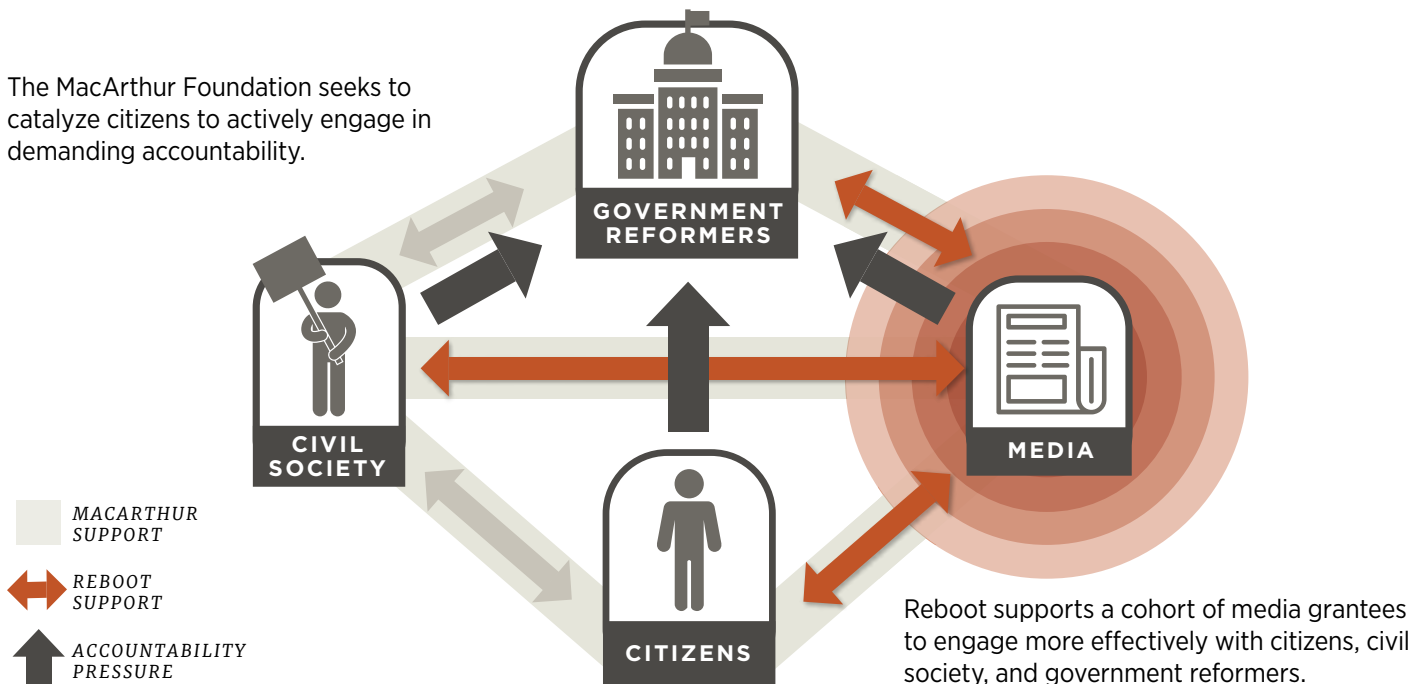
In tackling these ambitious governance challenges, the MacArthur Foundation and Reboot both recognize that no single organization or innovation can create watershed change. Instead, we are joining forces to foster an “accountability ecosystem,” a web of efforts that resonate with and enable each other. Ultimately, we seek to catalyze **citizens** to actively engage in demanding accountability by supporting civil society, government reformers, and media to fulfill their potential in the accountability ecosystem:

**Civil society** expose, highlight, and amplify corrupt activities in the government, mobilizing **citizens** around issues, providing them with a platform to amplify their voices, and directing them to take action.

**Government reformers** forge and institutionalize internal mechanisms, including government agencies and strategies, that have the mandate to respond to **citizens’** demands, the power to sanction officials and duty bearers, and the will to actively bring them to account.

**Media** enables engagement in the public interest—rigorous, evidence-based investigations and reports that give citizens oversight of government actions. In order for media to fulfill this role, independent organizations must achieve financial sustainability and earn public trust.

The MacArthur Foundation seeks to catalyze citizens to actively engage in demanding accountability.



Based on this shared theory of change, MacArthur and Reboot are supporting grantees in a cohort model, encouraging groups of local organizations working with and within government, civil society, and media. The Foundation is actively identifying emerging spaces for accountability, and finding ways to engage non-traditional grantees—including social media influencers and subnational government reform agencies. But perhaps most importantly, we are working to foster collaboration amongst these diverse players in the ecosystem.

KEY OPPORTUNITY:

## Collaboration

Collaboration is a key feature of a functioning “accountability ecosystem.” Diverse actors in the ecosystem have resources and expertise that can benefit others, and partnerships are necessary to implement solutions that will address the entire system. Additionally, because powerful actors are highly motivated to preserve the status quo, attempts to highlight malfeasance are often met with aggressive pushback; collaboration can strengthen the entire accountability ecosystem to protect individual actors who might otherwise be targeted or persecuted for their work.

Yet collaboration is a difficult request. Up until recently, there have been few incentives for members of the accountability ecosystem to collaborate. Instead, competition (real or perceived) for funding, readers, attention, and other resources has impeded potential partnerships, as have professional misunderstandings.

That’s why fostering collaboration is a key strategy for the accountability ecosystem today. ***The MacArthur Foundation engaged Reboot as a co-creation partner in order to foster productive, sustained collaborations.*** Our role is to help members of the accountability ecosystem to join forces with each other, with civil society, and even with government champions, in strategic ways.

**“Fighting corruption is dangerous. It requires accountability advocates and monitors working collaboratively to sustain the pressure and withstand the fightback from corrupt actors.”**

—Dayo Olaide, MacArthur Foundation, Deputy Director, Nigeria Office.

# How Reboot Media is Paving the Road to Impact

In recent decades, media development efforts have largely comprised one-off training courses, usually specific to a particular sector of thematic area, along with funding for individual reports. These investments create a few journalists with stronger skills and a few flagship (and often flashy) reports. But on the ground, these exercises have limited impact, as the discrete work done is outweighed by the larger system and the status quo persists.

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Reboot Media takes a long-term, bottom-up approach to media development. We partner with journalists and media organizations, working shoulder-to-shoulder on projects and priorities they identify. We support media actors to take ownership of addressing structural challenges. We provide focus on technical details and strategy, following through to the end of an engagement—at which point we leave a self-sustaining model in place, so that actors can tackle issues even after support is long gone.

We also foster collaboration. We bring media actors together to align around shared challenges, to co-create solutions, and to work together to implement these solutions and strengthen the field for all. Our approach creates strong networks (instead of just siloed organizations) and builds competence across the ecosystem. The next page illustrates how our approach is working in Nigeria.

# Reboot Media's “On Nigeria” Process

## 1. Building community around shared challenges.

Before any two organizations can collaborate, they need to see each other as peers with aligned goals, who are facing similar challenges, and who can offer each other tangible value.

To foster this collegiality and kick-off the project, we hosted a bootcamp, bringing MacArthur grantees together with media industry veterans and civil society representatives for a week of facilitated conversations designed to hone in on potential strategies for a stronger accountability ecosystem. Participants found common challenges and agreed to take them on—early steps toward collaboration.

## 2. Working shoulder-to-shoulder with grantees as they prototype solutions.

Reboot is supporting organizations as they dive deeper into their agreed-upon challenges and develop first prototypes of solutions. We are supporting grantees to learn by doing, offering technical training in design, research, audience development, and other specialties as grantees probe the challenges they've agreed to take on. Reboot is also serving as a “systems integrator,” bringing in new opportunities for needed resources from civil society, foundations, government reformers, and others. As grantees achieve the first milestones of success in their projects, they are also institutionalizing their own roles as part of a collaborative ecosystem.

## 3. Institutionalizing local approaches at the international level.

As we support grantees in developing prototypes, we are also communicating their work and success to donors and other international actors. Over the long term, institutionalizing the expectation of local collaborations amongst influential donors will help sustain the ecosystem. We are also encouraging these large institutions to incorporate collaboration in their work—for example, multiple donors with journalist defense initiatives are aligning as part of a larger, grantee-led coalition.



# Case Studies from Ongoing Collaborations

**A**t the Reboot Media bootcamp, media and media support organizations arrived at three shared challenges. These challenges are interwoven, and have far-reaching detrimental impact. Grantees agree that collaboration is necessary to tackle these challenges. They also agree that solutions in these areas would create a positive ripple effect, creating widespread impact across Nigeria's media landscape.

Reboot is now supporting grantees in prototyping solutions to these challenges. The following case studies offer early glimpses of grantee collaborations and milestones on the way to impact.

SOLUTION #1:

## Media Alliance to Protect Press Freedom

**Shared challenge:** Government interference and intimidation is one of the most frequently cited challenges to independent media. It's a primary cause of self-censorship amongst journalists and editors—fear of lawsuits, harassment, or even extrajudicial arrests is a powerful motivation to maintain the status quo.

**Solution prototype:** To tackle this issue, grantees are prototyping a Media Alliance. The alliance is envisioned as a coalition that would track and respond to government interference in a sustained way. The goal is to make government intimidation into a recognized social issue, one that both government officials and the public at large see as a priority.

**Early milestones:** Two years ago, local journalist Jones Abiri was arrested and detained extrajudicially by the Department of State Services after he criticized the federal government. Two journalist protection organizations—the Committee to Protect Journalists and the Nigerian Union of Journalists—put out statements at the time, but received no response. A member of the Media Alliance investigated further, and met with members of Mr. Abiri's family in his hometown. When the investigations were released, multiple members of the Media Alliance signed a joint press release and worked with local civil society organizations to spread the message. This collaboration led to an overwhelming response on Twitter, significantly raising the public consciousness of Abiri's detention and pressuring the government to respond. As a result, Abiri was arraigned for the first time, with a crowd of media and civil society actors attending the court session in solidarity! Abiri was later released on a reduced bail and formally charged, a significant victory in a case where activists formerly did not have proof he was even alive. The Alliance continued to mobilize partners to speed Abiri's trial to a positive conclusion. Finally, a magistrate court in Abuja [acquitted Mr Abiri](#), striking out all charges and describing his two-year detention as criminal intimidation. Mr. Abiri was compensated for his prolonged detention.

SOLUTION #2:

## Data-driven, Investigative Journalists on the Power Sector Beat

**Shared challenge:** Data-driven journalism is a vital tool in tackling corruption. Yet journalist capacity, as well as access to credible data, is a perennial challenge. During the bootcamp, grantees identified the power sector—one of MacArthur’s priority focus areas—as a strategic place where investigative and data-driven journalism could create impact; however, the challenges are compounded by the bureaucracy behind the power sector, which is particularly opaque (some say purposefully so).

**Solution prototype:** To tackle this issue, Reboot is developing a cohort of power-sector experts. These journalists, advocates, and data gatekeepers are working together in capacity-building and collaborative exercises. Their goal is to improve the analytical depth and political salience of reporting on corruption in this sector. Nascent prototypes include developing an onboarding “power sector” training for media organizations, increasing accessibility to data through visualizations in investigative reporting, and fostering the next generation of power sector reporters through a public lecture series and investigative journalism module in universities.

**Early milestones:** Reboot brought the energy advisory firm, Nextier Power, together with MacArthur’s media and journalism grantees to identify ways to increase media coverage for power sector corruption. We are developing a monthly meet-up—an extension of an event that Nextier already hosts for public and power sector officials—specifically for journalists and editors to build networks with government gatekeepers and develop their knowledge of salient issues. Based on the success of early meet-ups, Reboot is working with the media cohort and Nextier to co-create a toolkit for data-driven power journalism, to increase the number of journalists who have a good understanding of power sector operations.

SOLUTION #3:

## Independent Revenue Streams for Investigative Journalism

**Shared challenge:** Most media organizations in Nigeria are closely connected to political interests; owners often have significant business or political connections that influence editorial decisions and limit investigative reporting on governance issues. While there are media owners and entrepreneurs who may be interested in greater editorial independence, they are hesitant to invest in new revenue streams, as local success stories have been virtually non-existent until recently.

**Solution prototype:** To tackle this issue, Reboot is developing alternative streams to fund investigative journalism, including into the power sector and other governance issues. We are coordinating amongst organizations to test and build models for fundraising that not only provide financial support, but also engage citizens, so that citizens’ input drives investigative journalism and the resulting stories resonate with them.

**Early milestones:** Driven by grantees’ suggestion of starting a joint pool of funds, we are developing a crowdfunding platform geared toward investigative journalism. Reboot has explored the model and its viability by assessing existing platforms and researching with crowdfunding experts, and we have been building demand and ownership amongst local media organizations in a series of workshops. We are now working with journalists, media consumers, and individual donors to design and pilot a crowdfunding model, in collaboration with civil society organizations who have agreed to amplify outreach.

# Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Development Partners

**W**e are sharing these “lessons learned” with the wider development community—in the same spirit of collaboration that we seek to foster amongst media and civil society organizations, and recognizing that international organizations are a part of the accountability ecosystem ourselves.

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## LESSON #1:

### **Building a culture of collaboration takes time.**

The value of collaboration is not always instantly clear to organizations used to working in silos. Especially when collaboration represents a new way of working, staff and leadership will need adequate time to learn it and incorporate it; different organizations will engrain the practice in different ways. There is no set schedule, but it is important to ensure adequate time for organizations to truly adopt collaboration as a valuable new way of working—once they institutionalize this culture, they will spread it to new staff and new partners widely.

**For example:** MacArthur is successfully catalyzing the development of a culture of collaboration. By making long-term investments in inclusive “cohorts,” or groups of grantees within civil society, government, and media, the Foundation creates ample opportunity for collaboration. And by investing in organizations like Reboot to facilitate connections and highlight shared opportunities, there is a growing culture of collaboration as formerly siloed organizations more quickly embrace each other as valuable allies in their work.

**Recommendation:** Development funders should invest in building a stronger culture of collaboration amongst grantees working on governance and media, by providing ample time and expertise for grantees to absorb and incorporate the habits of collaboration.

## LESSON # 2:

### **Collaboration must be conceived and led locally, based on issues prioritized together.**

A “collaborative” project pushed by an external actor is far less likely to be sustained than one conceived and led by local organizations themselves. Co-creation processes provide grounding for a successful collaboration; bringing all prospective partners together to identify the issues (instead of allowing external donors to drive priority areas), to align around shared goals, and to develop steps forward together is a major factor in later success. When outside actors determine the issues to be addressed and encourage collaboration without a clear strategy or nuanced understanding of participants interests, it often leads to “collaboration fatigue,” and can actually diminish an organization’s interest in future partnerships.

**For example:** In the On Nigeria program, having local organizations take the lead means that local partners define the specific challenge they are facing and develop the solutions. Reboot provides facilitation and just-in-time technical assistance to support, and colleagues at the MacArthur Foundation provide technical and financial assistance in responsive and flexible ways.

**Recommendation:** Development partners and grantees should prioritize co-created initiatives by incentivizing organizations to pool their resources, and by designing mechanisms for funding high-impact co-created programs as they emerge.

## LESSON #3:

### **Keep in mind who is not in the room**

When fostering collaboration, it is important to involve the right people; that inevitably includes people who are not “in the room.” These absentees may include stakeholders, such as government actors, who influence people’s willingness to share openly. They can also include decision-makers, citizen activists, journalists, and other people who are unable to attend a particular convening due to availability, cost, or other impediments. Identifying these absent stakeholders, and finding a way to systematically engage them in the initiative (outside of the primary collaboration channels as necessary), can be an important way to avoid duplication, and can improve the uptake of initiatives over the long-term.

**For example:** After media organizations at the On Nigeria bootcamp identified the need for a media alliance to protect press freedom, Reboot supported grantees’ by following up systematically with all the organizations working in that space who did not attend the workshop. By convening these stakeholders for the pilot of the Media Alliance, we are seeking to strengthen existing processes to be more inclusive and responsive (rather than duplicating ongoing efforts).

**Recommendation:** Ensure collaboration processes have mechanisms in place to consider and involve those who are not in the room at every stage in the process.

# The Way Forward

Governance reform is more of a process than a product. It is gradual by necessity, and it must be led locally, as actors re-forge sustainable systems of accountability for the current reality. It also requires system-wide shifts, which include development partners and donors as well—changing old ways of working is as vital for major international institutions as it is for the government actors they seek to reform.

As development donors pursue this sea-change in their own work, they can benefit from the same commitment to collaboration that grantees on-the-ground are finding so productive.

One example is the **Transparency and Accountability Initiative**, a collaborative of donors committed to good governance, which organized a visit to Nigeria for donor member organizations to see the On Nigeria program (and others) in action. These donors are already exploring a number of ideas to spread the impact of ongoing collaborations amongst media, civil society, and government. Efforts like this help reduce duplication on the ground.

In that same spirit, we encourage other development partners to reach out to the local organizations that the MacArthur Foundation's "On Nigeria" program is working with; Reboot's staff in Abuja can be resources and partners in exploring new ways and approaches for this important work.