FAIR PLANET

CASE

STUDY

Rebuilt: Participatory and Research Driven Design Methods for Future Proof, Independent Local Journalism

IN SHORT

FairPlanet strengthened its strategic foundation by reframing its mission, developing a prototype theory of change, and conducting extensive stakeholder research through 20+ interviews and a 100-response survey. The project clarified how the organisation creates impact, refined its editorial and partnership strategy, and opened pathways for future collaboration and fundraising.

ABOUT THE NEWS OUTLET

FairPlanet is a Berlin-based nonprofit digital media organisation with a global network of 200 contributors across 100+ countries. Founded in 2014, it produces solutions-oriented journalism on human rights, climate justice, and the UN SDGs. Its mission is to amplify underrepresented voices and connect local stories to global audiences through impact-driven reporting.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

FairPlanet aimed to gain strategic clarity by reframing its mission, developing a prototype theory of change, and understanding stakeholder needs. The goal was to validate core assumptions, define priority audiences, and build a foundation for stronger editorial, partnership, and organisational decisions.

IMPLEMENTED SOLUTIONS

FairPlanet conducted 20+ interviews and a 100-response survey, ran systemic design workshops, and created prototypes including a mission reframe, theory of change, and circulation strategy. Iterative synthesis and scope refinement ensured actionable insights, clearer priorities, and new collaboration opportunities.

Transitions

WHY THIS PROJECT?

FairPlanet had the goal of addressing a key internal challenge: the need for strategic clarity. While the organisation had a strong mission and global network, it lacked an articulated theory of change, stakeholder insights, and a clear framework for understanding how its activities drive long-term impact. The project aimed to test core hypotheses about FairPlanet's mission, value proposition, and role within the media ecosystem – ultimately helping the team refocus its strategy and strengthen the organisation's future sustainability.

HOW DID APPLYING DESIGN THINKING PRINCIPLES HELP?

Design thinking played a central role at every stage of the project. Systemic design workshops provided the space to step back from day-to-day operations and examine FairPlanet's mission in a structured way, translating abstract goals into concrete research questions and strategic frameworks. Hypothesis-driven interviews helped challenge assumptions, while iterative evidence gathering allowed the theory of change to develop as a prototype rather than a fixed document. These methodologies grounded the entire process in stakeholder needs and ensured the resulting strategy reflected real-world insights rather than internal intuition.

DID FAIRPLANET'S APPROACH CHANGE ENGAGEMENT WITH ITS AUDIENCE IN ANY WAY?

While the project did not focus on audience-facing activities, the research improved understanding of audience expectations and how readers engage with FairPlanet's work. The interviews and surveys brought clearer insight into the types of stories, formats, and support structures stakeholders, including the audience, value most. In the long term, these findings will strengthen audience engagement by informing editorial focus, website improvements, and new partnership models.

WHAT CHALLENGES DID FAIRPLANET ENCOUNTER AND HOW DID IT ADDRESS THEM?

The most significant challenge was the project's initial scope. FairPlanet originally planned to conduct full stakeholder research and test new website wireframes, but this proved too ambitious. By week three, the team narrowed its focus to two core questions: how FairPlanet creates systemic change and what stakeholders need from the organisation.

Additional challenges included scheduling difficulties due to summer travel, interview question refinement, and time-intensive synthesis, since integrating insights from multiple stakeholder groups demanded more analysis time than expected. The team responded by tightening scope, revising their research instruments midstream, and using phased milestones to maintain momentum.

HOW WAS FAIRPLANET'S PROJECT RECEIVED BY ITS AUDIENCE?

While the project was not public-facing, it strengthened relationships with external stakeholders. Interviews with journalists, publishers, and funders opened new collaboration pathways – including interest in future co-publishing projects. Participants expressed appreciation for FairPlanet's commitment to listening and refining its mission, which helped reinforce the organisation's credibility in the independent media space.

WHAT INSIGHTS OR LESSONS DID FAIRPLANET GAIN FROM THIS PROJECT?

The team learned that projects of this nature take significantly longer than expected, particularly the process of synthesizing multi-stakeholder insights into a coherent strategy. Another key lesson was the importance of narrowing scope early and ensuring milestones are manageable. FairPlanet also recognized the value of combining qualitative depth with quantitative breadth, and the need to tag and organise data continuously rather than waiting until the end. Finally, the process confirmed that website navigation and other surface-level issues often signal deeper strategic challenges – meaning that solving root causes is more important than quickly addressing symptoms.

WHAT DOES FAIRPLANET PLAN ON DOING NEXT?

FairPlanet will complete and publish its comprehensive research report, sharing findings with interview participants, partners, and the wider media community in January. The team also presented its work at the Media Innovation Summit in Prague, seeking further feedback and discussion. Internally, the results will inform 2026 planning across editorial, business development, and partnership strategy. FairPlanet will use the research as a foundation for targeted fundraising, especially for initiatives validated through the project, such as website improvements and professional development workshops for early-career journalists.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD FAIRPLANET GIVE TO OTHER JOURNALISTS OR ORGANISATIONS CONSIDERING A SIMILAR PATH?
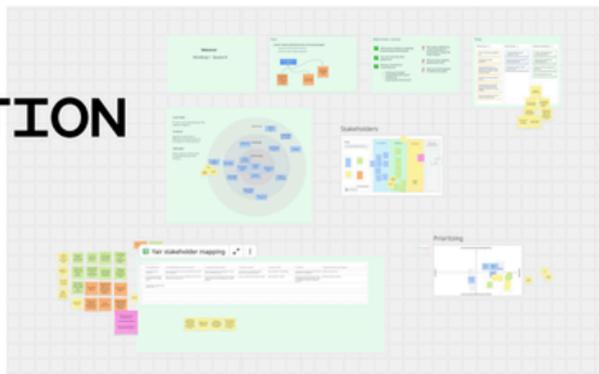
FairPlanet advises combining qualitative interviews with broader surveys, as the two methods reinforce each other and provide a richer understanding of stakeholder needs. Setting clear scope boundaries early, over-recruiting interviewees, and building time for synthesis into the project plan can help avoid delays. Above all, treat research as a relationship-building tool – engaging stakeholders openly can create unexpected opportunities for collaboration and long-term partnerships. Taking a step back before acting on assumptions was incredibly valuable.

Transitions   Journalismfund Europe   Creative Europe MEDIA   CZECH AID   TRANSITION Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic   VERONICA   Limelight

PHASE 1:
STRATEGIC FOUNDATION

(3 weeks)

STRATEGIC REFRAME

Re-articulated Fair Planet's **impact through human rights and climate literacy lenses**

THEORY OF CHANGE PROTOTYPE

Developed a framework linking our core activities, or those we want to focus on (co-publishing, journalist mentoring) to measurable **behavior change and long-term systemic impact**

METHODS   REFRAME & RESEACH

RESEARCH *METHODS*

HYPOTHESIS-DRIVEN RESEARCH

- Developed specific, testable assumptions for each stakeholder group before beginning interviews

THEORY OF CHANGE PROTOTYPING

- Treated our impact framework as an iterative prototype, refining it through stakeholder feedback

USER-CENTERED INTERVIEWS

- Conducted 20+ in-depth conversations to understand stakeholder needs, motivations, and success factors

Building FairPlanet's strategic clarity through structured frameworks, hypothesis-driven research, and user-centered insights.