

TOP TIPS FOR DEVELOPING A SUCCESSFUL PRO BONO PROJECT

FOR NGOS AND OTHER NON-PROFITS

DESIGNING THE PROJECT

HAVE A CLEAR PROJECT DESIGN AND PURPOSE

- **Clear design:** A successful pro bono project needs to be limited in its scope with a clear task for the volunteer lawyers and a concrete outcome for the non-profit organization and/or community involved.
- **Clear purpose:** Consider how you are going to measure the impact of your project. This will help you as you define the project purpose and design, including ensuring the project is designed in a way to gather the impact data you will need.

CONSIDER WHO YOU WOULD LIKE TO WORK WITH

- **Frame projects strategically:** Position climate justice projects in a way that resonates with firms' goals or proposes legal actions that will drive change. Try to use appealing wordings that are constructive, such as climate justice instead of climate crisis, or frame your concerns as access to other rights (like access to water, land, indigenous rights, etc.)
- **Tailor your pitch:** International law firms often have significant resources to contribute towards a project, while local law firms will have locally qualified lawyers on staff and know the local legal framework.

BE AWARE OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

- **Be aware:** conflicts of interest often remain a persistent obstacle that hinders environmental and climate justice pro bono partnerships. Whether the need involves direct legal advocacy or essential operational support, NGOs and clearinghouses frequently encounter closed doors from firms due to perceived or actual conflicts. PILnet can suggest strategies and ideas on how to frame the project and offer advice on which legal fields are easier to place with law firms.

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BE AWARE OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

- **De-risk the project:** The biggest barrier is reputational and client-conflict risk, to which law firms are highly sensitive. Avoid pitching projects to corporate firms that directly target specific corporations or industries that they likely represent. Prioritize technical, operational, compliance, and governance advisory work.

- **Consider seeking support on a confidential basis:** Think about asking the law firm to help you without making their involvement public, which allows firms to assess the conflicts and risks internally and makes it easier for them to start the engagement.

CONSIDER PRACTICAL ASPECTS

- **Consider time zones and languages:** Think about time zones and in which language(s) the work needs to be done. Think creatively about using technology to support your pro bono project (e.g., phone interpreters and interviews).

THINK ABOUT WHAT RESOURCES YOU NEED

- **Resources required to facilitate the project:** Consider internal capacity and dedicated staff working on the project as early as possible to avoid delays in the collaboration phase.

DON'T BE PUT OFF BY THE INITIAL INVESTMENT

- **Initial resource investment:** Pro bono programs require an investment of time, including establishing connections with the lawyers and laying down ground rules for the collaboration. Ultimately, it can be well worth the investment if you manage to harness your partner's skills, resources, and passion.

SETTING UP & IMPLEMENTING THE PROJECT

CLARITY ABOUT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES AT THE OUTSET

- **Managing expectations:** To ensure a high-level and consistency of assistance, especially when working with multiple law firms, you need to provide clear instructions about what is required of the volunteer lawyers.

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CLARITY ABOUT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES AT THE OUTSET

- **Mutual understanding:** Don't assume the law firm you are partnering with has the same processes or understanding of protocols as those you may have worked with before. Try to clarify and standardize practical details as early on as possible and prepare procedure notes and briefings for those involved.

PRIORITIZE OPEN COMMUNICATION AND PROJECT COORDINATION

- **Provide examples:** For written work, provide model documents if possible, so that the pro bono lawyers understand what you are expecting and in what format.
- **Open communication:** A good working relationship, built on open communication, trust, and professionalism, is key to a successful pro bono project. Channels of communication and coordination should be clear and established as soon as possible.
- **Appoint a liaison:** In successful projects, the NGO designates a liaison for the project, who manages the relationships with the firms, organizes logistics, and ensures that the lawyers know what is required and when.

BE MINDFUL OF SCHEDULING AND TIME CONSTRAINTS WHEN ASSIGNING WORK

- **Recurring meetings:** It is generally helpful to establish check-ins and find other ways to stay connected regularly. For example, by scheduling regular online calls, using online tools for giving/receiving feedback, etc.
- **Consider the collaborator's capacity:** Most pro bono lawyers have to balance their pro bono work with their regular client work. Therefore, consider assigning work with less pressing and/or more flexible deadlines, breaking bigger pieces of work into smaller tasks, and providing estimates for how long tasks may take, so that pro bono lawyers can organize around these estimates.

HIGH STANDARDS OF PROFESSIONALISM

- **Manage expectations on standards:** Lawyers are ethically obligated to be as diligent in their pro bono work as in their paid work. However, sometimes, a heavy workload of paying clients may cause lawyers to de-prioritize their volunteer work. This should not be the case. Regular delays should be raised with the law firm so you can find a suitable solution. You can also raise any concern with PILnet.

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CELEBRATING SUCCESSES AND RAISING PROBLEMS

KEEP MOTIVATION AND INTEREST UP

- **Exercise feedback:** Remember that lawyers appreciate and are motivated by feedback, especially if you can show them how their work is benefiting people.
- **Keep lawyers in the loop:** To increase retention, keep them updated about how their cases are progressing (if applicable), even after their work on the case has concluded (e.g., through follow-up emails or regular newsletters).
- **Law firm visibility:** Law firms are often motivated by publicity and visibility. Depending on how comfortable you and the law firm are, think about ways you can highlight their involvement and the impact the partnership is having (e.g., apply for a pro bono award).

RAISE PROBLEMS IN A CONSTRUCTIVE WAY

- **Constructive feedback when things go wrong:** In any partnership, there is a potential for things not to go as planned. Law firms might struggle to meet deadlines, and there might be problems around communication, or you might find yourself in a position where you no longer need pro bono legal advice, or the scope of the assistance that you require has shifted. Either way, open communication and raising problems in a constructive way are key.
- **Come ready with solutions:** When problems occur, do not be afraid to discuss them and come ready with some recommendations on how these problems can be fixed. If your project was matched by PILnet or another clearing house, do consider reaching out to them to help you to navigate any issues you are experiencing.