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Tipsheet: Tools and New Perspectives for Collaborative and Cross-Border Investigations: Key Questions and the Strategic Use of Drones to Uncover Large-Scale Gold Trafficking

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Session: Uncovering Environmental Crimes Through Collaborations

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Golden Opacity English <https://convoca.pe/goldenopacity/>

Golden Opacity Spanish

<https://convoca.pe/doradaopacidad/>

Golden Opacity Portuguese

<https://convoca.pe/opacidadedourada>

Introduction to the Topic

This tip sheet is based on Golden Opacity (Dorada Opacidad), a cross-border investigation that exposes the mechanisms behind large-scale gold trafficking and laundering across five South American countries. The project reveals how a failed regional oversight system enables a systematic criminal economy that harms local communities and Indigenous peoples, and generates profound environmental, social, and economic consequences in Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, and Venezuela.

The investigation combines community-built databases, field reporting, open-source research, satellite imagery analysis, drone documentation to track gold-transporting

trucks, and extensive document review. Golden Opacity is led by Convoca.pe in alliance with journalists from Armando.info (Venezuela), Rutas del Conflicto (Colombia), Plan V (Ecuador), and Reporter Brasil (Brazil).

This guide synthesizes key lessons learned from more than a decade of participating in—and leading—collaborative and cross-border investigations.

I. Collaboration and Cross-Border Investigations

Start with the Right Questions

Before initiating a cross-border investigation, clarify:

- Is the topic truly cross-border? What are the transnational connections, impacts, or actors?
- Are the objectives, scope, and expected outcomes fully understood?
- Do we already know potential partners, or do we need help identifying them?
- Is access to key information plausible?
- Do you want to lead this project or collaborate as part of it?
- Is there a concrete plan? (Timeline, roles, budget, resources, risks.)

Remember: every cross-border investigation operates under a different model and may require a tailored workflow.

Define the Scale

Understanding the scale helps define partners, resources, and the level of ambition:

- Local
- Continental
- Intercontinental
- Global

Who Should Be Involved?

Cross-border projects can be formed between:

- Journalists from two or more countries

- Small, medium, or large media organizations
- Freelancers, newsroom reporters, journalism nonprofits or consortia

What We've Learned

- Distance is not a barrier if the commitment is strong.
- Methods, work cultures, and editorial practices can be interconnected.
- Collaboration is built on trust, transparency, and a win-win mindset.
- Recognize the unique talent and contribution of each team member during different stages of the research project (e.g., data analysis, field reporting, legal research, writing).
- A project needs a clear leader to maintain direction and coherence. Leadership is essential: a coordinator or editor should keep the whole picture in view.
- Define the type of collaboration and establish clear commitments.
- Agree on a shared methodology for information gathering, verification, and editorial decisions.
- Agreements, responsibilities, and expectations must be explicit.
- Use secure communication channels (Signal, PGP, encrypted platforms).
- Establish continuous communication to keep morale and momentum high.
- Expect—and embrace—adjustments as the team consolidates knowledge. Be flexible!!!
- Celebrate and acknowledge everyone's contributions.

The Coordinator's Role

If you choose to lead a cross-border project:

- Produce weekly progress memos to track advances, challenges, and next steps.
- Continually identify emerging common threads and encourage story proposals from them.
- Foster constant information sharing and ensure all voices are included.
- Study patterns from a high-level perspective and guide the project with both strategic and editorial clarity.

II. The Value of Complementarity

In every collaborative project, you will encounter people with different points of view, cultures, backgrounds, perspectives, strengths, and ways of being and working. This means that our biggest challenge—and at the same time our greatest treasure—is learning how to complement one another as journalists and as human beings. This diversity is your most powerful asset.

Complementarity means recognizing that:

- We do not need to master everything individually.
- Diversity of skills, personalities, and cultural backgrounds strengthens the work.
- Differences can be bridges—opportunities to see more than we could alone.
- Collaboration is sustained not only during productive phases but also through challenges.

The Andean Concept of Yanantin

In the ancestral Andean worldview, Yanantin describes complementary opposites—order coexists with chaos, complexity with simplicity, density with lightness, good with bad.

Applying this philosophy to collaborative journalism means embracing differences as a source of balance, creativity, and resilience.

Key Questions to Identify Complementary Skills

- What technical skills does each member bring? (e.g., data, multimedia, narrative, OSINT, fieldwork)
- What personal traits shape how they work? (disciplined, creative, introverted, pragmatic, analytical)
- What aspects of teamwork energize them, and what do they find challenging?
- How can we pair strengths so the team becomes stronger than the sum of its parts?

III. Recommendations for Using Drones to Follow Cargo Routes in High-Risk Areas based on Peruvian experience

To conduct the reports on illegal gold mining areas in Peru, as part of the *Dorada Opacidad* project, we used drones to fly over gold extraction zones that were located in hills and inaccessible places. The artisanal miners in Secocha, Arequipa (in the south of Peru), had their permits suspended by the authorities. Our hypothesis was that they were still selling the gold they produced to a formal gold company, Laytaruma, which is the fourth largest gold exporter in Peru. We then designed a strategy and work plan to track the trucks carrying gold shipments from illegal mining zones in Secocha to Laytaruma's plant, which was more than 20 hours away. We were able to document our hypothesis with videos and photos.

You can access the full investigation here.

<https://convoca.pe/investigacion/caso-laytaruma-toneladas-de-oro-de-enclave-informal-ingresan-la-planta-del-cuarto>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQFiC8ay9kE>

I developed this research with two other Peruvian colleagues who worked with me as part of the Convoca team: Paul Tuesta (who handled the desk work, including databases, documents, and satellite maps) and Roberth Orihuela (who worked with me in the field in the mining zones, operated the drone, and took photos and videos). I was in charge of fieldwork, particularly gaining the trust of the truck drivers transporting the gold, recording the truck plates to identify the owners of these vehicles, designing the methodology, and editing the overall research.

Here are key recommendations drawn from that experience:

1. Build a Comprehensive Plan

Your plan should include:

1. A robust security protocol.
 - o A logistical strategy: viable access routes
 - o transportation options in order to follow the truck (vehicle, motorcycle, etc.)
 - o trusted drivers and local partners
2. Clear role assignments for every team member.
3. A detailed budget with additional funds for contingencies.

2. Prepare Thoroughly Before Traveling

- Interview multiple sources in advance to test your hypothesis and reduce on-site uncertainty.
- Understand local and national drone regulations.

- Identify whether the area has drone detection systems—many companies do. Today in Peru, all mining companies have them. In our case, there were none in the illegal zone, but there were in the Laytaruma company.
- Ensure the drone operator fully understands the objectives and is trustworthy and stable under pressure. My recommendation is that a journalist who has experience using this device and is emotionally stable in risky situations operate the drone.
- A minimum field team should include:
 - o a trusted driver
 - o a trained drone operator
 - o a reporter who maintains the big-picture view and leads decision-making
- It's essential to have a leader in the team because, most likely, difficult decisions will need to be made: stopping the initial plan, moving to a different location unexpectedly, postponing the objective, facing an arrest of the individuals under investigation, etc.

3. Build Trust with Key Actors

When safe and ethically appropriate, building rapport with drivers or workers in relevant supply chains may help you understand routes, timelines, and internal dynamics.

Trust is essential—but safety comes first.

4. Maintain a Safety-First Approach

No investigation is worth a life—yours, your colleagues', or anyone else's.

Bonus Tracks

If you need reliable information on the extractive industries in Peru (mining, oil, and gas), I recommend accessing Convoca Deep Data: it's the most comprehensive platform on the subject in the country.

<https://deepdata.convoca.pe/industrias-extractivas>

<https://deepdata.convoca.pe/main/home>

If you want to present your investigation in the form of an educational video game, you can do so with Games for News, without needing to know programming or design. It's another tool created by Convoca.

<http://gamesfornews.convoca.pe/>

You can register for both tools using only your Gmail account.

Enjoy collaborating, enhancing your skills, and following trucks!