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MAKING PROJECTS WORK – CONFLICT AND PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES IN WIND PARK CONSTRUCTION IN LA GUAJIRA, COLOMBIA

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Wind park in La Guajira in northern Colombia. Photo: © Martin Gubsch/PRIF.

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La Guajira, a desert region in northern Colombia, possesses substantial wind energy potential that could offer a promising solution to the region's humanitarian and infrastructure crisis. This development would not only provide a favorable "green" image for the state but also help meet international demands for energy transition and climate change mitigation. However, the promise of sustainable green transformation has been overshadowed by social protests, humanitarian crises, and numerous conflicts involving government authorities, private companies, and indigenous Wayuu communities. Despite more than 2,000 consultation processes and aid packages aimed at conflict mitigation, the promise that wind parks would bring prosperity remains unfulfilled. These setbacks point to a more fundamental structural issue with the conventional notion of „development" through infrastructure and technological innovation, while also highlighting the complexity of transformation processes. This report aims to demonstrate the importance of this complexity and explain why participation as a conflict resolution mechanism fails when it does not account for the everyday reality of conflict. Through this case study, I seek to establish a more effective approach to using in-depth cultural studies for conflict prevention in large-scale projects. I conclude by emphasizing the necessity of recognizing difference in perception to adequately address these challenges.

The failure of these projects stems from multiple factors: perceived environmental degradation, violations of indigenous rights, migration pressures, and historical marginalization. These tensions are further intensified by mismanagement, corruption, and inadequate governance, while the imposition of external visions of progress through energy transition disrupts local dynamics and fails to address underlying problems. A long history of unfulfilled promises and broken agreements has fostered distrust and impeded communication, particularly when misinformation proliferates. These local governance challenges are amplified by the pressures of transforming global supply chains, climate change debates, and international political demands. Well-organized inclusion of local populations is crucial to prevent these areas from becoming „sacrifice zones" in the global effort to mitigate climate change.

This report highlights several region-specific characteristics and affected populations that are crucial for understanding local conflict configurations and improving participation processes. Progress is inherently cultural and, as such, often conflicts with other conceptualizations held by the state, the broader nation, and global private enterprises. The tendency to dismiss cultural nuances rather than recognize them as potential sources of conflict has been one of the most underestimated factors in failed consultations.

The pilot project, Jepírachi, faced criticism as early as 2001 for inadequate community engagement and limited benefits. Subsequent projects expanded under the 2014 Renewable Energies Act, attracting additional multinational investments, and after 2018, interest in wind park development grew exponentially. However, accusations of exploitation, fraudulent consultations, and inadequate compensation for affected communities increased correspondingly. Pre-existing conditions such as poor infrastructure, misaligned consultation processes, and cultural misunderstandings have exacerbated ongoing disputes. Government officials, companies, and Wayuu leaders exchange blame while failing to address the need for genuine consensus on progress.

While conflicts in the region may appear straightforward on the surface – companies exploiting marginalized indigenous communities under the watch of a corrupt government – a closer examination reveals a complex tapestry of divergent conceptions of progress, value, and justice underlying these conflicts. This report employs ethnographic vignettes to demonstrate how a more systematic cultural-ontological approach could facilitate satisfactory solutions for all parties involved.

The first vignette examines how a hole excavated for a wind turbine foundation became an unexpected rainwater reservoir. While the company maintained that this natural occurrence did not affect their contractual obligations, local families argued that the new water source enhanced the land's value, highlighting the disconnect between rigid legal frameworks and the community's more relational understanding of territory. In a second case, a fraudulent consultation process unfolded when a Venezuelan relative falsely claimed leadership status and signed agreements for land that legitimate authorities had never agreed to relinquish. By the time the actual community members discovered the project, both government and company records already showed the consultation as complete. A third narrative centers on Roberto, who believes his resistance to the wind project triggered a violent attack on his home – an incident he suspects was orchestrated through collaboration between the company, his brother, and armed groups. Though the company denies involvement, Roberto's allegations illuminate how family conflicts, economic incentives, and local power dynamics intertwine. The final vignette presents three Wayuu leaders with distinct perspectives on modernization: one categorically rejects external development, another engages in careful negotiation to secure community benefits, while the third advocates for complete autonomy through traditional practices. Their contrasting positions demonstrate how wind projects intensify existing tensions and reveal the current inadequacy of participation processes in balancing cultural autonomy with infrastructure development.

The failure of participation mechanisms to address local complexities has become increasingly apparent. Indigenous representation often relies on a single group of leaders from one community, overlooking the diverse voices and extensive territories affected. These mechanisms also fail to account for the evolving social relationships and changes brought about by economic integration. Such oversimplification aggravates existing grievances and reinforces hierarchical power structures, ultimately undermining consultation effectiveness. These shortcomings reveal fundamental flaws in how both state and private sector entities engage with the region. Moving forward requires more than superficial consultations – it demands genuine respect for cultural norms, engagement with diverse stakeholders, and confrontation of systemic inequalities. Enhanced participatory mechanisms and recognition of complex local identities and interests can foster more sustainable and inclusive development in La Guajira. The region's conflicts extend beyond local disputes, reflecting broader tensions in the implementation of global energy transition goals within marginalized communities. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for resolving structural and cultural divisions that perpetuate conflict but also for improving participatory processes in transformation projects more broadly, while examining how appealing narratives like climate protection influence conflict dynamics.

Frankfurt, February 28, 2025

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1. INTRODUCTION[1]

La Guajira is a small dry dessert region in north Colombia. It is relatively sparsely populated and home to Colombia's largest indigenous community – 270,000 Wayuu living on indigenous territory. The region boasts consistent wind speeds of 8-12m/s throughout the year, potentially capable of meeting twice the national energy demand. This exceptional wind resource has sparked an energy boom, with the government designating 57 areas for over 2,800 wind turbines. However, La Guajira's is not in the headlines because of its potential for wind power and energy transition, but rather because there is conflict.[2] Most media coverage depicts a region beset by social protest and humanitarian crises, with government interventions attempting to address a historically difficult region.

These conflicts persist despite extensive prior consultation efforts and government attention. Over 2,000 community consultation processes have been conducted, including compensation plans for affected communities, and the government recently decreed a humanitarian aid package for the region. Yet the impact of these conflict mitigation strategies has been minimal. Participatory approaches have traditionally been the cornerstone of conflict prevention in socio-ecological transformation projects, whether implementing large-scale mining, transforming agricultural production, or introducing renewable energies. Development, government intervention, and private investment often trigger conflicts due to misaligned economic interests, top-down decision-making, exclusion, displacement, and fundamental disruptions to economic and social structures.

Participative methodologies are designed to allow communities to shape transformation plans to better reflect the complex demands and perspectives of affected populations, whose opinions, interests, and positions often lie at the root of conflict. Critics have long highlighted issues of token participation, lack of meaningful impact, and power imbalances – concerns that have been addressed through improved transparency, arbitration, and cultural sensitivity. However, in this case I argue that many participation methodologies, including prior consultation, workshops, seminars, and even basic electoral campaigns, fail to account for complexity and change. Consequently, formal agreements are mistaken for genuine consensus, while the everyday reality of conflict tells a different story. This disconnect results in cultural misalignments that should have been addressed through participatory venues to better integrate new actors, such as executing companies, with local populations. Therefore, this analysis argues that any socio-ecological transformation project must be embedded within sustainable cultural structures and reflect the cultural complexity on the ground.

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2 For example: *Bloqueo indefinido a la línea férrea de Cerrejón por indígenas de Nación Wayuu:* https://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/otras-ciudades/bloqueo-indefinido-a-la-linea-ferrea-de-cerrejon-por-indigenas-de-nacion-wayuu-3364167 (July, 2024), *Wind farms divide Indigenous communities in Colombia Projects in La Guajira region are a focus for the energy transition, but create tensions among Wayuu people:* https://dialogue.earth/en/energy/368855-wind-farms-divide-indigenous-communities-in-colombia/ (May, 2024), *Las motivaciones del paro en La Guajira:* https://www.elespectador.com/colombia/mas-regiones/las-motivaciones-del-paro-en-la-guajira/ (March, 2023), *Continúan enfrentamientos entre clanes wayúu en la Alta Guajira donde se construye el parque eólico Piden urgente la intervención del Gobierno Nacional para frenar estas disputas:* https://www.rcnradio.com/colombia/caribe/continuan-enfrentamientos-entre-clanes-wayuu-en-la-alta-guajira-donde-se-construye (September, 2021).

As with most conflict settings, La Guajira's disputes stem from a long history of contentious relationships and social structures. While it is tempting to reduce these conflicts to simple narratives – „private enterprises displacing indigenous populations," „complex industrial efforts thwarted by underdeveloped infrastructure," or „humanitarian crises blocking business ventures" – the reality is more nuanced. Though each of these perspectives contains truth, they interact with and reinforce each other, reflecting a fundamental lack of effective conflict resolution structures, communication channels, and an over-essentialization of stakeholders. It is a complex, multifactorial conflict situation, shaped by various interests emerging from a history of marginalization and unidirectional development efforts.

Most analyses of conflicts between wind park development and local populations (Coronado Delgado/Dietz 2013; González Posso/Barney 2019; Schwartz 2021; Ulloa 2023; Vega Araujio et al. 2023) identify several conditions for negative peace in the region, producing ongoing conflict in three areas: 1) Environment and resources, 2) Indigenous Rights and Migration, and 3) postcolonial structural deficits (and neo-colonial structures). These analyses converge on state failures and highlight dysfunctional relationships among various civil society actors, primarily Wayuu people, government agencies, private companies, and criminal armed groups. While corruption, colonial legacy, and institutional negligence have indeed eroded governance mechanisms' effectiveness, these factors alone cannot fully explain the persistent humanitarian crisis and the failure of existing conflict mitigation structures. The instability of compromises and political promises suggests a fundamental problem in defining authority and genuine community involvement. This analysis argues that the main issue lies in an oversimplification of the region and a misunderstanding of energy transition and global green transformation efforts as transformation tools disconnected from fundamental relationships on the ground. This planned transformation presents a major challenge to local political structures, raising basic questions about how this space should be organized and participatory venues structured.

The answer to this organizational question is embedded within imaginaries of progress. The „modernization" of territories is generally contentious, with transformation advocates and opponents disagreeing over fundamental economic processes and the cultural assumptions underlying spatial transformation. These transformation conflicts are essentially territorial, as the interests of groups – constructed as local – clash with businesses, governments, and organizations that project their interests onto these physical spaces. At the heart of this conflict lie different understandings of progress. Green, environmental, techno-utopian, conservative, degrowth, and numerous other imaginaries shape how people interpret space through historically embedded cultural logics. Neither public figures nor public debate adequately address crucial questions about how people process technological visions and imaginaries of „progress," how they envision their desired future, and how they believe it should be achieved. The transformation project thus faces multiple competing visions. A major challenge lies in understanding the diversity of affected populations and determining appropriate representation – who should speak for whom about what. This case study of conflicts surrounding wind park development in La Guajira therefore offers broader insights into the social and cultural impacts of socio-ecological transformation within the framework of energy transition.

To understand these differing visions of progress, this report draws on ethnographic narrative data, selecting specific conflict situations, stories, and tropes used by participants to discuss their

perception of conflict. Using ethnographic data collected during two three-month field research stays in 2022 and 2023, the analysis depicts the structure of arguments people employ and derives different positions that enter into conflict due to fundamentally opposed conceptualizations of what is desirable.

The report is structured in three parts. The first section situates the conflict within broader debates on transformation, energy, and participative planning methodologies. The second part explains the empirical case's historical and colonial context, both generally and through selected ethnographic vignettes that illustrate everyday perceptions of this conflict constellation. The third section contextualizes and explains how these personal stories and positions reveal, through specific examples, how renewable energy projects have disrupted the region's socio-cultural composition. Based on these insights, the report proposes how this type of in-depth information and description might improve political participation and conflict resolution mechanisms. Finally, it identifies the oversimplification of the „local" and relevant conflict actors as a major explanatory axis of these conflict constellations. This reductionist approach proves problematic for most relevant groups, as even those with critical stances essentialize imaginaries along lines of social organization and fail to account for diversity within groups.

2. PARTICIPATION, INFRASTRUCTURE, PROGRESS

Wind parks are being deployed as a ‚problem-solution' methodology, aligning with the broader paradigm of advancement through technology – a cornerstone of development efforts to bring „progress." These projects exemplify socio-ecological transformation initiatives, simultaneously symbolizing a greener future while facing criticism as massive disruptions to ecological balance (Avila et al. 2022; Kirkegaard et al. 2023). Development has historically entailed a one-sided imposition of values and often exhibits intrinsically colonial characteristics by establishing dependency relationships (Esteva 1993; Gunder Franck 1969). Despite extensive debates about best practices in transformation and subsequent terminology shifts –including ‚humanitarian aid,' ‚participative-inclusive development,' and ‚post-development' – the fundamental process remains focused on rectifying perceived defects in target societies. This approach continues to project an idealized future based on notions of desired versus undesired traits, or modernity versus backwardness, imposing a unilinear vision of human progress onto populations considered less developed (Escobar 1995; Esteva 1993). This narrative is reinforced by moral justifications based on humanitarian compassion, which further infantilizes the recipients of development (Fassin 2012).

Development has long been viewed as distinct from general transformation processes, when it can more accurately be understood as a subset of transformation politics. Policies aimed at regional transformation simply represent efforts to change an area according to specific imaginaries of how things ought to be. This report therefore approaches the project as a transformation initiative while incorporating the valuable critiques produced by critical development studies. To understand the narratives at play, the analysis proceeds in three steps: first examining ecologically desirable – ‚green' – futures and images of green progress; then showing how companies, NGOs, and governments are

constrained by practical considerations; and finally analyzing how these factors have shaped approaches to integrating affected populations.

2.1 GREEN NARRATIVES AND IMAGINARIES OF PROGRESS

Different types of green development narratives implicitly or explicitly guide transformation projects. These narratives contain imaginaries that explain how specific problems arise from certain mechanisms. Imaginaries encompass „assumptions about how social interactions are supposed to take place, including everyday expectations about how one conducts economic transactions, socializes in a pub, or engages with political processes, as well as the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations“ (Philpott/Richmond 2022). Sconfienza (2021) identifies several dominant green development imaginaries: ecological modernization, civic environmentalism, sustainable development, degrowth, and environmental authoritarianism. Ecological modernization seeks technological solutions to replace „un-green“ technologies through new technological progress. This utopian optimist perspective suggests that everything will ultimately resolve once we discover technological solutions to sustain current practices. A variation, civic environmentalism, proposes that individual changes in consumption patterns will compel larger companies to adopt ecological modernization (Bäckstrand/Lövbrand 2006). Sustainable development advocates changing economic practices to respect growth limits and resource use while optimizing current production until achieving a sustainable balance, while environmental authoritarianism promotes top-down implementation of ecologically beneficial practices as defined by the state or governing authority. In contrast to these optimistic semi-utopian imaginaries that claim to know how to solve the climate crisis, degrowth views the problem as unsolvable within current modes of consumption and production, advocating instead for economic contraction to reflect attainable levels.

Growing concerns suggest that renewable energy is becoming a vehicle for reproducing structures similar to fossil fuel extractivism (Gudynas 2009). As Ulloa (2023) argues: „This green extractivism also aestheticizes dispossession – making it invisible, acceptable, and legitimate – masking new global commodity chains and delegitimizing indigenous demands in favor of green energies to address climate change.“ Green narratives and their strong normative emphasis on reforming energy infrastructure to move beyond fossil fuels place additional pressure on local structures to accommodate these measures. Similarly, Dunlap (2021, 2023) demonstrates how the green energy transition, often presented as a solution to climate crises, intensifies infrastructural harm through grid expansion and industrial systems. Infrastructure projects, as Gareau (2016) notes, operate within extractivist logics aligned with capitalist frameworks, while Harvey and Knox (2015) highlight how such projects bring contrasting visions of progress into conflict. They argue that infrastructures like roads or energy grids represent more than material constructs – they are spaces where centralized state power intersects with local realities, often marginalizing historically embedded cultural logics. Transformation conflicts thus become territorial conflicts, as illustrated in Reyes-García et al.'s (2020) study of the TIPNIS road project, which reveals diverse perspectives and economic motivations including market access and job opportunities, alongside antagonistic concerns about environmental degradation and economic exploitation that shape local attitudes. The green energy narrative, despite its

reformist character, often overlooks such local diversities, creating further tension between imposed projects and localized aspirations. The fundamental challenge remains understanding the diversity of affected populations and identifying legitimate representatives for meaningful dialogue.

2.2 PROJECT CYCLES IN INFRASTRUCTURE PLANNING – MODERNIZATION AND GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

Transformation project planning can be understood as a series of steps: a) problem identification, b) determination of desired futures (goals), c) funding, d) intervention design, e) implementation, and optionally f) evaluation. Each of these project cycle elements could – and arguably should – incorporate participative mechanisms. These steps embody specific normative imaginaries of how „things ought to be" and thus likely contain some degree of ethnocentric assumptions.

Every transformation process encompasses three core elements: a conception of the transformation site's original problematic condition (Problem), an approach to solving it (Intervention), and a vision of the desired outcome (Goal). Problems may be perceived as stemming from insufficient economic progress, inadequate democratic institutions, or exploitation through dependency relationships (Gunder Franck 1969; Haber 2006; Wallerstein 1997), among other perceived deficiencies. Solutions often focus on infrastructure interventions as vehicles of modernization, state expansion, or social and cultural reforms. When interventions are projected onto these problem spaces, they can generate tensions between different visions, particularly in contexts with pronounced power differentials (Escobar 2011). Goals typically center on technological innovation, progress, and modernity – often presented as objectively positive future outcomes – but frequently fail to address the originally stated problems (Vallejo 2011; Cardoso/Turhan 2018).

Any project aimed at correcting a perceived defect in a constructed „other" inevitably imposes an ethnocentric vision of the „correct way of doing things." Contemporary linear transformation projects are as susceptible to this error as 1970s economic aid projects were. Post-development theories have attempted to address inherent criticisms regarding knowledge and administrative hierarchies, colonial relationships, and imposition by establishing more participative project creation and knowledge generation processes (Collier 2007; Ziai 2006). Participation – understood as the inclusion of multiple voices – and bottom-up approaches that accommodate different visions of the future should therefore be fundamental to problem-solving. However, implementation typically favors a single vision, with little room for compromise. The following empirical fieldwork excerpts will demonstrate why this process is more complex than it appears, and illuminate the types of conflicts, data, and ongoing social processes that underlie growing conflicts and negative peace factors.

These narratives of defects and desired futures are produced and transformed within local spaces worldwide while being shared and discussed in a global arena commensurate with the scale of climate change. This becomes particularly evident as energy transition unites perspectives across different scales. It involves a bidirectional restructuring of spaces – both „upwards" to global and national levels, and „downwards" to local and regional contexts, a phenomenon Erik Swyngedouw terms

‚Glocalisation.' ‚Glocal' describes the simultaneous occurrence of global and local processes, where global dynamics adapt to local contexts, and local practices influence global trends. It represents a synthesis where global strategies are tailored to meet specific local needs while recognizing that local actions can have global repercussions (Swyngedouw 2004; Swyngedouw/Heynen 2003). This networked scaling of the economy manifests in transformation projects where previously unconnected locales become linked through shared imaginaries and material interventions (Gupta et al. 2007). Such processes not only transform the value and significance of local territories but also create new political spaces where narratives surrounding climate change and green development are contested and reimagined. In La Guajira, these dynamics highlight the tension between global energy transition goals and local socio-cultural realities.

2.3 PARTICIPATION, CONSULTATION, AND THE STAKE OF THE AFFECTED

How, then, can we determine which imaginary will be most successful, least conflictive, and most capable of achieving the general goal of „progress"? And who should participate at each stage of the project design cycle?

The prevailing view suggests that consultation and participation enhance policy goal refinement to better address specific needs and thereby increase effectiveness and sustainability (Mansuri/Rao 2013), empower local actors (Cleaver 1999), and help establish alternative governance structures. This approach reduces the need for long-term involvement of development agencies and helps diminish neo-colonial power structures (Córdoba et al. 2018; Poteete/Ostrom 2004) while integrating new and alternative knowledge into the project cycle (Ross et al. 2015; Rosset et al. 2019). Most importantly, these participative approaches may be fundamental in establishing positive peace factors, addressing structural flaws, and preventing conflict (Hrivnák et al. 2021). In conflict settings, the absence of proper local representation and democratic structures often serves as both a root cause and result of ongoing disputes. Effective participation in planning and organization should address grievances and integrate diverse community perspectives – crucial elements for sustainable peace – yet paradoxically, this often fails to occur.

Consultation processes and local participation in regional transformation projects have become best practice, promoted and enforced by activists, governments, and private companies alike. Sustainability transition programs, industrial and infrastructural engagements, and other high-impact ecological interventions have particularly benefited from improved consideration of diverse stakeholders. Despite these intentions, participatory processes face significant limitations. A major criticism centers on tokenistic engagement, where participation becomes a mere procedural formality without genuine influence on decision-making (Robles 2020; Ulloa 2020). Such processes frequently fail to address socio-cultural complexity, reducing participation to a checkbox for legitimizing external projects. Local power inequalities exacerbate conflicts as influential stakeholders dominate dialogues while other voices remain marginalized (Ulloa 2020). These mechanisms often disregard communities' internal heterogeneity. Practical barriers – including resource constraints, logistical challenges, and cultural misunderstandings – further impact planning, transforming what should

be a platform for empowerment into a source of frustration and conflict. Disparities in knowledge levels may allow one side to leverage the more marginalized party into decisions against their interests. Critics point to potential corruption, community dissent, information overload that obscures relevance, and selective omission of information. Another common complaint involves companies presenting information misleadingly to facilitate partial agreements.

To counter these negative aspects of one-sided transformation efforts, many companies and government agencies have broadened participation to include more diverse stakeholders and affected populations. The institutionalization of participation aims to democratize knowledge creation and proactively identify potential conflict scenarios during project design. Participation subjects projects to a failsafe mechanism, bringing together those projecting their interests (companies, government, etc.) with affected populations, thus bridging scale limitations and enabling improved communication and consensus-building. This is particularly significant in infrastructural transformation projects in marginalized regions, where historical and present power hierarchies structure the debate, as in La Guajira. The question remains why the extensive consultation processes in La Guajira specifically failed. This analysis aims to demonstrate how culturally sensitive data helps avoid these pitfalls while pointing toward the need for a more integrated project development approach.

3. LA GUAJIRA – CRISIS IN A PLACE OF IMAGINARY WIND PARKS AND REAL CONSULTATIONS

La Guajira represents Colombia's most promising region for wind park development as part of climate change mitigation efforts and national power grid enhancement. The global transformation project embodied in these construction efforts aims to eliminate fossil fuels from energy infrastructure as part of a fundamental reimagining of the relationship between economy, technology, and environment. This transition creates new global infrastructure networks that connect places and decentralize energy production. Essentially, any energy transition constitutes a large-scale socio-ecological transformation project that introduces new actors into diverse spaces where renewable energy can be produced, ideally replacing fossil fuel generation sites. Hydrogen, solar, and wind energy have become part of green techno-utopian imaginaries, forming an expanding frontier of energy substitution projection. This generates new imagined futures, plans, organizations, and financial attention, which in turn create narratives of growth and potential development. These stories and techno-utopian imaginaries produce varied reactions „on the ground" as they materialize within specific spaces and begin to impact their political and ecological economy. These responses range from enthusiasm and opportunism to outright rejection, distrust, and social activism. This creates new venues of conflict, as people within different social groups become divided over how to best proceed and react to this transformation, long before construction and material transformation even begin (Burdack et al. 2023; Domínguez et al. 2022; Huber 2021; IRENA 2022).

Over the past decade, Colombia's total electricity demand has risen by approximately 3-4% annually, driven partly by industrial growth in major urban centers like Bogotá, Medellín, and Barranquilla (Domínguez et al. 2022; IRENA 2022). As of 2020, the country's installed capacity stood at roughly

17.7 GW, with approximately 68% from hydropower, 30% from fossil fuels, and less than 2% from non-hydropower renewables (IRENA 2022). Growing industrial sector demand reveals distribution gaps, particularly in remote and conflict-affected regions, which Huber (2021) identifies as a major barrier to equitable energy access. Policy frameworks, such as Law 1715 of 2014, have sought to expand renewables by offering tax incentives and streamlining licensing, while Colombia's 2021 National Hydrogen Strategy aims to harness the nation's vast renewable potential for domestic consumption and exports (IRENA 2022). Despite these efforts, bridging the infrastructure deficit and ensuring effective coordination across regional and national levels remain critical challenges to achieving a truly inclusive and balanced energy transition (Domínguez et al. 2022; Huber 2021).

Colombia has also been a significant fossil fuel exporter through extensive gas, oil, and coal deposits that constitute an important part of national revenue. The Wind Power initiative has attracted substantial international interest from European states, the US, and companies such as Siemens and Thyssen, particularly for its potential to produce green hydrogen for energy and steel production in Europe. Simultaneously, replacing fossil fuels aligns with the Colombian state's strategy to project an image of an ecological and progressive nation.

Consequently, the energy transition is positioned as a politically, economically, socially, and ecologically desirable goal and, like other green transformation objectives, finds itself embedded in business ventures, technological debates, activist spaces, and grassroots movements. Understanding participation dynamics requires examining different sectors of society and their responses to these initiatives, as well as how these responses are represented in participation venues.

3.1 A SHORT REVIEW OF WIND POWER IN LA GUAJIRA

Colombia's first wind park, the „Jepírachi Wind Project," began construction in 2001 and became operational in 2004. Developed by Empresas Públicas de Medellín (EPM), this pilot project aimed to generate 19.5 MW of energy while serving as a model for evaluating wind power feasibility in the region. Although it established an important precedent, the project faced significant technical and social challenges, including limited community involvement in planning, maintenance issues, and disputes over community benefits (González Posso/Barney 2019). Nevertheless, building on the Jepírachi experience, both the Colombian government and national and international investors recognized the region's potential. The 2014 Renewable Energies Act accelerated this process by offering fiscal incentives, tax deductions, VAT, and customs exemptions. By the late 2010s, the government had designated 57 sites for wind parks. Key projects included the Windpeshi Park by Enel Green Power, projected to generate 205 MW, and Guajira I by Isagen, targeting 20 MW. Other major developers, including Begonia Power, Renovatio, and Vientos del Norte, announced their involvement and maintained a steady regional presence (González Posso/Barney 2019). A significant technical challenge remains: integrating these projects into the national power grid. The remote locations require expanded transmission infrastructure, including the planned Colectora 1, 2, and 3 substations and associated high-voltage lines, to connect the wind parks to Colombia's National Interconnected System. Companies like Enel Green Power, EPM, and Begonia Power have pursued tax exemptions

and carbon credits under mechanisms such as the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism (Vega Araujio et al. 2023).

By 2024, total installed wind capacity in La Guajira fell far below initial projections: of the ~200MW planned for installation, only 40MW were completed (EJAtlas 2024; Minenergia 2022), of which 20MW have already been dismantled. Consequently, the Colombian government's initially positive outlook on renewable energy prospects along the Caribbean coast has grown more pessimistic in recent years. While Colombia still relies heavily on hydropower, the crisis-ridden construction of Hidroituango (Shields/Guevara Salamanca 2023) and increased industrial sector demand in coastal regions have strained the energy grid (Thema/Roa Garcia 2023). Simultaneously, international political incentives encourage Colombia to position itself within the progressive green agenda (Ulloa 2023). The slow progress can be attributed to prolonged consultation processes and growing energy company frustration, manifesting in violent conflict, accusations of fraudulent consultations, roadblocks, protests, community rejection, and company withdrawals. This report will present fieldwork excerpts showing how Wayuu leaders argue they have not been adequately informed about projects' full scope, including long-term environmental and social impacts and the logistical complexity of organizing consultations across dispersed rural communities, as well as perspectives from consultants and community activists who are often overlooked in new region-wide development plans.

The primary participative mechanism for projects using indigenous land in Colombia is prior consultation. Defined in presidential directive 10 of 2013 (Presidencia de la República de Colombia 2013), the process involves several stages. First, the project proponent submits a detailed proposal outlining scope, potential environmental and social impacts, and areas of influence to the Directorate of Prior Consultation (DCP) in the Ministry of the Interior. The DCP then certifies the presence of indigenous or Afro-descendant groups in the project area through field verifications and database analysis. The DCP provides guidelines ensuring compliance with international standards like ILO Convention 169, emphasizing free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) (ILO 1989). These guidelines require consultations before project approval, with transparent communication about risks, benefits, and alternatives, using culturally appropriate methods and languages. After DCP certification, dialogues between project proponents, state representatives, and affected communities begin to identify impacts and negotiate preventive, mitigating, or compensatory measures. The DCP should ensure good-faith consultations with consideration of community perspectives. The process concludes with formalized, documented, and notarized agreements reflecting all parties' commitments. The DCP verifies compliance with these agreements to protect community rights, emphasizing participatory decision-making and adherence to legal and ethical standards.

A series of problems and conflicts has emerged, with particularly complicated blame attribution often directed at the ‚other': government officials blame the Wayuu, the Wayuu blame companies, and companies blame the government. While this topic has been analyzed, scholarly work remains limited. The most prominent explanations for ongoing regional crisis and conflict are: 1) faulty consultation processes, 2) unequal socioeconomic impacts, and 3) cultural prejudice (Barney 2021; González Posso/Barney 2019; Schwartz 2021; Ulloa 2020).

FPIC mechanisms, popular participation, and prior consultation, while legally well-established, remain subject to critique. Ulloa (2020) notes that hurried consultation procedures often exclude key stakeholders, undermining agreement credibility and legitimacy. Additionally, Castilla (2021) highlights how companies leverage language and power positions to obscure certain points and influence communities against their right to informed decision-making. These practices violate indigenous rights and spark protests and conflict. Claims of sustainable development warrant skepticism, as these development efforts often mirror exploitative practices of other extractive industries. Schwartz (2021) emphasizes that framing wind as a „resource" commodifies indigenous territories, replicating extractivist patterns. For instance, promised compensations often focus on material goods while failing to address urgent structural reforms in water infrastructure and education. Moreover, persistent cultural misunderstandings between Wayuu people and corporations have intensified social fragmentation. Traditional Wayuu authority structures are frequently bypassed in favor of negotiations with individuals more amenable to corporate terms. This strategy, which Castilla (2021) describes as „divide and conquer," exacerbates internal disputes and weakens communal resistance. Furthermore, the Wayuu's cosmological relationship with their land, including sacred sites and burial grounds, is often overlooked. Barney and González (2019) argue that failing to consider these dimensions deepens alienation and mistrust.

These participation process failures reflect a systemic gap between legislative frameworks and practical execution. While critique has generally focused on structural reasons such as weak government institutions or general economic principles of capitalist green modernization, local narratives and conflict structure details remain under-investigated or reduced to repetitions of the same essentializing assumptions. Victim narratives strip agency from indigenous people (and other local actors), reducing their struggle to consequences of (colonial) underdevelopment and weakness, failing to acknowledge ground-level heterogeneity. To demonstrate how this over-essentialization removes people from conflict explanation, this report focuses on specific conflict narratives and details, highlighting their fit within the broader regional context and global energy transition efforts. Each example will show how people make sense of these processes and make decisions based on their agency, power, and ontology. The report will explain specific conflict situations that might seem trivial at first glance but serve to demonstrate everyday life complexity within conflicts and how reductive answers can generate future animosity. However, first, we must discuss crucial elements of the colonial past and post-colonial context fundamental to Wayuu identity. While aiming to elevate conflict comprehension beyond regional history, we must first understand that history.

3.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND WAYUU IDENTITY

Historically, La Guajira has been shaped by power struggles and exploitation – from colonial land grabs and indigenous resistance to more recent impacts of drug trafficking routes and paramilitary activity (Barney 2021; Guerra Curvelo 2019). This exploitation represents a historical continuity, with local communities often finding themselves caught between external interests and internal cultural struggles. Understanding how people perceive and react to conflict requires knowledge of the region's historical identity and processes.

The region has experienced different periods of economic growth driven by various resources that shaped outside interest. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Spanish colonizers were attracted to its pearl banks, but the Wayuu's often violent resistance eventually forced their retreat. Subsequently, special economic relationships emerged, declaring Wayuu lands as neutral and establishing black market routes. These developments not only helped the Wayuu maintain independence from colonial powers but also contributed to their portrayal as lawless and in need of cultural „civilization" by colonizers (Barrera 1988; Carabalí 2008).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Colombia began exploiting vast coal reserves in lower Guajira, intensifying regional resource extraction. The Cerrejón coal mine – one of the world's largest open-pit mines operated by multinationals including Glencore, ExxonMobil, and Anglo American – emerged as a symbol of imposed ‚progress' and socio-ecological conflict. This development sparked significant opposition from local and national groups protesting land expropriation and environmental degradation (Gilbert et al. 2021; Ulloa 2020). Protests intensified when mine expansion led to the displacement of entire villages, such as Tabaco in 2001, where residents were forcibly removed for mining operations (Parra 2023). These actions have faced criticism for violating human rights and disregarding Wayuu cultural heritage. Community resistance has persisted through ongoing blockades and legal challenges aimed at holding Cerrejón accountable for its environmental and social impacts.

One illustrative point of contention was the rerouting of the Arroyo Bruno, a vital water source. In 2016, Glencore, then mine owner, diverted a 3.6-kilometer section of the stream to access underlying coal deposits, prompting widespread protests from local communities and environmental organizations who argued the diversion threatened the region's delicate ecosystem and indigenous populations' water security. Despite a 2017 Constitutional Court ruling ordering a halt pending further environmental studies, El Cerrejón continued operations, leading to ongoing legal battles and protests (Coronado Delgado/Dietz 2013).

From a Wayuu perspective, La Guajira's history is marked by resistance to external domination and enduring autonomy. This self-understanding as an autonomous people is deeply rooted in social, cultural, and spiritual systems that have actively resisted assimilation into external structures, from the colonial system to the nation-state (Figueroa 2016). Resistance to colonial forces extended beyond physical confrontation to preserve language (wayuunaiki) and cosmological worldview. While Spanish colonizers viewed them as unruly and uncivilized, attempting to impose their cultural and religious frameworks, Wayuu traditions persisted, woven into daily life and intergenerational stories. Origin narratives, tied to land and spirits, reflect a worldview prioritizing autonomy and interconnectedness (Guerra Curvelo 2019).

While culture only partly explains friction points, three major areas within Wayuu cultural heritage are fundamental to understanding these conflicts: matrilineal society, systems of justice and equal compensation, and concepts of territory and nature. The matrilineal society organizes ownership and power through maternal lines, with land inherited from mother to daughter. Though still patriarchal – as the daughter's brother administers the land – neither husbands nor their families hold authority. Power flows through the female line, making the mother's brother a fundamental figure who, for ex-

ample, must grant permission for his niece‘s marriage. Second, the justice system comprehensively attributes value to interpersonal infractions, from unauthorized water use and wandering goats to violence and murder. These cases require retribution and equal exchange, determined by Wayuu mediators (Pütchipü'ü). Third and perhaps most significantly, their relationship with nature, while varied in interpretation, consistently recognizes jepira (holy sites) connected to mountains and natural features as gateways between worlds. Land cannot be owned but is attributed to families – a concept incompatible with state-recognized property deeds. Generally, there exists a conservative outlook toward resource extraction and progress, with wind parks often cited as disturbers of birds, fish, and jepira (Guerra Curvelo 2007, 2019, Interviews and Field Notes).

Colonial and current accounts often portray the Wayuu as adversaries of progress, casting them as defiant toward allegedly justified control attempts. The colonial label of „savages“ – an instrument to undermine the legitimacy of people rejecting subjugation – still reverberates in media and popular explanations (Figueroa 2016). This background is crucial for understanding regional attitudes, both Wayuu and others, toward outside forces, connecting to national anti-colonial resentment, urban activist mobilization, and dependency and extractivist economic pathways.

3.3 DIFFERENT CONFLICTS CO-EXISTING IN LA GUAJIRA TODAY

A series of pressing current political problems masks more fundamental structural issues. Education remains inadequate throughout the region, with schools lacking basic facilities partly due to unfulfilled infrastructure promises. Armed groups exploit vulnerable populations and target local leaders who often lack state protection. Venezuelan Wayuu migration adds another layer of complexity, disrupting traditional governance structures and creating tensions over land use. This challenges social cohesion, while the emigration of young people seeking jobs and educational opportunities further impacts communities. These failings reflect broader governance challenges, as do issues related to water scarcity. Recent examples of these recurring crises include the 2023 „Carrotanque“ scandal, involving overpriced and mismanaged water delivery trucks, and environmental impacts such as Cerrejon‘s controversial 2016 diversion of the Bruno River (Arroyo De La Ossa/Arenas Granados 2021; Redacción Semana 2024).

La Guajira‘s conflicts are not isolated but interconnected, reflecting both historical and ongoing marginalization of its people. Resolving these issues requires a shift in approach – one that moves beyond surface-level engagement to address the region‘s structural, cultural, and ecological dimensions. Without this shift, the disconnect between imposed visions of development and communities‘ lived realities will only deepen, perpetuating conflict rather than fostering genuine progress.

To illustrate how these transformations generate conflicts and why prior consultations fail to remedy them, I will detail three different conflict settings: (1) A conflict rooted in normative plurality and legal comprehension, where water‘s value and usage are contested, (2) in-family feuds and unclear responsibility lines, and (3) conflicts surrounding notions of progress, mistrust, and misconstruction of the other.

3.3.1 NORMATIVE PLURALITY – THE STORY OF THE VALUEOF WATER, REPRESENTATION, AND JUSTICE

The Wayuu are renowned for and proud of their justice system, which shapes their understanding of compensation and territory. Central to this system are the Pütchipü'ü – impartial mediators unaffiliated with any clan or family – who resolve conflicts and determine just compensation (maünnaa) for infractions. This legal system operates parallel to Colombian state justice and received UNESCO intangible heritage recognition in 2010. Despite constitutional rights to their jurisdiction, which may sometimes supersede state justice, Pütchipü'ü are often excluded from wind park consultations, as these are considered outside indigenous legal purview and viewed as affecting individual communities rather than region-wide concerns.

Wind park establishment transforms the normative composition of occupied spaces as private companies and their employees become part of the territory. One frequently cited incident illustrates this transformation: During wind park construction, unexpected heavy rainfall filled an excavated windmill foundation hole, creating a new water source and altering the land's value. Affected families contacted the company requesting compensation for this newly inaccessible water source and increased land value. The wind company, having already established a compensation scheme, dismissed the claim as frivolous extortion, arguing that rainfall didn't alter contractual usage rights for foundation excavation. In typical business relationships, suggesting contract revision based on accumulated rainwater or value changes would seem far-fetched, leading the company to denounce such requests as opportunistic modifications to written agreements. (Interviews and Fieldnotes)

This conflict stems from communities viewing these projects as integral to their territory and thus subject to their cultural values – a perspective rarely shared by private companies. Both parties hold divergent views on land, water, value, and contracts, resolvable only through sustained communication and collaboration between authorities. The Wayuu perspective advocates for flexible value perception, where land ownership becomes circumstantial, and contracts remain amendable through time and change. Legal intervention via Pütchipü'ü might have explained the claim and resolved this issue. The company, by signing the compensation agreement, overlooked the complex social fabric it entered. Awareness of potential challenges to written agreements could have prevented such problems.

Case details vary in oral accounts, with different wind parks and family names cited, but its frequent mention (5/20 interviews) and varying details highlight important aspects of justice perceptions in corporate interactions. The account serves as both narrative resource and cultural reality, with companies using it to portray the Wayuu as irrational opportunists, while activists and locals cite it as evidence of corporate ignorance and exploitation.

While indigenous particularities might seem too specific for general conflict and development questions, dismissing them reflects an exoticized vision of „indigenousness." These examples, though more visible due to their apparent uniqueness – water value, land border perception, value volatility – should be understood as amplified demonstrations of everyday life's complexity and ongoing territorial infrastructure-private investment interactions. Despite specialized consultation and

participation methodologies, these everyday perspectives on justice, development, and values continue influencing practice beyond dedicated interaction spaces. This pattern appears globally where circumstances and perception inform relationships created by large companies‘ arrival.

Using normative plurality as an infrastructure development baseline suggests that private economic intervention in territory represents permanent intrusion into complex socio-cultural structures, initiating new actor interactions. This extends beyond Colombia, as evidenced by Danish wind parks where land scarcity has led private companies to leverage local access, creating tensions between traditional and technological land use (Kirkegaard et al. 2023). The developer-landowner relationship remains inherently political; though companies often reduce it to economic interaction, a 20-year territorial lease ensures ongoing interaction, potential conflicts, and misunderstandings. The water-filled hole incident, seemingly trivial, becomes both narrative resource and relationship paradigm. The issue stems from global political narratives enabling over-regional companies to impose specific ideas and cultural standards without addressing created glocal networks. New legal contractual obligations require procedural and culturally sustainable embedding.

Another common trope involves the ‚bad Venezuelan migrant‘ usurping community leadership. Many communities appear blindsided by wind park arrivals, noting planned construction only when workers appear – a striking contradiction to prior consultation laws. One activist reports the complete absence of community consultation (Interview 3b Alba). Upon escalating to indigenous affairs authorities, they discovered consultation had allegedly occurred, but through a Venezuelan paternal cousin who had claimed community authority. This reveals multiple problems: first, indigenous affairs authorities lack thorough land ownership tracking due to numerous communities, understaffing, and dynamic land claims – partly resulting from government negligence, mismanagement, and disinterest.

Second, it contradicts Wayuu matrilineal patriarchy, where male cousins through male descent never claim land rights, which pass exclusively through matrilineal family. Colombian Wayuu often view their Venezuelan counterparts as having lost crucial organizational structures and cultural practices, particularly matrilinearity, leading to improper maternal and paternal property claims. In Alba‘s account (Interview 8), wind companies knowingly accepted illegitimate consultation for convenience, possibly even orchestrating fraudulent representation.

Both narratives reveal authority and value problems challenging Wayuu culture. Culturally appropriate mediation would involve pütchipü‘ü engaging with prior consultation authorities, indigenous affairs secretaries, regional elected officials, and traditional authorities. Examples of rainwater value and misidentified ownership illustrate challenges to Wayuu territorial authority. Complex local structures are forcefully translated into state representation terms. While mother-brothers often serve as spokespersons and consultants, interterritorial conflicts traditionally involve pütchipü‘ü, who are excluded from state and corporate indigenous autonomy frameworks. In other cases, mother-brothers are entirely overlooked due to state authorities‘ failed mediation and actor identification.

3.3.2 COMPLEX CONFLICT SITUATIONS – IN-FAMILY FEUD OR CONTRACT KILLERS

The next case illustrates how guilt and blame are attributed, and how prejudice and family dynamics complicate the picture. Many Wayuu accuse wind park companies and the state of being accessories to murder. While no proven cases exist of wind park companies directly ordering or participating in killing Wayuu leaders, several cases show a strong correlation between rejection of private companies and subsequent violent attacks.

The most severe case I documented came from a displaced person sheltering in a regional mayor's office social reunion space. I will call him Roberto. This ample and protected space had served as his temporary shelter for six months at the time of my fieldwork. Through his son's translation, Roberto described how the wind park company arrived at their settlement. The company presented pre-made plans, only inquiring about regional distinctions, graveyard locations, paths, and sacred places for wind generator positioning during initial meetings, leaving the Wayuu leader with little hope these factors would influence construction plans. While they conducted prior consultation according to protocol, the Wayuu leader remained convinced from the start that „Alijuna [Outsiders] only bring problems, we have goats and that is enough."[3] Even after hearing their propositions and compensation plan, he maintained his rejection.

His troubles began when his brother strongly endorsed the potential benefits of these generators. Roberto today believes the wind company personally paid his brother, unable to conceive any logical basis for his brother's position. The first violent incident occurred when Roberto's nephew physically attacked him, an assault he managed to repel. After this emotional family altercation, matters briefly calmed. However, weeks later, several armed individuals wearing black helmets arrived on motorcycles, shooting at his house in what appeared to be an assassination attempt targeting him and his family. He escaped with minor injuries to the nearest large town, where he has remained for several years. He accuses the wind company of hiring these assassins. The company publicly denies any knowledge of the incident. Local politicians suggest either the brother's direct involvement or his hiring of the assassins. Another official explanation implicates smugglers and paramilitary groups, disconnecting the incident from the wind parks. Without proof, no further action has been taken. Weeks after the attacks, they repeated the prior consultation without Roberto, instead engaging his brother as authority, and the wind park received territorial approval. As Roberto concludes, his brother now drives an expensive car. He withheld his community's name, making it impossible to locate official documentation of this incident. However, the story's significance lies in its illustration of perceived culpability, economic reasoning, and participation. The region's armed group presence tragically normalizes such experiences, preventing the nationwide outrage they deserve. The conflict constellation encompasses state agents, the state as an abstract entity, the Wayuu community, Roberto, his brother, his nephew, and the wind companies.

This interaction demonstrates the challenges of mediation within weak legal and security structures. While people clearly understand occurring injustices, power imbalances and limited access

3 "'Alijuna' solo traen problemas, nosotros tenemos cabras y es suficiente con eso." (Field Notes 14.11.2022).

to representation restrict their agency and ability to assert their position. It also reveals how family conflicts intertwine with broader political concerns, which companies and government exploit to dismiss claims.

3.3.3 (CONFLICTING) STORIES OF PROGRESS

The most important topic underlying this report has been multiple visions of progress. How different people view what is best for the people and land is crucial to understanding opposition and interpretations of actions concerning wind parks. These differing visions generate animosity between family members, between companies and communities, and between various Wayuu approaches to remedying failed structures.

To illustrate this diversity of perspective, we can examine the positions of three Wayuu community leaders: Zacharía, Jacobo, and Andres. They represent distinct approaches: complete decoupling from outside forces to focus on traditional small-scale agriculture, promotion of tourism and green development, and inclusion in development schemes, respectively. All three exemplify different aspects of what is often framed as Wayuu resistance, with varying degrees of opposition to wind parks – Andres being most open to possibilities brought by the parks and Zacharia most resistant and convinced of their inability to bring benefit.

Each leader represents a distinct ontological position regarding territory, identity, and shared visions of a better future – one with more jobs, better infrastructure, and increased state intervention – while perceiving economic and socio-cultural reality differently. Their stances reflect diverse interpretations of progress, modernization, and the role of external intervention in their communities.

Andres – Cautious acceptance

In my interview with Andres, he eagerly presents his NGO, which he established after assuming leadership of his community from his mother's brother. His NGO addresses problems like water access, health, and education, pursuing a vision of progress rooted in local governance and communal self-empowerment. He expresses deep responsibility and concern about his community's challenges, particularly focusing on education and developing young people's capacity to engage with broader society – an area where he sees them as underprepared. While acknowledging the Wayuu's historical marginalization, he views external interventions as double-edged: though necessary resources may come from outside, risks of corruption and unequal distribution could exacerbate community hardships.

He follows the logic of cautious modernization – envisioning progress through Wayuu leaders' ability to organize and manage resources while resisting exploitation. Emphasizing neutrality and cross-community leadership, he sees progress as improving all families' well-being under his jurisdiction without succumbing to divisive political or economic forces. Given his community's proximity

to major urban settlements and better national connections, he recognizes increased opportunities for broader economic participation. His community has already accepted power line construction through their territory in exchange for a school and improved road access. As he states:

> „If they were to install a windmill or several windmills in the territory, I think it would be a solution to the issues we are facing. It's a way to produce renewable electricity, a solution that could provide us with electricity and, hopefully, resources to invest in the community. However, the benefit must reach us directly, and it shouldn't just serve other regions or leave us empty-handed."

While remaining skeptical about the fairness of this intrusion and expressing reluctance to accept larger-scale projects without substantial community inclusion, he engages with development, seeing modernization – in which he works to secure a stake – as serving the territory's best interests.

Zacharía – Outsider projects mean displacement

Zacharía speaks forcefully about renewable energy projects' destructive impacts on Wayuu territory. He views these projects not as progress symbols but as invasive forces echoing colonial displacement. He perceives outsiders as invaders and deeply criticizes external forces reshaping Wayuu land and governance, seeing wind farms and modern industries as catalysts for internal conflict and territorial fragmentation. His vision of progress centers on preserving ancestral lands and autonomy. He associates modernization with social division and material greed, viewing it as deepening territorial disputes and class hierarchies within the Wayuu community. As he states: „What the Spaniards could not do, renewable energy has done ... which is the displacement from the territory."

As a restaurant owner, he particularly fears impacts on future fishing and tourism industries. He emphasizes the need for project management reform, advocating for genuine political commitment and direct community engagement. He suggests infrastructure investments should prioritize long-term solutions like reliable water supply systems, and negotiation processes must be revised to ensure fair benefit-sharing with communities. While acknowledging the need for external support, he deeply doubts its sincerity. He views government and private companies as bearing responsibility if they want the territory; if not, he sees no issue.

Jacobo – Cultural Preservation

Jacobo focuses on how „clean energy" has been weaponized to displace Wayuu families and strip them of ancestral lands. He describes these projects as imposed without genuine consultation, triggering violent conflicts and displacement. He strongly opposes both state and corporate interests, which he sees as colluding to sacrifice Wayuu territory for profit under sustainability pretenses. Jacobo articulates broader Wayuu resistance to modern capitalist ventures, calling for solidarity against

supposedly „clean energy“ that has brought only harm. For him, progress means defending land from further desecration and preserving Wayuu traditions grounded in earth respect and communal ownership.

As he states: „...it‘s my community, my community. From the outset, we told them no, no to the consultation, no to the project, it‘s not happening here. We have the issue with the towers and nothing else to contribute, it‘s not happening here. And they told me that the government had already authorized it, that the government can authorize it, but this is not the government‘s land. These are ancestral territories, and the government is only the owner of the subsoil, not the soil, and we are on the soil. So, we told them if they want, since they own the subsoil, they can make tunnels and run those networks underneath. But it‘s not going to happen here.“ When asked about his future vision, he firmly emphasizes traditional economic sectors – goats, artisanal handicraft, and salt. These sectors offer self-management, sales control, and independence. He believes any outside intrusion will only breed corruption, internal strife, and conflict, seeing dependence and cultural ignorance as conflict‘s root causes.

These three leaders – Jacobo‘s rejection, Zacharia‘s critique of modernization as a fragmenting force, and Andres‘s cautious conscious opportunism – illustrate the spectrum of Wayuu responses to modernization. Andres represents a moderate position, balancing external resources with internal integrity. Zacharia opposes the greed and internal divisions fostered by outside intervention, while Jacobo represents the radical end, actively rejecting external forces as harmful to Wayuu culture and future prosperity. Their perspectives highlight the ontological challenges in representing a unified „Wayuu collective,“ as each leader questions how external forces redefine territory and space. Their narratives reveal a community grappling with progress‘s meaning, land defense, and lifestyle sustainability.

Paradoxically, all three succeeded in achieving their respective goals while harshly criticizing the general framework. They argue that inter- and inner-family conflicts are increasing and fear powerful actors „invading“ their territory. These leaders have directly participated in consultations, shaped their communities‘ responses to outside intervention, expressed opinions, made decisions, and leveraged outside support, mostly consulting within their communities about proposals. One accepted a powerline while two rejected proposed projects. They maintain authority over their respective communities, and consultation worked in these cases. However, examining conflict parties reveals several Wayuu community members involved in consultancies and company cooperation, while others participate in blockades and NGO protests. This demonstrates the difficulty of preventing conflict through participation schemes based on traditional authority, as community positions and realities prove even more complex.

3.3.4 ANOTHER SIDE – WAYUU CONSULTANTS, SOCIAL WORKERS AND ACTIVISTS

Several consultancy firms, primarily staffed by Wayuu who lack positions of power and direct consultation access, argue that collaborating with companies to defend territory from uncontrolled access

offers the only path to addressing poverty and humanitarian crisis. These actors often face accusations of being traitors and sell-outs (vendidos), despite expressing deep concern for their people: „It hurts my soul that I've dedicated my life to this, and now they say we're murderers behind the massacres in these communities." (Interview Carlos). One particularly compelling account comes from Athena, who laments both being dismissed and questions opposition sincerity:

> "Six years ago, I also decided to start working on due diligence processes as a company. To me there was a moment, that I said, that's it, that saved me, something that I saw, that I said well, is this all or are we here to say no to everything? That is, let's defend the territory, or do we finally prepare ourselves for negotiations that are not really sincere, or do we seek to say yes and negotiate some good conditions, and we have to train ourselves for that. I would have been telling you this in 2017. Yes. Because finally you, from one's activism, from one's struggle, you say no [to the wind parks], but when you get to the communities where there is so much poverty, so much vulnerability, and people end up giving in. Then you. You show your face and say your name and the territory it works differently.
>
> And I give you an example. On October 12th ... a local NGO here organized a blockade, and I was not working that day. This is a day when I am just another Wayuu. Yes, I was just another Wayuu because I did not represent anyone's interest. And that day I decided to pay a visit to my grandfather, and I arrived at the strike, and they told me:
>
> I am not going to let you pass because you are in your company car, and you can't pass.
>
> Yes, but the truck is not in service.
>
> No, I can't let the car through, you can go on foot.
>
> No problem. Where do I park? There? Well, I tell my cousin to pick me up.
>
> And while I am there waiting, I see company cars passing by with workers with their personal protection gear, that is, with boots, with helmets, with sequins. That is: they are going to work, and I saw that they paid the people from the strike to pass. And that is precisely what is happening to us. So that takes away all the strength of the movement. So six, seven years ago I said no, this is our turn. We have to train ourselves to find ways to negotiate and participate in all of this in a fair way."[4] (Interview Athena)

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4 "Hace seis años que yo decidí también empezar a trabajar en procesos de debida diligencia como empresa. A mí hubo algo que yo dije listo me salvó, algo que yo vi, que yo dije bueno, ¿es esto o estamos aquí para para decir a todo no? O sea, defendamos el territorio, o finalmente nos preparamos para que este no sea realmente sincero, o buscamos decir sí y negociar unas condiciones y nos tenemos que formar para eso. Esto te lo decía en 2017. Si. Porque finalmente tú, desde tu activismo, desde tu lucha, tú dices no, pero cuando se llega a las comunidades donde hay tanta pobreza, tanta vulnerabilidad, y la gente termina cediendo. Entonces tú. Tú das la cara y dices nombre y el territorio corre y funciona diferente. Y te pongo un ejemplo. El 12 de octubre … una ONG de acá local. Que es bastante amarillista y bastante… Entonces con esa ONG hicieron un paro y yo ese día pues no estaba trabajando. Este es un día en el que soy una Wayuu más. Sí, soy una Wayuu más porque no represento el interés de nadie. Y ese día decidí

The opinions and positions of consultancy agency are completely dismissed as being illegitimate representations of „the Wayuu“ by the three leaders quoted earlier, despite probable support from some community members.

A common pattern emerges where people delegitimize opposing positions and explain away „irrational“ behavior through their own interpretive frameworks. Blocking Athena's car seems illogical when she's not there as a company representative, leading some to conclude corruption and extortion must be the motivation. Yet these same people might argue that, given Athena's complicity, stopping her from achieving company goals is entirely logical, as these goals – from the leaders' perspective – cannot genuinely aim to help the community, but only herself. From this view, the roadblock becomes the only way to help the community – and perhaps Athena misidentified those allowed through. The key point is how prevalent this perception of others as irrational becomes, leading not to acknowledgment of mere differences in opinion, but to accusations of corruption or betrayal. They cannot conceive of willing cooperation with the „enemy“ based on conviction, instead explaining it away as opportunistic behavior that will ultimately harm the territory.

In this light, Andres's acceptance of wind parks reflects more the emergence of new alliances between local leaders and companies seeking material benefits like schools and infrastructure. Conversely, Jacobo's rejection reflects a perceived absolute incompatibility between progress and external development. These vignettes illustrate how the global push for renewable energy reshapes local power dynamics, producing new networks of cooperation and conflict among companies, communities, and government agencies. As social relations transform, the glocal arena becomes contested space where imposed external imaginaries collide with diverse local cultural and political realities. The conflict over water-filled excavation pits, visions of progress, and compensation schemes exemplifies the glocal dynamics of territorialization triggered by green development initiatives. Meanwhile, Athena demonstrates the universal commitment to genuine social and economic improvement, while perhaps underestimating traditional structures' role in maintaining communities.

Setting out to understand ongoing local conflicts surrounding wind parks in La Guajira, I began listening to different groups' perspectives. Contrary to the prevailing narrative of sharp conflict between Wind Park Companies and local Wayuu communities, the real debate within communities and the local economy reveals far greater complexity. We have seen various conflicts impacting wind park establishment. One fact can be generalized: Projects will be established in complex spaces, and failure to recognize diversity in imaginaries, alliances, and social groups will result in protest, resistance, and conflict.

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hacer una visita cuando yo venía de regreso me consigo el pase y llegué al paro y me dijo: No te voy a dejar pasar porque tú tienes tu camioneta empresarial. No puede pasar. Sí, pero la camioneta no está en servicio. No, no es que no puede pasar esto. Dije: No hay problema. ¿De qué lado me meto? ¿Allí? Bueno, le digo a mi primo Y yo estoy allí y veo que pasan carros empresariales con personas que tienen sus implementos de protección personal, o sea con botas, con casco, con lentejuelas. Que si van a trabajar. Entonces. Y yo veía que le pagaban para pasar. Y eso es precisamente lo que nos pasa. Entonces eso quita fuerza al movimiento. Entonces hace seis, siete años que yo dije no, aquí nos toca. Toca formarse para buscar unas formas de negociar y de participar en todo esto de manera justa." (Interview Athena).

4. IMPROVING PARTICIPATION

The multiple conflicts surrounding green energy projects in La Guajira stem from introducing large-scale socio-ecological transformation projects into a region suffering from humanitarian crisis. Multiple perspectives on progress create friction, and at several points, the lack of well-structured positive peace factors – such as consultation, communication, and democratic participation mechanisms – leads to violent conflict. The core problem lies in how, despite existing legal mechanisms, several relevant actors' opinions are not taken seriously and prove more diverse than acknowledged. Although participatory processes have been abundant, they haven't been thoroughly applied throughout the project planning cycle, and where implemented, they've failed to account for ground-level complexity. Ultimately, specific power imbalances lead to lopsided token participation, where politicians and companies can influence outcomes to benefit an agenda promoting a vision of progress that people don't share.

Three fundamental problems emerge from this analysis:

– First, project cycles' inability to adequately respond to everyday conflict constellations and opinions. These cycles need to create new working social structures that include permanent venues for conflict resolution.
– Second, participative mechanisms' flawed approaches to selecting consultation participants and taking their input seriously, significantly impacting project outcomes.
– Third, unchecked power positions allow private enterprises to act detrimentally toward local conflict situations or operate disconnected from socio-cultural everyday life.

4.1 PROJECT CYCLES AND SPACES FOR PARTICIPATION

In project planning practice, achieving complete participation remains virtually impossible. The ideal of complete inclusivity would require consulting every decision from the very beginning, when states (or other institutions) plan development funds supporting climate change mitigation strategies like energy transition and wind parks. When institutions define intervention plans, starting the conceptual phase with international surveys on every detail is simply unfeasible – some prior decisions must determine intervention goals. Desired futures of international and regional transformation projects almost invariably begin by establishing funding structures that then identify needs for resource allocation to specific topics or regions. We've seen that the target population – in this case, local people primarily comprised of Wayuu – only gains opportunity to influence resource utilization at the very end of a long planning process. The region shows no evidence of prior involvement: no state representatives made energy transition their platform, no companies initiated widespread campaigns to analyze local needs and infrastructural reality.

In La Guajira, the Wayuu people's first chance to influence came through elections, but politicians mostly lobbied and advocated to acquire funds by creating technological imaginaries like energy transition nationally and inviting multinational companies regionally. These efforts then created projects like wind parks where people were finally consulted directly, but by then, plans, locations, and

logistics had largely been decided, leaving them to merely negotiate acceptance or rejection of the parks and compensation schemes. Why do Andres, Jacobo, and Zacharía reject the parks despite having a major say in the decision and ability to thwart its inception? Each utilized their one chance to impact the plan but subsequently continued to interact with and design their lives in relation to the newly transformed territory. The infrastructure has become part of their reality even before construction and will remain an ongoing material reality. Consequently, companies and operators, technical staff and administrators become part of the community, actively or passively. Infrastructure impacts change social relations, and the way governments and companies design intervention must reflect this to create channels for conflict prevention and resolution.

4.2 WHO IS CONSULTED?

The second problem extends beyond creating projects that genuinely integrate into transformed spaces – it involves determining who has legitimate authority to participate in this process. Is consulting traditional leaders as community representatives sufficient, or does this require more thorough questioning of „local," „regional," and even „national" stakeholders? Many in La Guajira express rejection of how „people in Bogota" make decisions on their behalf, while leaders often view Wayuu working for companies as traitors. Meanwhile, these Wayuu see their families and people as mistakenly resisting progress opportunities.

Traditional authorities become the consulted parties, while company supporters are labeled as „bought off outsiders." This complicated composition of consulted people and mixed authority leads to „othering" of the „local" and its associated people, reducing them to a space viewed as needing transformation and inherently inferior to those doing the transforming. The necessity for mediators, state information on „who to consult," and logistical organization within participative frameworks reveals potential hierarchies inherent in the concept, thus compromising possibilities for free and open participation. While this cannot be fully resolved, it can be mitigated through understanding the complex imaginaries existing in the field. Therefore, participation's main point only partly relates to improving democratic state structure – it primarily aims at developing specific practices allowing public and private planning to incorporate the complexity of progress imaginaries existing within a territory.

Two fundamental questions must guide consultation planning: First, who has authority to speak for a territory, who can decide when all have been sufficiently consulted, heard, and represented in the final project? Second, at what point in the project cycle can and should people realistically be involved? Earlier participation in the project cycle allows more adaptations but lengthens the process, increases costs, and might diverge from initially stated desired futures. This could negatively impact funding institutions and disrupt planning schedules. While recognizing complexity should increase success and reduce conflict, it inevitably complicates planning.

4.3 POWER AND AGENCY

The situation ultimately becomes a negotiation of which vision of progress most convincingly presents its case for a better future. To avoid local conflict, multiple ground-level positions should be taken more seriously, with grassroots organizations, traditional leadership, national interests, and other stakeholders represented to preemptively deconstruct conflictive hierarchies. If these three leaders had been positioned to jointly present their interests, if other community members could better influence and position themselves, if Athena could argue her territorial vision to government and Wayuu leadership, and if serious concerns about destruction and displacement became actual points of debate, then participation would seem less contentious. Local participation's goal should extend beyond a symbolic nod – a reductive yes –to an already completed project, instead aiming to integrate new projects within existing political and cultural structures. This includes not only indigenous authority but also activists, young people's future hopes, and ecological, social, and cultural goals that might help avoid imposition pitfalls and create cooperative, fluid, and sustainable economic practices for a better ecological future.

Moreover, this topic is embedded in global networks surrounding energy transition – neither the companies nor the national government are local actors, yet they emerge as main conflict participants. National and global activist campaigns fighting for climate change mitigation impact these spaces and participate in this material and social restructuring. People throughout Colombia become voluntary or indirect participants in this political arena, projecting their desired futures onto a region with which they have little daily interaction. When Bloomberg titles that Colombia's Green Energy Ambitions „hinge on Windswept, Wary Province," they describe not only projected national interests but imply global stakes moving investors, governments, and diplomacy.[5] The glocal dynamics of wind park development in La Guajira reveal how divergent interests and social relations reconfigure within this transformation arena. Wind park infrastructure's introduction brought global energy transition narratives into direct interaction with Wayuu conceptions of land and value. While private companies adhered to rigid contractual frameworks rooted in global economic norms, local communities viewed the altered landscape as necessitating constant agreement renegotiation, reflecting a relational understanding of territory. This clash illustrates how global climate mitigation strategies, when implemented locally, can illuminate divergent imaginaries of progress and justice, amplifying stakeholder tensions. These frictions, rooted in differing positions, highlight the need for participatory mechanisms that genuinely accommodate societal complexities and the political economy and ecology.

5. CONCLUSION – A DIFFERENT VISION OF LOCALITY AND AUTHORITY ON SPACE

Fundamental structural problems persist that state and society have failed to adequately address. On one side lies a century-old failure of reconciliation, marked by power imbalances, corruption, hu-

5 https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2023-colombia-wind-power-guajira-clean-energy/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

manitarian crisis, inadequate infrastructure, economic and social instability, and racist exclusion. On the other side stands a myriad of development projects, consultations, and democratic initiatives. Main solutions have aimed at providing better infrastructure and increasing job prospects through extractivist projects and foreign investment. However, these efforts have neither improved the underlying structural socio-economic conditions that led to initial failures nor succeeded in creating basic regional infrastructure.

Strengthening democratic belonging, state presence, and participative methods alongside basic modernization convictions has long driven intervention logic in the region but has proven insufficient in La Guajira. These processes, intended to mediate between local populations, corporations, and the state, frequently reduce complex social dynamics to simplistic binaries. They fail to engage broader civil society, excluding crucial actors such as activists, NGOs, and local leaders. This oversimplification ignores local power structure intricacies and weakens participatory democracy's foundations.

In this report, I argued that beyond these structural complaints, participation's basic structure rests on a false dichotomy of „local" versus private company, or even indigenous versus „rest." While consultation processes typically include some representation of locality, company, and state as mediator, real-life conflict scenarios prove more complex. They should encompass wider civil society sectors, including activists, NGOs, workers, youth representatives, and teachers, among others. A general problem exists in constructing authority on territorial questions that reduces the stereotypical „indigenous" to community representative opinions and homogenizes a very complex group. Consultation processes' fundamental flaw lies in their lack of diverse actor inclusion – actors who could represent people, work constructively on holistic solutions, and sustainably unite private capital, public investment, and political involvement. Prior consultations, designed as the sole problem-solving mechanism, reproduce exclusionary hierarchical practices where company managers speak with specific group leaders who happen to reside where wind parks can be built, inhibiting agreement on larger-scale systemic solutions that could address issues raised by different advocates and groups within the country. The issue's global nature and power of green narratives further exacerbate this problem.

Improving this process requires shifting perception of power lines, windmills, and infrastructural changes away from mere private businesses toward viewing them as parts of living communities spanning decades. A more procedural participation process, allowing organic involvement of affected regional stakeholders throughout entire projects, could help transformation efforts genuinely include diverse local opinions and overcome oversimplified perceptions – where anyone associated with private companies is labeled a sell-out, state workers are deemed corrupt, and indigenous people are portrayed as peace-loving, agency-less victims. The aim should be gathering detailed information about affected society and socio-ecological transformation impacts to react to inevitable interest conflicts these projects produce. Local communities exist within complex narrative webs that inform helpful, informed, and intelligent opinions about how transformation can positively impact territory, but they must be involved and heard. Many people's lack of voice will lead to conflict, and this report strives to amplify some voices and nuances of voices that have been listened to but not heard.

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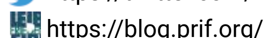
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MAKING PROJECTS WORK – CONFLICT AND PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES IN WIND PARK CONSTRUCTION IN LA GUAJIRA, COLOMBIA

Martin Gubsch

More than 2,000 consultation processes and extensive aid packages aimed at conflict mitigation accompanied the construction of wind parks in La Guajira in northern Colombia. Despite this, there were social protests, humanitarian crises and numerous conflicts between government authorities, private companies and indigenous Wayuu communities. Martin Gubsch reveals a complex tapestry of divergent conceptions of progress, value, and justice underlying these conflicts and illustrates why participation fails as a conflict resolution mechanism if it does not take account of the everyday reality of conflict.

Martin Gubsch is a Researcher in PRIF's Research Department Glocal Junctions. His research focuses on climate change, environmental movements and transformations of rural space in Colombia.

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