

# COMMUNICATING THE ENERGY TRANSITION: KEY LESSONS FROM WAYÚU COMMUNITIES

## INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEMATIZATION

### Case Context and Key Actors

Colombia's La Guajira region has been identified as promising for renewable energy projects, most notably for providing an ideal space for the installation of wind turbines. However, the local Indigenous communities, the Wayúu, fear and protest against the disruption of their sacred lands and spiritual customs that are inherently linked to the land used.

This case reflects a broader global challenge in climate governance. Similar communication failures and power imbalances are evident in renewable energy projects involving Indigenous and local communities worldwide.

In our policy brief, we focus on the interaction between the stakeholders involved in the installation of the renewable energy projects. As indicated in **Figure 1**, we specifically look at how the government and private sector communicate towards the indigenous communities, because this is where most of the friction and tension can be observed.

### Contested Land vs. Energy Futures (the Role of Language)

What creates the friction are the differing understandings of the concept of *land*. In particular, there is a lack of mutual recognition that land is not unilateral - it is not only a physical object, not only a natural resource, or only a spiritual place. Rather, the term should be understood as a provisional assemblage of material substances, technologies, discourses, and social relations that interact to construct the meaning of *land*. The tension witnessed in Colombia therefore reflects a clash between two constructs: one viewing the land as suitable for renewable energy projects that generate profit and public good, and the second understanding the land as scarce and carrying inherent cultural and spiritual value.

### Aims

This policy brief aims to provide guidance for policy makers on how to communicate with local communities in a way that is fair, inclusive, transparent, and respectful. Its purpose is to highlight the importance of context-sensitive, participatory, and accessible communication processes that go beyond narrow economic or technical perspectives, and that avoid imposing externally biased or Western-centric frameworks on local realities, and ultimately support stakeholders in reaching outcomes that are broadly acceptable to all parties.

Consistent with our context-dependent approach, the findings and recommendations of this policy brief should be applied to other settings only by analogy. As they are derived from a specific case in Colombia, any transfer to different contexts must carefully consider land conditions, the heterogeneity of local communities, legal frameworks, socio-political dynamics, and the diversity of stakeholder interests.

### Power Relations

In practice, the renewable energy projects have generated conflict with Wayúu communities due to limited consultation, unequal power relations, and the disregard of territorial and spiritual meanings attached to the land.

Despite high energy generation potential, many local residents remain without electricity, underscoring how inadequate, one-sided climate communication can contribute to social exclusion and undermine the long-term sustainability and legitimacy of climate policy.



Figure 1: Communication Map of Stakeholders

## Challenges Identified: The Three “T” Framework

Three “T” framework was developed to summarize the concrete problems observed in the communications from the government and the private sector towards the Indigenous communities in La Guajira.

### Tunnel Vision

Much of the communication relies on a universalist or Eurocentric development framing of the involved companies and omits the specificities of the local Wayúu context. This also includes assumptions such as automatically equating “green” with “good.”

### Top Down

Communication is shaped by asymmetric power relations and top-down decision-making. In practice, this results in a lack of meaningful participation and consultation with the indigenous groups.

### Technical Language

This refers to an overreliance on technical metrics and terminology, which are often not accessible or understandable to the local communities. This also encompasses the issue of an overreliance on technological language and framing, which ignores the broader picture of social justice.

## RECOMMENDATIONS: FOUR T’S TOWARD TERRITORIAL JUSTICE: SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION

### Transparency

Energy Transition project-related information tends to prioritize technical and financial aspects, emphasizing short-term material benefits while downplaying further potential environmental and social impacts. Assessments are usually brief, highly technical, and do not consider broadly and cumulative effects. Moreover, relevant data is frequently non-public or difficult to access.

**Communication strategies must openly acknowledge risks, trade-offs, and uncertainties, rather than relying solely on economic benefits and technological assurances. Impact assessments should treat territory as an interconnected, collectively affected space.**

- **Provide permanent, complete, and easily accessible information in line with the community’s preferences or suggestions.**
- **Regular meetings and transparency committees are recommended, along with independent and broader impact assessments.**

### Terminology Clarity

Indigenous communities often encounter difficulties in fully grasping the language used to present projects, due to technical, cultural, and contextual barriers.

**Clear communication is the key for inclusive policy-making: Complex legal, environmental, and technological issues should be translated into accessible narratives, metaphors, and visual formats that resonate with local cultural understandings.**

- **Engage in iterative, collaborative dialogue with affected communities to foster shared understanding and long-term collaboration.**

## CONCLUSION

Communication is not a secondary issue but a central determinant of whether energy projects succeed or fail. When communication breaks down, the consequences are not merely procedural; they can halt projects altogether or impose serious burdens on community livelihoods. The three “T” framework offers a practical tool for diagnosing communication challenges in specific contexts, but its real value lies in guiding the development of four complementary “T” principles that foster meaningful, context-sensitive participation. Together, these elements create the conditions for more equitable dialogue, reduce the risk of conflict, and open pathways toward provisional consensus and future collective construction across differing worldviews.

### Territory Reading

Wayúu communities are embedded in dynamic and complex contexts, shaped by internal and external constraints that shape participation, understandings, territorial perspectives, and land arrangements. Corporate and governmental communication often overlooks factors such as spirituality or even the presence of armed violence, relying instead on externally imposed frameworks that provide a limited understanding of the territory.

**Communication processes need to be contextually aware. Spatiality should be understood not only as a matter of geographical location, but also in relational terms: discourses, interests, actors, hierarchies, social divisions, gender dynamics, history, religion and culture matters. Communities usually have own methodologies to carry out participation process that should be taken into account.**

- **Hold regular stakeholder workshops to identify community-specific contextual factors and improve understanding of the territory.**

### Threading Voices

Governmental and corporate communication often fails to account for the complexity of Wayúu’s social organization, varied concerns and internal diversity. Communication is often treated as a one-time initial step, with minimal community involvement during project development and no long-term follow-up.

**Communication strategies must reflect the non-homogeneous social organization of communities and their interests, including recognition of ancestral authorities and diverse community leaderships. They are to be space for the continuous co-construction of the territory and the materialization of multiple community visions. Dialogues should create a space of equality and understanding.**

- **Conduct participatory mapping exercises with the local populations.**

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