

Making the energy transition in Colombia a just one: A political economy analysis and collective ideas for action

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► The Governance Action Hub



The Governance Action Hub is an initiative of Results for Development (R4D). Drawing on examples from different fields and with a keen focus on impact, the Hub seeks to explore what is possible in solving complex governance problems by challenging traditional assumptions, supporting and learning from bold, locally led innovations, and acting as a broker between actors that hold different pieces of the puzzle.

In resource-rich and non-resource-rich settings alike, and particularly at the subnational level, we see a need to support effective coalitions for systemwide change that deliver tangible improvements in people's lives while building trust and strengthening democratic resilience.

At the Hub, we understand governance as a complex ecosystem of relationships and interactions with people at the center, underpinned by power, rents, and interests. To foster change, it is crucial to understand how the system behaves, whom it serves, and why and where it might be open to shifts. Systems are best understood and navigated by local stakeholders, often with the support of external allies.

As an ally, we seek to support collective action strategies, elevate new experiences and voices, and connect peers and allies. We aim to promote cross-learning and facilitate local and global reflection on what works, where, and why, while progressively building a global community of governance reformers, action-takers, and creative thinkers.

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► Results for Development



R4D is a leading nonprofit global development partner that collaborates with change agents—including government officials, civil society leaders, and social innovators—and supports them in navigating complex change processes to achieve large-scale, equitable outcomes in health, education, and nutrition. R4D works with country leaders to diagnose challenges; co-create and implement innovative solutions built on evidence and diverse stakeholder input; and engage in collaborative learning to adapt, iterate, and improve. R4D also strengthens global, regional, and country ecosystems to support country leaders with expertise, evidence, and innovations and help them solve immediate challenges while also strengthening systems and institutions to meet future challenges. It shares what it learns so others around the world can also achieve results for development.

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Executive Summary

In late 2023, the Governance Action Hub began scoping potential entry points to support climate change and energy transition efforts in Colombia that could lead to inclusive development outcomes. In doing so, it undertook a political economy analysis, drawing on a framework created by the School of Oriental and African Studies – Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOAS-ACE) team at the University of London. The SOAS-ACE framework has primarily been used to understand behaviors within systems in service of anti-corruption efforts, but we used it to understand actors in the energy transition and their behaviors based on their relative power, capabilities, and interests—first at the national level and then at the sector and subsector levels.

At the national level, we found that Colombia’s political settlement is one of competitive clientelism embedded in a volatile history with periods of extreme violence around the distribution of rents. Over time, centralized control of these rents under two dominant political parties has evolved into a more decentralized, competitive system in which parties compete fiercely at the local and national levels to control the state apparatus—using rents to attract and reward supporters—and economic interests align flexibly around candidates who are most likely to protect their short-term interests. The economic elite have limited capacity to improve their economic circumstances through innovation, so they rely primarily on their political influence to maintain the status quo. With the backing of institutional frameworks designed to protect their interests, they do this by funding political campaigns and controlling the public narrative through their ownership of media outlets.

At the level of the mining sector, we found that the current configuration of interests and actors makes reform efforts challenging. In addition, a number of nongovernmental organizations already have extensive experience in the mining sector and extractives more broadly. We therefore concluded that the Hub is unlikely to have much impact in that area in the near future.

We found that the energy sector has more potential entry points. The sector’s political settlement has resulted in an efficient national energy grid because the main actors compete and hold each other accountable for rule-following to protect their own economic capabilities. The grid was designed to serve populations in and around the country’s large cities and is economically beneficial to the economic elite, who buy their power at reduced rates directly from power distributors. As a result, the sector has a number of challenges from an equity perspective, including:

- ▶ Financial advantages to big business through cheaper, more reliable energy
- ▶ Poor-quality service outside major cities, which raises production and social costs for consumers

- ▶ Insufficient cross-subsidies, forcing the government to spend half a billion dollars a year to fund shortfalls in the subsidy system
- ▶ Mismanagement of funds meant for improving energy access outside major cities, due to clientelist ties at the local level
- ▶ About 9.6 million people, or 18.5% of the population—most of them Indigenous, Afro-descendants, or small-scale farmers—either lack access to energy or have no reliable or affordable sources of energy.
- ▶ The same governance challenges for investments in new infrastructure, including capture and diversion from their intended purpose, exist for investments in traditional infrastructure.

Early in the Gustavo Petro administration, which began in 2022, these challenges were moved to the center of discussions about the energy transition. In short, the energy transition became about achieving justice as both a means and an end. Based on a countrywide consultation process, the administration announced that the energy transition would be a vehicle for improving the energy sector's governance process, giving local communities and green energy companies the ability to manage new assets to address local energy and development needs and thereby strengthen the voice and power of previously excluded populations within the local system. The government made a number of changes to the sector's rules and institutional framework, including incentives to communities to subsidize the cost of new infrastructure, tax breaks, access to soft credit, and the potential to generate large amounts of energy and sell it back to the market. The ambitious commitment included support for 20,000 new organizational structures called energy communities (ECs) to steward this shift at the local level by the end of the Petro administration.

The analytical part of our scoping work suggested that these formal changes signaled an important potential shift in the system in favor of equity. However, it also underlined the potential for an implementation gap, given the informal rules and practices within Colombia's clientelist political settlement. Changes to policies and incentives on paper can be an important first step, but they are unlikely to result in considerable improvements to equity in service delivery or local development outcomes unless local actors are prepared to seize the opportunity—and this likely requires new behaviors and practices. That is, the ECs policy offers a feasible entry point for change and for addressing justice deficits in the system, but local communities need support to use the new policy space to advance longer-term system changes, including using the new infrastructure to pilot more inclusive governance.

Based on the first phase of our work, we developed a working hypothesis that has since been ground-truthed in a number of communities. Through a process of co-creation with local allies and with previously excluded communities leading the conversation, we developed a theory of change. Our ultimate goal is to significantly reduce energy poverty in Colombia through new forms of renewable energy; improved energy access, affordability, and reliability; and greater agency for local

actors to steward their own economic and social development processes. The Hub will support this vision through new coalitions of actors united around a process based on a collective vision for local development, with new forms of energy playing a pivotal role. Such processes can also increase trust among actors who have not previously worked together or experienced the potential of collective action, and they can ultimately strengthen democratic resilience at the local level.

We are currently in the process of launching two local pilots to support communities in La Guajira and Cesar—regions that have not been well served by the national grid and are at risk of falling further behind as mining companies exit. We are working with allies who are engaged in similar efforts to support additional communities, but we recognize that sustaining change and achieving scale, in line with the policy commitment, will also require work beyond the local level. We therefore aim to support the generation of new public narratives around energy transition, told in the voices of those who are leading the changes locally and stand to benefit from them. Our analysis suggests that without this element, the narrative around the changes will likely be distorted as political and economic elites discount shifts that do not serve their interests, particularly leading up to the 2026 elections. We also aim to facilitate communities of learning and generate rigorous evidence, in partnership with our allies, to increase issues-based discussion on the effectiveness of the pilots, to learn from the Colombia experience, and to support Colombians in sharing it at the global level.

We hope the combination of support for local collective action, targeted support for the government, generation of evidence and public narratives, and our participation in a broad ecosystem of local stewards and allies will lead to sustainable improvements in development outcomes and more inclusive governance at scale.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

EC	energy community (comunidad energética)
JET	just energy transition
NGO	nongovernmental organization
PCI	power, capabilities, and interests
SOAS-ACE	School of Oriental and African Studies – Anti-Corruption Evidence program

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Governance Action Hub was created to support bold experiments in governance in extractive-rich settings, resulting in tangible benefits to people's lives. The Hub seeks to be locally driven while connecting actors across localities, forging new South-North relationships, and collectively seeking better ways to tackle complex problems, including governance challenges.

In Colombia, about 3 million people have no access to the energy grid. As a result, children are unable to realize their social rights, regardless of merit. Former combatants who agreed to a historic peace deal that promised government investments in infrastructure projects in rural areas feel let down, unable to access the infrastructure required to improve their productivity and opportunities. About 9.6 million Colombians are “energy poor”—they have limited or unreliable access to the national grid or are forced to choose between feeding their families and paying for expensive energy.¹ While Colombia's energy system is efficient and works well for those who are connected in the country's major cities, it was not designed to be just or equitable.

The Hub's Colombia team sought to identify ways to support a shift in the energy system in favor of greater equity, particularly given the new administration under President Gustavo Petro, in terms of climate change globally and greater justice domestically. From the outside, the new administration appeared to recognize that improving the reliability and affordability of power for Colombia's energy poor was a governance issue that would require changes to formal rules through new institutional frameworks. Given the limitations of many externally supported interventions in governance, particularly those in complex settings such as communities that depend on extractives, we set out to determine whether there were feasible ways to partner with local allies to support a system shift that would have sustainable impact on equity.

This paper outlines our work in Colombia so far, summarizing findings from the first two stages: 1) scoping feasible entry points and 2) truth-testing a working hypothesis. We first describe a conceptual framework borrowed from the School of Oriental and African Studies – Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOAS-ACE) team² at the University of London to identify feasible and effective entry points as part of our scoping. We applied the framework to help identify sectoral entry points in Colombia that merit further attention. In doing so, we determined that a number of entry points were either not feasible or unlikely to result in system shifts in favor of equity. We ultimately arrived at a working hypothesis around a new governance framework for generating power in underserved areas: energy communities (ECs), or *comunidades energéticas*. We briefly describe our hypothesis of using ECs as an entry point for improving access to affordable and reliable energy as a way to improve development outcomes locally and build democratic resilience.

CHAPTER 2

Applying the Power-Capabilities-Interests Framework

Given the limitations of best practice approaches to governance, as well as the specific challenges with improving governance in extractive-rich settings, the Governance Action Hub conducts practically focused political economy analyses in local contexts as the first step in its in-country work. The Hub's Colombia team opted to borrow the power-capabilities-interests (PCI) framework from the SOAS-ACE team to understand both the national political settlement and the political settlement underpinning the energy sector. (See Box 1.) This paper uses the SOAS definition of a political settlement as "a description of the distribution of power across organizations that are relevant for analyzing a specific institutional or policy problem."³

Although the SOAS-ACE framework has primarily been used to understand what motivates behavior around corruption-related problems, we used it to better understand broader governance issues, including potential implementation gaps in the policy process. The framework lends itself well to understanding how different actors behave across a system and why and where entry points might exist for initiating a shift in a system. This relational approach, embedded in an understanding of specific political settlements, fits with the Hub's goal of promoting audacious thinking to frame action aimed at impact. Our use of the framework in Colombia suggests that, even in rule-following sectors, the approach can be useful for understanding how new rules might sustainably deliver more inclusive outcomes by supporting shifts in behavior among actors who share interests and have sufficient relative power within their communities.

Box 1. The Power-Capabilities-Interests Approach

We borrowed three key terms from the PCI framework:

- ▶ **Power.** The ability of actors to make others follow formal and informal rules within a system.
- ▶ **Capabilities.** The productive potential of actors and their incentive for personal gain.
- ▶ **Interests.** The motivation of actors to invest their time and energy in sustaining change.

We used the terms to address the following broad questions:

- ▶ What is the general institutional landscape of institutions, actors, and formal and informal relationships?
- ▶ How has change happened in specific contexts, and what can we learn from these experiences?
- ▶ What are the potentially feasible entry points for change that is likely to result in more inclusive development?

Power, capabilities, and interests are crucial to understanding what underlies the specific dynamics behind these broad questions. For example:

Power:

- ▶ How is power obtained and maintained by political and economic elites through formal and informal channels? Which groups can aspire to obtain power? What strategies do they use?
- ▶ How have these processes changed in recent history, and what does that reveal about the behavior of elites—specifically, how they extract and distribute rents and how they obtain and exercise power?
- ▶ To what extent can national elites discipline local elites?

Capabilities:

- ▶ How productive and innovative are the economic elite? What proportion of the benefits they obtain comes from their efficiency and capacity to innovate, and what proportion comes from laws that benefit them and protect their interests?
- ▶ What is the nature of the relationship between the economic elite and the political elite?
- ▶ How powerful are the economic elite in promoting or blocking reforms that serve their interests?

Interests:

- ▶ How do elites bring about change to serve their interests? Is change always initiated by them? What are the different pathways to change?
- ▶ How does the distribution of rents and power affect reform pathways?
- ▶ Who is excluded from the system, and how does the political settlement explain this? How are excluded groups managed, and what strategies do they use to exercise influence?

We used the PCI framework twice in our analysis. First we used it to understand the national political settlement in Colombia. Then we used it to understand how economic rents^a are distributed in the energy sector and what drives the behavior of the different actors. To arrive at conclusions, we also factored in lessons from Colombia's experience in the extractives sector to identify feasible entry points for just energy transition (JET)^b reforms with the clear potential to advance inclusive local development.

We found that ECs offer a potentially feasible entry point and that a number of changes to the sector's institutional framework under the new administration have made ECs a potentially powerful instrument for change. However, we also identified the potential for an implementation

a A rent is any income or profit earned from owning a resource, asset, or position that exceeds what is necessary to keep that resource in its current use. Essentially, rents arise when an someone or something benefits financially from scarcity, exclusivity, or advantageous market conditions without contributing proportionately to production.

b JET is about defunding fossil fuels in a way that reduces inequality, shifting the costs of climate action to wealthy polluters while prioritizing economic, racial and gender justice.

gap, given that formal reforms introduced through new laws, policies, and plans do not necessarily result in change if they are not accompanied by reinforcing shifts in informal relationships. Our political economy analysis suggests the need for action-oriented coalitions of sufficiently powerful local actors with economic capabilities that can use the new policy space and alignment of incentives to shift local systems.

As our work progresses, the PCI framework will remain an important part of our analysis. We will analyze local political settlements in communities that are undertaking energy transition pilots as we seek to understand how the implementation of this policy shift is likely to play out. We believe the framework is well suited to understanding how local actors behave and how coalitions with aligned incentives around changes can use the new policy space to work toward more inclusive local development using new forms of access to energy. We hope this will lead to new collective action and collaborative governance practices that can help address other local priorities beyond energy access. Such experiences can ultimately build trust and lead to improved development outcomes and greater democratic resilience.

CHAPTER 3

The Colombian Political Settlement

The Colombian political settlement is one of competitive clientelism,^c in which the political elite are fragmented and competitive. The economic elite have medium to low innovation capacity but still have considerable political influence, allowing them to shape reforms that protect and expand their capabilities. Colombia remains one of the most unequal countries in the world, with low social mobility and wide disparities between regions.⁴ Since its independence over 200 years ago, the actors, their relationships, and the relative power and interests that underpin this political settlement have evolved, as described in the following sections.

► Characteristics of the Political Elite

For most of Colombia's democratic history since the early 1800s, the configuration of power among the political elite revolved around two political parties—the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party. Both parties were able to mobilize their subnational clientelist networks to win national elections, and they relied on strong party identities and the distribution of rents when in power. There were long periods of intense violence as they competed for power. In the 1950s, after many years of confrontation, the military assumed power for a short period. Subsequently, between 1958 and 1974, both parties agreed to alternate power over four presidential periods in an attempt to reestablish less violent civilian rule. The automatic alternation of power led to the dilution of party identities from the national level to the subnational level. But as new groups, such as communist guerrillas and drug cartels (narcos), emerged, so did new opportunities for subnational elites to become channels for rent distribution and extraction and new configurations of power at the local and regional level took shape, diminishing the power of the national elite locally. This new influence among subnational elites led to a demand for political reforms that would better serve their interests, including increased decentralization and electoral competition. Those demands were enshrined in the country's constitutional reform of 1991.⁵

The reforms increased the capacity of subnational political elites to access rents and created opportunities for groups within traditional parties to create new parties and compete for legislative seats and executive posts without needing approval from traditional national elites. In less than a decade, the number of recognized parties grew from two to nearly 70. These new parties took advantage of local clientelist networks and used them to secure subnational offices and

c *Clientelism* involves the exchange of private goods and services for political support. See <https://www.soas.ac.uk/about/blog/why-clientelistic-politics-matter-development-prospects>.

seats in Congress. During this process, several guerrilla groups demobilized, having achieved their goal of opening up the democratic system. However, a small number of guerrilla groups persisted, motivating local elites, in collaboration with the army, to support the emergence of new paramilitary groups to counter them. As a result, the violence resurged and both guerrilla and paramilitary groups increased their power and influence across the country by aligning with subnational political elites, using coercion and vote buying to reshape clientelist networks.

In 2002, the power of the two traditional parties finally weakened sufficiently for the presidential election to be won by an independent candidate, Álvaro Uribe. Uribe won the election with the support of a coalition made up of subnational political elites who sought the demobilization of paramilitary groups and the eradication of all guerrilla groups. During this period, the sordid history of the relationship between political elites and paramilitary forces came to light. Many ties between politicians and armed groups were uncovered and, in response, the judiciary began a series of prosecutions leading to the eventual conviction of more than 88 members of Congress.⁶ However, even after the convictions, the clientelist ties between armed groups and subnational elites persisted.

Today, subnational political elites extract rents through negotiations at the national level over benefits such as cabinet positions—the most sought-after posts being those that manage budgets for projects at the local level. These elites also secure subnational offices and extract rents from local budgets through public procurement, distribution of subsidies, authorization of private projects, and subnational corruption.

Since the election of Uribe and the precedent of a successful candidate coming from outside the dominant parties, ruling coalitions have become considerably more flexible. Subnational political elites now support the most likely electoral winner, regardless of party, in exchange for bureaucratic representation and rent extraction opportunities. While a number of issues continue to divide Colombians ideologically, it now matters less who wins the presidential election because subnational elites have proven agile in forming coalitions around the successful candidate, regardless of party, in exchange for distribution of rents.

► **Characteristics of the Economic Elite**

In Colombia, the economic elite have limited capacity to improve productivity, and their survival and success depend on their level of political influence. Traditionally, economic elites emerged around agricultural and mining production, thanks to their access to large parcels of land and benefits from early forms of industrialization in the textile and food production sectors. They have largely been centered in the major cities of Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali and, over time, their strong ties to the political elite have meant that they are often one and the same. As such, they have used global and regional trends, such as import substitution in the 1980s, to benefit their business

interests, thereby increasing their productive capacity and consolidating their power while preventing the redistribution of land ownership to others.

During a period of extreme violence in the 1970s, the emergence of new economic elites around illegal activities and the fragmentation of traditional political power led to a shift in the identity and strategies of the economic elite. As competition increased at the local level and between regions, including through new illegal economic elites, their strategies evolved. On the one hand, they sought to use their influence to establish tax benefits and incentives in key sectors to increase their return on investments while limiting the access of others to specific markets. On the other hand, the rise in violence and illicit activities posed a risk to their investments and required new costs in the form of security and protection as they increasingly became targets for rent extraction from new, illegal groups.⁷

Alongside the shift in the strategies of the economic and political elites, dominant economic ideologies coalesced around economic liberalization and globalization and gained much traction across Latin America in the 1990s. Economic elites saw this as an opportunity to access new investment opportunities and global markets in sectors that the state was beginning to open while taking advantage of Colombia's low labor costs. As they advocated for increased liberalization, they also sought the modernization of certain institutions that would protect property rights, provide security, and ensure sufficient levels of competition—all while ensuring that they could retain power and shape the rules in their favor. The constitutional process that started in 1990 provided an ideal opportunity for them to formalize these changes at the highest level.

The benefits of the liberalization and accompanying institutional modernization process have been significant for Colombia's economic elite. Their interests have expanded and now include areas that connect them to global markets such as media, communications, energy, food processing and production, infrastructure, and extractives. Meanwhile, they continue to use their influence to benefit their business interests nationally through, for example, the construction sector. Their ties to the political elite continue to be strong, thanks to new forms of influence such as controlling public narratives through the media outlets they own and financing political parties or electoral campaigns. The relationship between subnational elites, often with ties to illegal activities, and local political elites continues to center around the extraction of rents from government programs. The business interests of subnational elites are often in low-productivity sectors with negligible development impacts.⁸

► How Change Happens

The way political and economic elites behave and interact has important implications for how change happens in a country. As in many other contexts, in Colombia change happens when sufficiently powerful coalitions of political and economic interests coalesce around a proposed

reform. Under the current political settlement, this tends to happen in two ways. The first way is through reforms passed during the first year of a new administration, on the back of an electoral win, when the incoming administration can negotiate with the numerous political parties to form coalitions based on the distribution of rents and bureaucratic posts. The balancing act of negotiating enough space for the new government to pass priority reforms and implement them through the distribution of rents and posts is a delicate process. This period of intense negotiation and coalition building can be seen as a “grace period” during which political leaders, along with their economic supporters, negotiate what types and levels of change might be acceptable and what they need to provide to secure it. The National Development Plan 2022–2026 is a critical piece of legislation passed during this period of the Petro administration. It set out a new agenda and budget to frame the distribution of rents in the system for the next four years.

In the second way that change happens, when reforms are not passed early on, the clientelist dynamics are quite different and more transactional. As the country shifts to preparations for subnational elections, typically just a year after the presidential election, relationships reconfigure around new opportunities for rent extraction and earlier agreements are discarded. This undermines the initial power of the incoming administration because a large share of its rents and positions has already been distributed and elites are able to demand more and accept less change.

► **The Role of Excluded Populations Under Competitive Clientelism**

In any political settlement, some groups are included and benefit from rent distribution and economic gain while others are systematically excluded or included merely at the margins. The political settlement has important implications for inclusion policies and how reforms affect or benefit marginalized groups. As noted earlier, Colombia has been plagued by conflict and violence throughout its history. During the first part of the 20th century, this violence was fueled by conflict over party membership and land ownership, but after party identities began to diminish and communist ideologies took hold, violence was used primarily as a means to exclude peasant and ethnic groups from the political and economic system. In the 1990s, after many years of mobilization and violent struggle, the Constitution, as well as other important pieces of legislation, finally recognized social and economic rights while defining ethnic communities as special interest groups with rights to collective land ownership and prior and informed consent.

The recognition of these new rights in legislation led to the demobilization of some armed groups, while others continued to use violence to demand the inclusion of traditionally excluded populations. During the 1990s and early 2000s, increasing confrontation between guerrilla and paramilitary groups, and their connections to armed groups with drug trafficking networks, had a profoundly negative impact on vulnerable groups.⁹ Victims during this period were estimated to number in the millions, disproportionately among ethnic and peasant populations. After the demobilization of paramilitary groups and the subsequent signing of a peace agreement with

the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, or FARC), the government made a number of commitments related to rural reform, political inclusion, drug trafficking, and demobilization of combatants. The implementation of these agreements is still a source of contention, however; many have not moved forward since 2019.¹⁰

In 2022, the Petro administration was elected on a strong campaign of social inclusion and implementation of the peace agreements. It built on mass mobilizations against the establishment on issues such as tax breaks for the economic elite and continued privatization of services, bringing together leftist and center-leaning political parties as well as a diverse array of subnational political elites, ethnic groups, and pockets of independent voters across the country. During its grace period, the Petro administration was able to pass bold tax reforms, reducing benefits for big business and the rich. However, the administration has struggled to pass other reforms in the areas of health, education, labor, and extractives.

CHAPTER 4

The Energy Transition: An Opportunity for Greater Justice?

The energy transition is not a new idea in Colombia. Successive administrations have placed it high on their political agenda because of the country's dependence on oil and coal exports and the economic impact that any decrease in the use of these commodities might have.^d Although Colombia's contribution to global emissions is relatively small, at 0.56%, and it ranks only 32nd of 193 countries in global emissions,⁴ its vulnerability to the impacts of climate change is real and ever-present in the minds of citizens. The country's propensity for floods, landslides, and extreme heat has led to damage to the country's infrastructure, agriculture, and overall health of its people. Given the impact of an energy transition on the country's economy and environment, along with the impact on jobs and livelihoods in coal and petroleum-dependent regions, finding feasible ways to navigate the transition is a complex governance problem. In a country divided on issues of economic models, as well as peace and inequality, the energy transition is fertile ground for opposition and disagreements, including among the country's elites.

Soon after Petro's election on a campaign of social and economic inclusion, which had the strong support of excluded populations along the Caribbean and Pacific coasts and in the Amazon, the government announced a bold commitment to "democratize" the energy sector and proposed new rules and new opportunities for new actors and models that would help address the justice deficit in the system. The administration began inserting the word *justice* into the implementation of the energy transition. Petro emphasized the importance of just governance by communities over their own resources and a just end goal of reducing energy poverty¹ by improving energy access and affordability for excluded groups. According to the Multidimensional Energy Poverty Index, a person or household is energy poor when they cannot use appropriate and quality energy to meet basic human needs.

In 2022, the administration carried out a countrywide consultation process in which participants prioritized issues of social and environmental justice, active participation of consumers as empowered actors in the system, and lower energy costs and greater energy access. They also highlighted the need for reindustrialization to cover the losses from decreasing fossil fuel investments.¹¹ Based on these sessions, the government created a JET roadmap that covered different areas of interest, the investments needed, and the main policy goals.¹²

^d In 2022 these products amounted to 55% of total exports.

Given that Petro had challenged countries in the Global North to do better in following up on their commitments by dedicating resources, not just words,¹³ the Hub's Colombia team was keen to understand whether his plans to address energy justice in his own country could be supported. A better understanding of the political settlement at the country level allowed us to determine whether possible and feasible entry points might exist for such support.

To identify potential entry points, we applied a filter using three criteria:

- ▶ **Feasibility.** Policy areas where change was unlikely given the present configuration of power, capabilities, and interests were excluded.
- ▶ **Increased Equity in Systemwide Change.** Policy areas where the potential impact would not increase equity across the system—particularly among the 9.6 million energy poor, who also disproportionately shoulder the impacts of climate change—were excluded.
- ▶ **Organizational Comparative Advantage.** Policy areas where the Hub had no clear comparative advantage were excluded.

As we reviewed the new roadmap and interviewed experts in the field using these criteria, we identified three broad areas of potential interest. For each area, we carried out a rapid appraisal with the same criteria in mind.

- ▶ **Mining sector.** Major legislative reforms are needed to lower conflict in the sector, address discontent in mining communities, and make progress on social and environmental issues. Mining is important for economic diversification, but the political settlement in the sector is underpinned by strong interests of an important segment of the economic elite, who have been effective at protecting their business interests in the mining of coal, hydrocarbons, and other minerals. Legislative reforms have been slow to materialize and are unlikely in the present context. In addition, a number of specialized NGOs are active and have deep experience in the sector, many of them involved with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. The Hub would thus be unlikely to provide added value in this area.
- ▶ **Emissions.** Greater efficiency in energy use in the industrial, residential, and transport sectors has the potential to reduce emissions in Colombia and thereby have worldwide impact. However, the Petro administration's strategy has no identifiable provision to ensure that the impact would also include greater equity. We eliminated this area not because of feasibility but because of the lack of a strong equity focus.
- ▶ **Energy sector.** Expansion of renewable energy to improve access to reliable, affordable energy received a lot of attention early in the Petro administration. In its first year, the administration required many of its plans to insert justice as the main motivation for the country's energy transition vision, to make it a just energy transition. At least rhetorically, this could fulfill the criterion of increasing equity. Also, our initial actor mapping suggested that

few other groups were working in this area and that NGOs working in the extractives sector were unclear about how they could support the new administration's plans. We decided that this potential entry point was worth pursuing, while also recognizing the feasibility risks posed by the history and legacy of the extractives sector. Despite a number of new institutional building blocks, it was unclear whether these might further strengthen the interests of the existing elite who control the energy sector rather than lead to a more fundamental shift in the sector.

Having eliminated the first two areas, we moved on to exploring the dynamics within the energy sector to assess whether we could play a helpful role.

► **The Political Settlement of the Energy Sector**

The evolution of Colombia's energy sector—how it is organized, which populations it serves, and who is excluded—reflects the symbiotic relationship between the political and economic elites at the national level as well as their capacity to exclude important segments of the population from the development model through clientelist handouts. The energy sector was designed to serve the main urban areas. It is fueled by private and foreign investment, primarily to respond to the commercial and personal interests of the economic elite, who used their power to design the system to meet their needs and strengthen their own capabilities. They have shown little interest in considering an increase in energy prices to cover the costs associated with providing coverage for all. Until the 1950s, the government had no incentive to increase the number of people connected to the grid or the quality of the service outside of certain major cities because underserved populations did not have the relative power to negotiate greater coverage for themselves.

Between 1950 and 1990, however, the state came under pressure from an emerging middle class and from economic and political elites in other regions of the country to expand access to energy. As the political system opened to subnational elites, international pressure—in the form of the international financial institutions providing incentives to support the role of public enterprises in delivering infrastructure—resulted in an increased role for the Colombian state in the energy sector. A state-owned enterprise was created, focused on connecting existing but isolated systems to help balance out surpluses and deficits in energy generation. Regional public generation and commercialization companies were also launched. (Of the public funding for expanding and operating the system, about 30% was public debt and 25% was public spending allocated to the sector.) As a result, access increased—reaching nearly 75% coverage by the 1990s—but at a high cost. The system subsidized a number of inefficiencies, many stemming from the rent-seeking practices that grew out of clientelist ties around generation and transmission projects, as well as from the operation of the different electricity companies at the subnational level.¹⁴

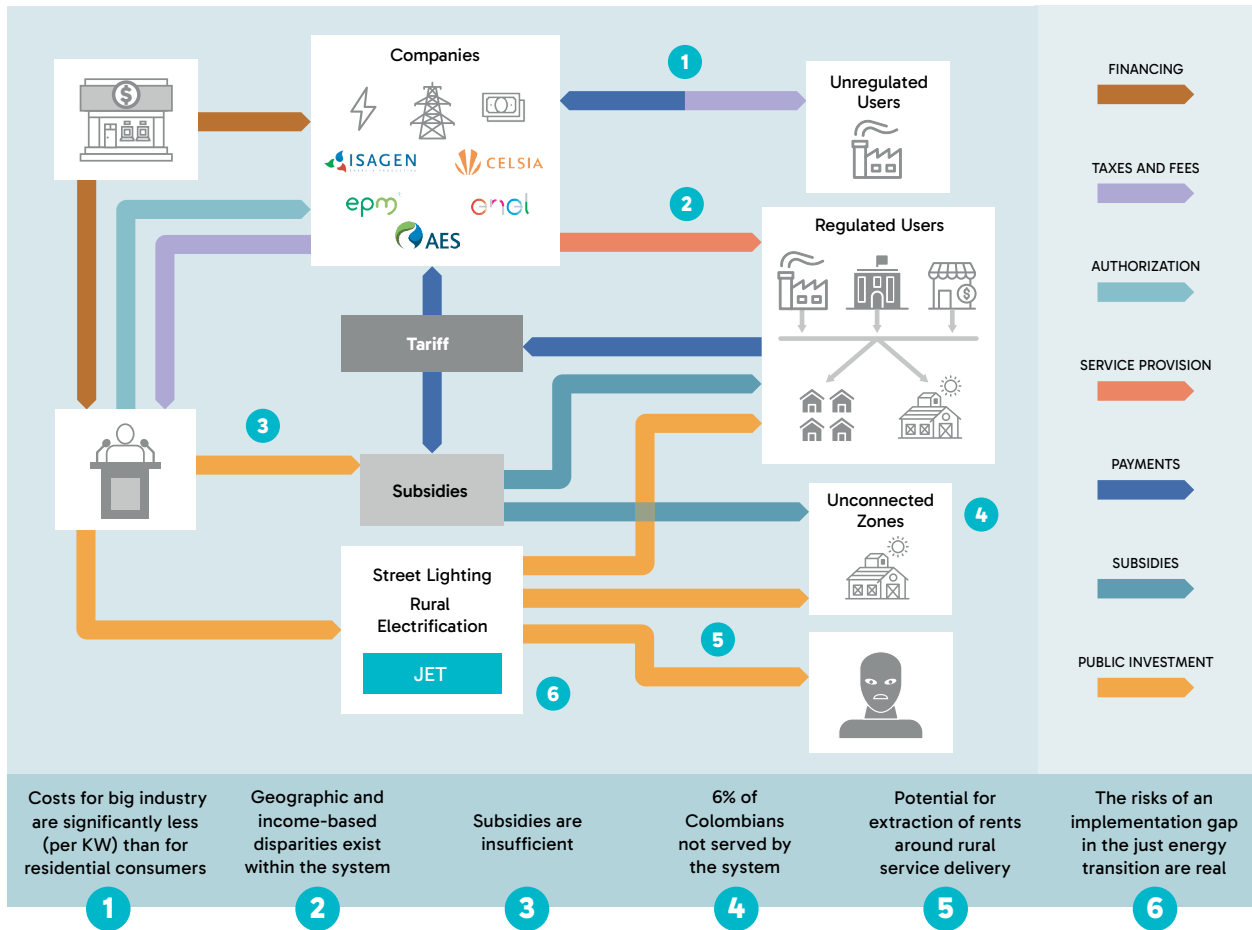
The system was also highly reliant on hydropower, a source of energy prone to vulnerabilities that affect reliability. Delays in energy generation projects and cyclical droughts caused by the El Niño weather pattern led to major blackouts in 1992 and 1993. The crisis provoked discontent among the country's elite, who experienced major productive losses and, for the first time, witnessed first-hand the challenges of living life without access to energy. This crisis led the elite to begin pushing in 1994 for liberalization of the sector through multilateral banks, including reducing the government role to regulation and oversight only; opening the sector to regulated competition and private investment; introducing a subsidy for low-income and rural households funded by additional fees charged to high-income households, businesses, and factories; and providing incentives for private investment, including through a beneficial tariff regime for large commercial users.¹⁵

Colombia's energy sector is broadly seen as efficient, with powerful companies (a mix of public, private, and public-private) providing horizontal checks on one another because they all broadly follow the rules of the system. The system has increased access to electricity in the country and even kept the lights on during several droughts. Nevertheless, the system was designed to prioritize the demands and needs of the economic elite—it was not designed to be just.

The system has six main areas of injustice and risk, as depicted in Figure 1.

- ▶ **Advantages for big consumers.** The unregulated energy market provides big industries with cheaper and more reliable energy than everyone else.
- ▶ **Variation in quality of service.** Although 94% of the population has some form of access to energy,¹⁶ the quality and reliability of service varies depending on geographic location and ability to pay. An estimated 18.5% of the population is considered energy poor.¹
- ▶ **Insufficient subsidies.** The fees paid by industrial, commercial, and high-income users to fund subsidies for low-income users are insufficient. As a result, the government spends about half a billion dollars per year to cover shortfalls in the subsidy system.¹⁷
- ▶ **Important pockets of no access.** An estimated 6% of the population (about 3 million people) have no access to energy, and 53% of the territory in Colombia is not connected to the main grid.¹⁶ Most people without access are members of ethnic minorities and subsistence farmers.
- ▶ **Misuse of funds meant for improving access.** Investments to improve public lighting and the generation, transmission, and distribution of energy for underserved communities can be misused, including for rent extraction.
- ▶ **Poor governance.** Investments in the energy transition are not immune from bad governance practices. Many solar generation projects have been plagued by mismanagement and misuse because they operate within the existing political settlement with its clientelist practices.

Figure 1. Areas of Injustice and Risk in Colombia's Energy Sector



Source: Authors' analysis

CHAPTER 5

A New Strategy for a Just Energy Transition

Over the past decade, Colombia has enacted a regulatory framework—including laws, regulations, and policies—to promote renewable energy as part of the country’s energy transition strategy. This framework encourages new entrants into the renewable energy market through tax benefits, incentives for research and innovation, and inclusion in local and national climate change plans. The main incentives to date have been tax deductions, tax exemptions, accelerated depreciation of goods and infrastructure investments, reduced tariffs for renewable energy products, and lower local taxes on energy generation. The government has also launched several renewable energy auctions to encourage big investments, offering investors additional incentives in exchange for long-term contracts.

Despite these efforts, the proportion of renewables in the energy market has remained low—around 1% in 2022, not including hydropower. The uptake of small-scale generation projects has also been slow and well below the country’s goal of generating 100 megawatts.¹¹ The use of renewable energy to meet the needs of unconnected zones has also been slow, meeting only 15% of their generation needs by 2023, largely through individual solar solutions financed by the government, as well as some small biomass and hydroelectric plants.¹⁸

Progress has been slow for many reasons. Some observers say the main obstacle is the bureaucratic process that requires approvals at different levels of government. Others point to technical limitations in connecting new projects to the national grid. Lack of access to funding for small projects is another barrier. It is important to note that, historically, the incentives for renewables have focused largely on big companies, which has resulted in the biggest investments in these projects coming from companies that control the energy sector, along with some new international investors. As a result, many Colombians perceive the energy transition agenda as focused on expanding opportunities for those already operating in and benefiting from the existing system rather than transforming it into a new system with different actors and rules.

While the new administration’s discourse signaled continuity in the country’s plans to diversify energy sources, the emphasis on social equity, jobs generation, and the consumer’s role in managing new forms of energy marked a sharp shift in the means and end goal of the energy transition in Colombia. The president’s bold call for action and not just words at international forums on climate change were matched, at least in his rhetoric, by a commitment to shift the energy system from an efficient one that serves the needs of the elite to one that is fair and serves everyone.

The backdrop for moving from an efficient system to a just one has not been ideal, however. Due to COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, energy prices have not risen for some time, resulting in significant accumulation of public and private debt to companies in the sector. At the same time, a strong narrative fueled by the economic elite has emerged, warning of risks to the country's economic stability by phasing out fossil fuels. Mobilization of the elite around the energy crisis provoked by El Niño in 1994 was not a distant memory. If the system was to shift to efficiency and justice for all, the new administration knew it had to move quickly.

This first phase of our analysis suggested that improving access and affordability within the energy sector offered the most feasible and effective entry point to support inclusive development outcomes. Armed with insights about both the national political settlement and the sector-specific one, we moved on to a second phase of analysis in the form of a desk review of recent institutional changes in the energy sector introduced by the new administration to assess three prerequisites for our involvement:

- ▶ **Feasibility** in the form of sufficient incentives for justice-centered pilots to serve the energy poor
- ▶ **Increased Equity in Systemwide change** through changes to both formal and informal rules at different levels
- ▶ **Organizational Comparative Advantage** for the Hub to play a credible role in facilitating locally led shifts and adding value

Three potential areas of focus emerged from the desk review:

- ▶ **Controlling energy costs for consumers.** This was a political priority for the administration, given the debts that had accumulated during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a quick analysis of the power and capabilities of the actors that would be affected by a change in the tariff system suggested that even though such a reform would likely improve equity by reducing energy costs for low-income communities, it would involve protracted negotiation, at best, and could eventually prove unfeasible. Change would require a shift in the tariff scheme, and existing companies operating in the network would be forced to charge less for energy generation, transmission, distribution, and commercialization. They would make less profit while providing the same service. Given the power of the interests involved and the potential impact on their capabilities, we concluded that this would be a difficult shift. It was also unclear that the Hub had any real comparative advantage in supporting local actors on this issue.
- ▶ **Addressing social, environmental, and bureaucratic obstacles to large-scale green energy projects.** Our analysis concluded that while efforts in this area could support progress toward a general energy transition in the country, the energy poor would be unlikely to experience the greatest impact. In fact, addressing bureaucratic obstacles would likely allow existing actors in the system to expand their own interests without increasing access and affordability for the energy poor.

- ▶ **Promoting green energy as a driver of local development.** This was a third priority under the administration's JET strategy. The ECs strategy, announced in 2022 as part of a package of new initiatives, marked a new commitment to promoting decentralized, sustainable, and community-driven energy solutions to enhance energy access, social equity, and environmental sustainability by involving local communities directly in the generation, management, and consumption of renewable energy.

Next, we reviewed formal legislation and policy changes around ECs to assess whether, at least on paper, they provided a feasible way to improve justice in the sector. In doing so, we confirmed that the administration had introduced and assigned a budget in the National Development Plan and had subsequently provided a decree with details about the form and the governing rules. The details included the following.

- ▶ ECs would benefit from the incentives available to other renewable energy projects, including tax breaks and access to low-interest credit.
- ▶ Different types of organizations and ethnic authorities could apply to become ECs.
- ▶ The association among ECs will allow them to generate larger amounts of energy and sell it commercially.
- ▶ ECs can be formed and governed by coalitions of public, private, and community actors in such a way that they respond to local dynamics and serve local needs and priorities.
- ▶ The most energy-poor communities can benefit when public resources support the administration, operation, and maintenance of new infrastructure and the initial investment in infrastructure is free.
- ▶ ECs can sell surpluses to the system at market value.

Together, these incentives and rules and the government's ambitious goal of deploying 20,000 ECs by 2026 seemed like a bold attempt to expand energy access and quality for all. While a number of incentives relating to private-sector actors were unclear—stemming from delays by the regulatory body, the Energy and Gas Regulatory Commission (*Comisión de Regulación de Energía y Gas*)—these rule changes seemed, at least on paper, to provide a more robust enabling environment for a systemic shift in favor of the energy poor. It also seemed that such a shift could happen without harming the interests of existing elites that control and benefit from the efficient national grid. The ECs initiative therefore appeared to be a feasible entry point that could lead to improved equity and longer-term shifts.

However, while changes to formal rules can be a good first step, we were keen to understand the level of local demand as well as local perspectives on how this national-level policy change might play out for them. Would changes in the formal rules make it feasible for new coalitions of actors

to come together and deliver better, more affordable, and more reliable energy to the energy poor? If so, what would be needed to do it at scale and have long-term systemwide impact?

► **Toward a Theory of Change Through Energy Communities**

To assess the demand and implementation capacity of the ECs initiative, we undertook a scoping trip across Colombia with the goal of understanding:

- The demand for ECs locally
- Local potential to use the new macro-level policy space through coalitions of new actors united around a common vision of green energy for change
- The potential for more inclusive local development, governance practices, and system shifts beyond individual communities

To prepare for the trip, and with a view to building on and adding value to the work of others, we conducted interviews with more than 50 government officials, private-sector leaders, and civil society organizations engaged in governance and in the extractives and energy sectors. These interviews confirmed the following:

- **Strong demand at the community level to try new approaches** to making energy accessible and affordable, with more than 18,000 excluded communities having applied to be ECs
- **Flexible and aligned incentives under the new enabling institutional framework** with room for communities, different levels of government, and the private sector to collaborate
- **Potential to use new forms of energy to promote broader local development**, given that energy poverty hurts the development potential of local communities across many dimensions, reducing their productive, social, and human capabilities
- **Potential to use collective problem-solving methods** through local coalitions, potentially building trust and relationships that could help address other common problems.¹⁹

While these points underscored the demand for and potential of ECs, the interviews also pointed to some risks. For example, many interviewees emphasized the importance of taking seriously the legacy issues from extractives-producing regions. This would involve understanding local dynamics and finding ways to ensure that communities could participate fully in the process and benefit from new technologies, to avoid repeating past costly mistakes in the extractives sector (see Box 2.) Without local communities leading the way, new investments in green energy would, at best, fail to deliver on their potential and, at worst, create conflict and be vetoed by local groups. We thus set out on our trip to get a sense of local demand and potential and to assess risks across a diverse set of communities representing Colombia's energy poor.

Box 2. Lessons from the Extractives Sector

The following lessons are of utmost relevance when considering transitioning to new forms of energy, particularly given that the behaviors of powerful corporate interests that provide important revenue to the country can easily be replicated in the present context.

- ▶ Lack of effective community engagement can lead to conflict, social unrest, and opposition to projects. Many communities feel that consultation with them has been transactional and that ultimately their interests have mattered little. As a result, they have developed veto strategies, causing social and economic disruption and even blocking investments.
- ▶ The extractives sector has had significant environmental impacts, including deforestation, water pollution, and habitat destruction. Colombia has relatively strong environmental standards, but the process of monitoring and enforcing them is considered cumbersome and bureaucratic by potential investors.²⁰
- ▶ The benefits of extractive activities have not been evenly distributed, often exacerbating social inequalities. This has led to strong feelings among host communities that they have unfairly borne the cost of extraction. There is some evidence that trust in these communities is low, which makes collective action and collaboration challenging.
- ▶ Effective governance and robust institutions are essential for managing challenges associated with the extractives sector. Coordination across ministries and between levels of government has been weak, with centralization of decision-making and limited investment—and high risk of rent extraction—at the local level.
- ▶ The extractives sector's share of total employment in Colombia has always been relatively modest. This is despite the sector's significant contributions to GDP and export earnings. Mining communities have depended heavily on companies for employment and now face unemployment and a loss of identity. Finding meaningful opportunities for these communities will be critical as the country continues to shift to new forms of energy.

▶ Feasibility and Potential Impact

In March 2024, we visited six regions of the country to hear firsthand from communities about their needs, the potential for ECs, and their vision of how to use them. We also interviewed 15 representatives from the public and private sectors and leading NGOs, to better understand whether the Hub could add value by supporting this new initiative.^f

The visit confirmed the following:

- ▶ **A broad range of marginalized actors see the justice component of the energy transition as a welcome and overdue social and economic priority.** For some, it means

e Prepared by the authors based on their experience as well as the review of literature on extractive-sector governance in Colombia.

f We visited 1) La Montañita, Caquetá, 2) Medellín, Antioquia, 3) San Andrés, Providencia y Santa Catalina, 4) Santa Marta, Magdalena, 5) Barranquilla, Atlántico, and 6) Barrancabermeja, Santander.

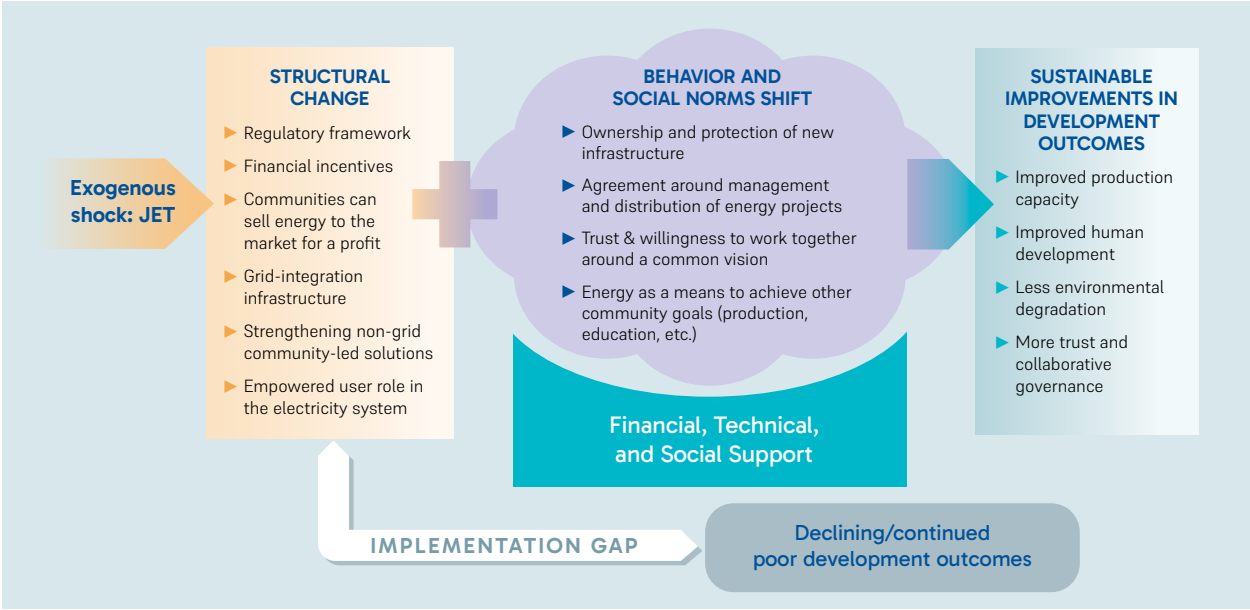
delivering on the peace negotiation agreements more fully; for others, it means being able to pay the electricity bill and put food on the table; and for many, it offers an opportunity to realize full social and productive rights. Making the energy transition just is more than an environmentally responsible thing to do.

- ▶ **The most complicated part of JET pilots is likely to be the social process**—understanding community needs and priorities and ensuring a just and inclusive process. In a country as diverse as Colombia, the social process would need to be well-tailored to local needs. Understanding diverse local dynamics and using credible local facilitators would be crucial.
- ▶ **Trust levels in local communities are likely to be a challenge**, due to past poor experiences with extractive companies or feelings of being neglected by the central government. In many communities we visited, the presence of public institutions is minimal, making it difficult to envisage how an energy transition could help lead to better, more holistic local development. Building local relationships that improve trust would be time consuming and require careful balancing with the government's ambitious goals. At the same time, local trust and collective visions for change would be critical to ensuring that new energy investments could be sustained and lead to better development outcomes beyond a particular political administration.
- ▶ **Increased information and engagement are needed at the local level.** We noted strong government leadership and a clear vision of new energy as an engine for change at the central level, but at the local level, information about specifics such as incentives for the private sector, the respective roles of different actors, and the process of becoming a legal entity through an EC was less understood. Finding ways to support government efforts to disseminate information across all communities and publicize its support would be important.
- ▶ **Peer learning and coordination across levels of government are paramount.** Communities around the country are grappling with surprisingly similar issues, suggesting that there is something to be gained by facilitating links between local coalitions for mutual learning. At the same time, finding ways to address common bottlenecks could also help the government reach its ambitious goals, flagging and efficiently resolving systemwide barriers to implementation.
- ▶ **New narratives and solid evidence are needed to ensure the sustainability of the policy.** The ambitious goals and short timeframe raise questions of sustainability in a political settlement that is increasingly organized around sharp ideological positions. To ensure the sustainability of ideas and investments beyond the present political administration, attention to establishing baselines and collecting good evidence (including local testimonials, to avoid domination of narratives controlled by elite-run media outlets) would be needed.

In short, the scoping visits confirmed the feasibility and desirability of this new public initiative among a wide range of communities where people are energy poor. The justice rationale provided by women, men, the young, the elderly, Indigenous people, and the urban poor was powerful.

Access to more affordable and reliable energy is essential for people to live full and meaningful lives. However, the visits also confirmed that implementing ECs and ensuring their long-term impact cannot happen solely through new rules and regulations. In fact, the potential for an implementation gap—a mismatch between formal rules and their application on the ground—is high. Figure 2 illustrates how new rules at the central level, while important, do not necessarily lead to sustainable change unless they are accompanied by complementary support to shift behavior and social norms at the local level, along with technical support to design financially viable business models.

Figure 2. Using ECs to Shift Systems at the Local Level



Source: Authors' analysis

Based on our mapping of other actors, we felt that the Hub is well placed to provide that complementary social support. The government confirmed that it had received little support in this area to date and was keen to develop methodologies, tools, and a community of organizations to support its efforts. As discussions with the government developed, we agreed to play a convening role in this effort at the local level while also underlining the importance of taking a systemwide approach. In our view, discrete interventions at the meso (intracommunity) and macro (countrywide) levels to ensure scalability and sustainability are needed, given the government's ambitious goal of 20,000 ECs by 2026. Also needed are ways to solve common implementation challenges across communities, pair communities for mutual learning, collect evidence of change across communities, and crowd in additional public and private support. We found that creating a strong evidence base and a proactive public campaign would be critical for broadening the public narrative around JET reforms and their sustainability beyond the current political administration.

CHAPTER 6

Next Steps for the Governance Action Hub

Since concluding the scoping stage, we have launched a co-creation process with a number of allies. We started at the local level to engage new actors, particularly those most affected by the transition, but we are also aware of the need to crowd in allies and work at the meso and macro levels.

Starting symbolically in Colombia's mining corridor, and in coordination with the University of Magdalena (*Universidad de Magdalena*), we invited representatives of six communities and 50 other relevant stakeholders to attend a June 2024 workshop to help us understand their vision of community change and how the insertion of the JET strategy might help them achieve that. We drew on participatory mapping tools and the PCI framework to help communities educate us on the web of relationships and interests they would need to navigate when preparing to use new investments in green energy. With the communities in the lead, we drew on human-centered design, identified collective visions, and discussed with candor how existing roles and responsibilities, as well as practices and behaviors, would need to shift to deliver on the promise of a just energy transition. We recently shared our workshop experience online.²¹

We also used the opportunity to discuss with potential allies how we might work together to provide greater support to these local experiments as the system adjusts to implementation challenges, scales up solutions, and embeds new practices.²² We brainstormed collectively on the emergence of a new system and, with the voices of the communities fresh in our minds, we envisioned how best to tailor our support. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3. Workshop Participants and Conclusions



As a result of this workshop, we have initiated activities as a convener and facilitator of critical conversations to explore common challenges and potential solutions to strengthen collaboration, build trust, and support collective action around ECs in Colombia. These include conversations on the following topics:

- ▶ **Participatory methodologies to support and sustain ECs across Colombia.** This includes exchanging tools, lessons, and challenges related to providing locally tailored support to communities so that, as they become ECs, they can develop productive projects, improve local development, and strengthen their governance processes. These conversations can help identify appropriate methodologies, facilitate mutual learning, and ensure that support from the Hub and our allies can lead to the kind of scalable and sustained impact envisioned in Colombia's JET policies.
- ▶ **Robust quantitative and qualitative ways of tracking and sharing evidence about the implementation and impact of ECs locally,** as well as macro issues related to JET. This conversation can help map existing research activities and identify what else is needed to produce solid information that will support the sustainability of JET policies beyond political administrations and facilitate sharing outside Colombia.
- ▶ **Strategies to elevate new voices and narratives,** making local protagonists the messengers of Colombia's JET pilot while ensuring a broad coalition of support for the agenda across the country. This conversation has already begun, with a number of allies supporting ECs by tracking stories, identifying pertinent messages, and creating narratives centered on community needs and channeling them strategically to key audiences that will be critical to supporting the continuity of the agenda.

In the coming months, we will work with allies on developing our portfolio in Colombia, including support for specific local communities, as well as meso- and macro-level interventions. An initial example of where our programming is heading is the collaboration we are starting with the University of La Guajira (Universidad de La Guajira) and the University of Magdalena to pilot the use of systems change methods to support ECs in La Guajira with the support of the Engineering X Safer Complex Systems program of the Royal Academy of Engineers.²³

As a small team, we aim to convene, connect, and suggest. We see our role as that of a crucial friend, facilitator, broker, and cheerleader. Our aim is to continue supporting globally interesting examples of good practice at the local level, elevating new voices and knowledge and connecting actors across local and global systems to ensure that change is bold, inclusive, and durable.

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