

Delivering Systemic Change in Colombia's Energy Sector: Progress, Pitfalls and Lessons

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Executive Summary

This is a story of a bold attempt by the first centre-left government in Colombia to refocus the country's ongoing efforts to transition out of non-renewable energy sources in order to benefit the "energy poor." The story is based on rigorous research and interviews with protagonists of the just energy transition in the country. Colombia has been known for decades as a global supporter of an energy transition, as the country urgently works to reduce its dependence on hydrocarbons and its vulnerability to climate-related shocks. But the clear attempt to shift the energy system from an efficient and competitive one that serves big business and consumers well in large and developed urban settings across the Andean region to an inclusive and just one that serves everyone has represented a sharp pivot in agenda.

This shift in the country's energy transition (ET) strategy upon the election of Gustavo Petro as Colombia's 35th president in 2022 was an attempt to embed justice ("the J") at the core of the strategy, making it a Just Energy Transition (JET), not an ET strategy. This was more than a change in semantics or branding. It was an attempt to fundamentally re-engineer a system that, while efficient and competitive for urban consumers and large companies, had been structurally unjust for millions. The new JET strategy, then, was framed as an act of historical redress, a commitment to ensuring that access to quality and affordable energy is not a privilege enjoyed by limited urban elites but rather a universal right for everyone. The strategy emphasised democratisation of the energy sector, whereby passive consumers become active agents and owners of their own system through, for example, the creation of Energy Communities (ECs). The strategy also contributes to progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 7, access to energy for all.

The context for implementing this system shift was a complex one. Colombia is a proud middle-income country with a political settlement characterised as a competitive, clientelist one. As such, over 30 parties compete fiercely at the local and national level to control the state apparatus, using rents to attract and reward supporters, with economic interests aligning flexibly around candidates that are most likely to protect short-term interests (Bain & Florez, 2024). The country is prone to weather-related crises and has a long history of violent and armed conflict, including a recent civil war, with fierce disagreements over how the rents of the state are distributed across the country's diverse geography.

After a period of state control in the 1960s, Colombia's energy sector was liberalised during the heyday of the Washington Consensus and, as a result, the sector is broadly seen as an efficient one where powerful companies (a mix of public, private, public-private partnerships) provide effective horizontal checks on each other, because the actors are broadly following the rules (Nieto, 2015). The system, however, was not designed to be a just one. In 2024, Fundacion Promigas estimated that 15.4% of the population (approximately 8.1 million Colombians) did not have access to reliable, affordable, and quality energy, which negatively impacts their productive and human potential, while the percentage of energy poor has reduced over the years wide variation across

regions persist (Fundación Promigas 2025, Esquivel García and Toro-García, 2024). Many of these were rural and ethnic minorities from relegated regions like the Pacific, Caribbean, and Amazon that had voted for the agenda of structural change put forward by President Petro.

The immediate political context presented a deeply divided country delivering a small margin of victory and no majority in Congress. Added to this, the agenda of a large coalition of 14 parties and 13 citizen movements that had brought Petro to power under a National Pact risked overpromising and under-delivering, particularly since the economic context, in a post COVID world, meant public resources were under huge pressure (Novoa Orjuela, 2025). The energy sector had accumulated large amounts of debt during the pandemic, when Petro's predecessor had frozen tariffs and energy companies were anxiously awaiting their arrears (Suarez and Alguero 2023). Further, the financing gap to maintain the subsidy program, whereby high-income households as well as commerce and industry subsidise lower income households, was putting additional stress on the sector's finances. And, as a vocal group of businessmen repeatedly pointed out, as a major coal exporter with only 2 % of the energy sector generated by renewables in 2022, the country could not afford to be too bold in its transition.

Notwithstanding this challenging context, over the past three years Colombia has put in place a significant shift to its energy transition strategy and substantially increased the proportion of generation from renewable energy to its national grid from 2% to 15,6% (Ministerio de Minas y Energía, 2026). Not all of this can be attributed to the Petro administration who, in some ways, are reaping the benefits of efforts by previous administrations to improve the climate and attract new investment for renewable energy. The shift in the public narrative around energy transition, the emergence of new and powerful voices, an ecosystem of support for a justice-focused transition, and the shift in mindset of public functionaries who now recognise communities' needs and not just those of potential investors all bode well for the sustainability of a true system shift. Important new institutional changes, largely through new laws and incentives, including recent attempts to address bottlenecks in approval processes for investors, suggest that Colombia has set the foundations for transformational change under its JET strategy.

At the same time, the delivery of "transactional change" through new infrastructure, for example, has been disappointing and well below the goals set by the administration itself. Only 250 of the 20,000 Energy Communities promised in the National Development Plan had been launched by the end of 2024 (El Espectador 2024), and as Colombia enters a year of fiercely fought elections, 18,000 additional registered energy communities (Ministerio de Minas y Energía, 2024a) are unsure that the promises made will materialise in time. While the administration's efforts to unlock the potential of the transmission line Colectora from La Guajira, notwithstanding the grueling 285 community consultations to overcome local resistance (Ministerio de Minas y Energía, 2024b), is broadly seen as a big step forward, the inability of the administration to deliver transactional change on a larger scale is regretted by internal reformers and their allies.

This case study draws on interviews with diverse Colombian stakeholders — political leaders, technical staff, locally elected officials, private sector investors, and members of the international community. In recognising the foundations laid for foundational change, as well as the disappointing results in terms of transactional change, the study identifies a series of bottlenecks and, subsequently, some recommendations for other practitioners of systems change.

Delivering systems change is much more difficult than talking or writing about it. It is not for the fainthearted, but doing it well is urgently needed. The study concludes with ideas for teams setting out to solve complex problems, in hope that the experience of Colombia provides them with a solid start.

It is hoped that this study, woven through the voices of different Colombian actors looking back over the past three years from different positions in the system, is of pragmatic help to other change agents setting out to shift systems in better directions. We propose that the updated Circle of Change Framework (see Methodological Considerations), which we have borrowed but updated to reflect the recent experience in Colombia, provides a helpful starting point to consider the implications of context, specific events, and how they might shape the policy arena, as well as other actors you might consider engaging to maximise the potential for delivery from within.

I. Introduction

“What a blessing it is to have electricity,” Almeir Enruiquez from Jisentira, La Guajira declares. Like many others, the insertion of the word “justice” into Colombia’s two-decade transition out of non-renewable energy sources is not just semantics; it is the difference between living with dignity and struggling through life in the dark (Florez, J, 2025). In rural Vichada, Claudia Rangel proudly recounts how she can keep her fridge going all night without losing food (Ministerio de Minas y Energía, 2024c). In Choco, high school student Jainer Andres celebrates being able to connect to the internet and print documents to keep up with school, avoiding long journeys to the capital (El Tiempo, 2024). By inserting a “J” into Colombia’s energy transition journey, the Petro administration aimed to do more than rebrand (UPME, 2024a). They aimed to repair historic injustices, providing affordable and equitable access to the 3 million Colombians who suffered from “energy poverty” while also handing over agency—allowing them to be agents with ownership in the system, not just users of public services (Ministerio de Minas y Energía, 2024d).

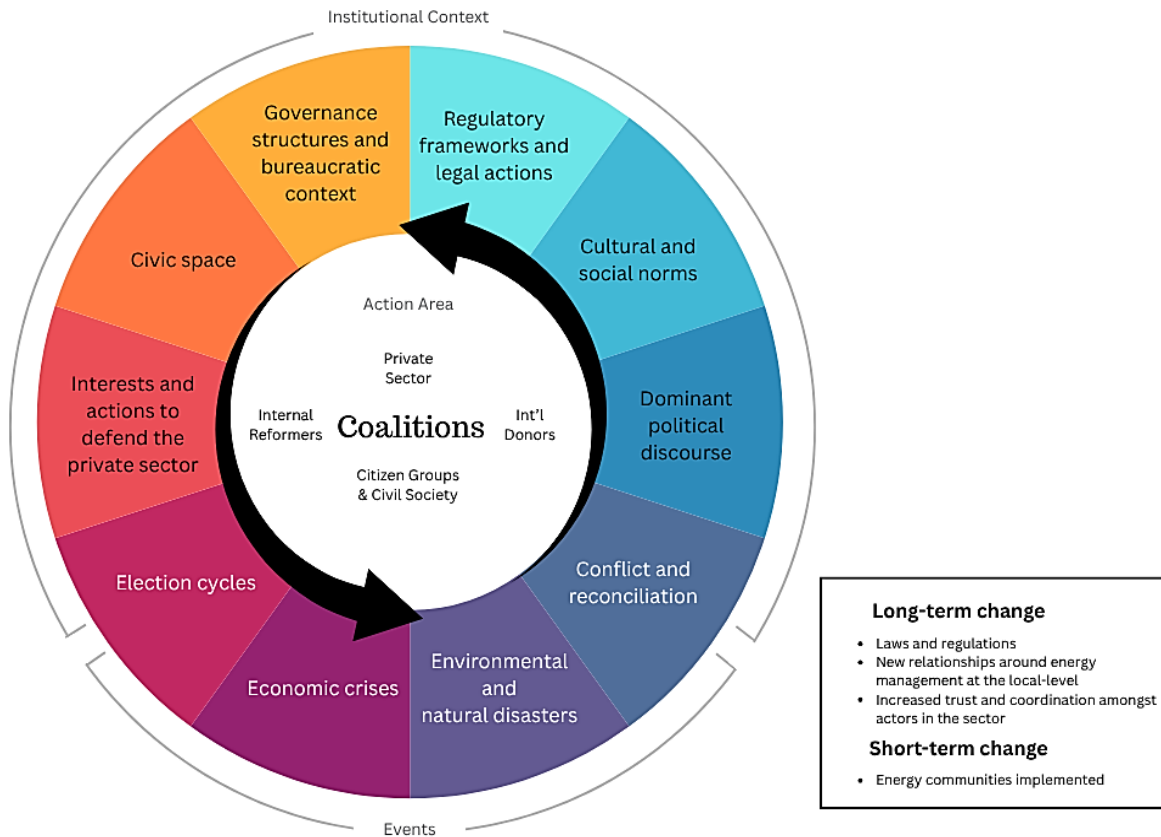
Like all stories of change, this story is a complex and messy one. It is told in the hope that it is both interesting and useful. At a general level, President Petro’s fiery rhetoric in various climate fora, exposing the imbalances of power in global climate negotiations, makes the story of Colombia’s journey of interest to audiences beyond its borders. At a more operational level, the story, informed by in-depth interviews with actors who were directly involved in the attempted system shift, as well as seasoned observers, provides practical insights into the contextual, institutional, and human factors that enable or thwart change. In this sense, it is our hope that this story will inform other teams setting out with bold ideas and lots of passion about how to change unjust systems, allowing them to build on the successes of Colombia while avoiding some of the pitfalls. Much has been written on the theory of systems change, but today’s global reality demands that the art of practising systems change is continuously improved. We hope that this story contributes to that effort.

II. Methodological Considerations

This story has been woven from a variety of Colombian voices and is framed by previous work across disciplines to understand change. We focus on one element of the country’s Just Energy Transition — the Energy Communities — and make no attempt to evaluate impact. Rather, we draw on previous attempts to depict stories of change to understand the contextual, institutional, and bureaucratic factors that enable it, as well as the strategies used. As such, we attempt to provide further insights into how change happens, focusing on emerging lessons for other practitioners.

One resource we drew on was the Oxfam toolkit for Stories of Change which highlights, for example, the importance of context: institutions, agents, and events. This framework was central to preparing semi-structured conversations with a variety of actors (Green, 2019) using this version which has been tailored to the Colombia reality (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Circle of Change Framework



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Political settlements are a particularly important part of the context story, and so we draw on Roy, Slota and Khan (2022) and Hudson et al. (2025) and our application of their methodology to Colombia and its energy sector (Bain & Florez, 2024). We have also endeavored to unpack how the policy arena, framed by specific contexts and events, enable or block attempts at change. Within the policy arena, we sought to understand bureaucratic autonomy (Roll, 2023) and bureaucratic empowerment (Honig, 2024), as well as adaptive problem solving (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2013), the use of paradigmatic ideas to shape public narratives (Hickey & Mohan, 2023), and the use of coalitions of change to navigate politically feasible reform paths (The Asia Foundation, 2023).

Finally we divide change emerging from the policy arena into two types:

1. Transactional/Short-Term changes — new services delivered that are quantifiable through numbers of roads, solar panels, or books delivered, for example
2. Transformational/Long-Term change — changes in laws, incentives and relationships that can have long-lasting impacts, but which elude quantification

In preparing for our narrative sharing sessions, we drew on the methodological guidance from both Successful Societies at Princeton University (Innovations for Successful Societies, 2011) as well as more recent guidance around Participatory Narrative Inquiry (Kurtz, 2016). See Annex 1 for more details about the methodology.

III. Colombia: Contextual Considerations

Understanding the context for this story is critical to understanding how attempts to enact change played out. At both the country and sector level there are a number of important factors to keep in mind, captured in more depth in this political economy assessment undertaken by the Governance Action Hub (Bain & Florez 2024).

1. Country level factors

At the country level, the following five factors are worth noting. First, Colombia is a country that is **extremely vulnerable to weather-related crises**. Climatic events such as El Nino have brought Colombia's energy system to the brink of collapse in recent years. In 1993, it collapsed completely, reminding everyone, including the powerful elite who enjoy reliable access to the national grid most of the time, of the importance of diversifying the country's energy sources (Guevara-Luna et al. 2023). Second, the political settlement of Colombia is a **competitive clientelist** one. Over time, a centralised control of rents under two dominant political parties has evolved into a more decentralised system where over 30 parties now compete fiercely at the local and national level to control the state apparatus, using rents to attract and reward supporters, with economic interests aligning flexibly around candidates that are most likely to protect short-term interests.

Third, In this context, **change generally happens** in two ways. Through reforms passed early in a new administration, during the first year known as the "grace period" when the incoming administration can negotiate with numerous political parties to form coalitions based on the distribution of rents and bureaucratic posts. When reforms are not passed early on, clientelist dynamics become more challenging and make changes more transactional in nature. As the country begins 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 have already been distributed.

Fourth, Colombia has experienced periods of **extreme violence involving conflict around the distribution of rents**, including a civil war. Notwithstanding the peace agreement and a reconciliation process that has not progressed as planned, inequality remains persistently high in Colombia. Narcotrafficking groups continue to exert control over many regions, and there is a sense among many that historical deficits remain unaddressed (Rivera-Lozada et al. 2025).

Finally, it's important to note that Colombia is a **middle-income country** and plays its role as an influential member of the international community with pride (See Box 1). It played a key role in the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals under President Santos, and President Petro is seen by the international community as a plain-spoken ally on climate issues.

Box 1. Colombia in the Global Context

Colombia is a middle-income country, member of OECD and recently joined the International Energy Agency. While the country's contribution to greenhouse gas emissions is relatively small, at 0.56%, and ranking 32nd of 193 countries in global emissions, its vulnerability to the impacts of climate change is real and ever-present in the minds of citizens (World Bank, 2023). The country is highly dependent on fossil fuel production, it represented 45% of exports and 10% of the country's GDP in 2024 (IEA, 2024). This creates structural tensions between economic stability, fiscal revenues, and climate ambition.

The country has been vocal in international fora including the development and application of the SDGs (DHF, 2018) and piloting global initiatives such as developing a green taxonomy and a local green bond market (World Bank, 2022). Recently the country has advocated for phasing-out fossil fuels joining the treaty on non-proliferation of fossil fuels (MADS, 2023) and hosting the first conference on the issue (Cancilleria de Colombia, 2024).

The energy communities policy is aligned to SDG 7. Progress towards SDG 7 worldwide has been slow, it's estimated that by 2030 there will still be 660 million people with no access to energy (Tracking SDG7, 2024). While Colombia's results on this SDG are good given that it's reported that access to electricity reaches 99% and access to clean cooking 92%, the country has moved beyond assessing access towards assessing multidimensional energy poverty (Promigas and Fundación Promigas, 2025. Ministerio de Minas y Energía 2024f).

Colombia has also made ambitious commitments towards climate goals. The country committed in 2015 to reduce emissions in 20% by 2030, in 2020 it increased its goal aiming to reduce emissions by 51%, and in 2025 it continued to increase its commitment by limiting emissions by 2035 to between 155 to 161 Million CO2 Tons. The energy sector is one of the main priorities in Colombia's National Determined Contributions (NDCs) since energy generation is highly vulnerable to droughts, and in these periods the use of fossil fuels for energy production can increase sharply. Rapid deployment of renewable energy production, energy communities, modernizations of the grid, and energy efficiency are preferred measures to advance in reducing emissions (WRI, 2025).

Colombia also makes clear in its NDCs that there are relevant costs and losses associated with its climate vulnerability, including 4.01 trillion pesos yearly (approximately 1.06 billion dollars) and 351.000 people internally displaced, The country is short about 2 trillion COP annually (approximately 531 Million USD) and aims to increase the mobilization of international cooperation (Gobierno de Colombia, 2025). Debt for nature swaps are an option. Colombia has been vocal about the potential of these financial instruments, it signed one swap with the United States in 2004 (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2004) and is currently negotiating others making sure that accepting these swaps does not affect its sovereign credit rating (Bloomberg, 2023).

2. Energy Sector Factors

At the energy sector level, the following eight factors are also relevant to the framing of this story. First, **Colombia's energy sector has been managed through many models, and the nature of the state's role in the sector remains controversial.** In the 1960s, for example, a state-owned enterprise was created and public investments were used to fund the expansion and operation of the system. As a result, access increased – reaching nearly 75% of coverage by the 1990s – but it did so at a great cost, generating large debts. It also generated a number of system inefficiencies, many stemming from the rent-seeking practices that unfolded as part of clientelist ties around generation and transmission projects (Nieto Combariza, 2015).

Second, today, **the sector is broadly seen as an efficient one** where powerful companies (a mix of public, private, and public-private partnerships) provide effective horizontal checks on each other because the actors are broadly following the rules. The system was reformed with the support of multinational banks, building on broad discontent around the 1992 blackout, which enabled President Gaviria to push for a radical reform of the sector through liberalisation (Pombo 2021). Since then, the government's role has been limited to regulation and oversight, investing in unconnected areas, and coordinating investments to expand energy capacity, quality, and interconnection across the system. A subsidy program was introduced in 1994 whereby high-income households, businesses, and factories pay additional fees to cover the energy costs of low-income and rural households. Incentives for private investment include a beneficial tariff regime for large, commercial users. Yet, third, **this energy system was not designed to be a just one.** In 2023, it was estimated that about 8.1 million people, or 15.4% of the population, did not have access to reliable, quality energy (Promigas and Fundación Promigas 2024, Esquivel & Leon, 2024). The majority of this population – termed the “energy poor” — are members of ethnic minorities and subsistence farmers.

Fourth, Colombia is a **major coal exporter, although its role as a coal producer is declining.** In 2023, it ranked as the fourth largest producer in the world, and it has remained among the top global exporters, though its global production has now declined to about 13th (Mining Technology, 2024). Coal, along with oil and gas, has played an important role in Colombia's economy, making a transition both politically and economically challenging (IMF, 2025). Thus, fifth, **energy transition is seen as a necessary form of risk mitigation in a country prone to blackouts** that will likely get worse with time. Under both the Santos and Duque administrations, several incentives for new investments in cleaner energy were introduced, including tax benefits and reduced tariffs for renewable energy products (Congreso de la República, 2014, DNP, 2022). Additionally, a number of energy auctions have sought to incentivise big investments — offering investors additional incentives in exchange for long-term contracts (Moreno and Larrahondo, 2021).

Sixth, **despite this, the proportion of renewables in the energy market has remained low, at around 1%** (not including hydropower) in 2022. The uptake of small-scale generation projects

has also been slow and well below the country's goal of generating 100 MWs (Ministerio de Minas y Energía, 2024e). The use of renewable energy to meet the needs of non-connected zones has also been slow, meeting only 14% of their generation needs in 2023, largely through individual solar solutions financed by the government (SSPD, 2024).

Seventh, **the financial state of the energy sector remains precarious**. The combination of social relief and price control measures designed to protect vulnerable households and contain inflationary pressures has ended up creating a high structural debt in the energy sector, which jeopardises growing fiscal resources, limits the liquidity of service providers, and generates sustainability pressures on the country's public finances (Gallego 2024). Specific factors include:

1. The tariff freeze imposed by the Duque administration during the pandemic to contain the cost of living. During this period, all users in the system accumulated debt. Most high- and middle-income users have now paid off their debts, but many low-income and other users have not been able to pay their debt back (Suarez & Alguero 2023). The debt stood at around \$3,2 trillion COP (approx. \$800 Million USD) in March 2025 (Portafolio, 2025).
2. The growing gap between contributions and subsidies in the sector. In Colombia, high-income households, commerce, and industry pay higher tariffs (approx. an additional 20%) in order to cover a portion of the expenses of lower-income households (up to 60%). Currently, these contributions are not enough to cover the amount of subsidies needed and result in an increasing public debt in the sector (IEA, 2023), it amounted to \$2.8 trillion COP in 2025 (around \$700 Million USD) (Valora Analitik, 2024a).
3. Fuel subsidies for gasoline and diesel reached a fiscal cost of \$100 Trillion COP in 2024 (around \$27 Billion USD) (Böhl Gutierrez et al., 2024). While gasoline subsidies have been gradually reduced, diesel subsidies remain in place, partly due to pressure from a well-organised transport sector union (Böhl Gutierrez, 2026).

Finally, eighth, an often-cited constraint to greater investment in clean energy is an **investment climate that is characterised by lengthy approval processes due to** low capacity for environmental approvals, delays in connection to the network through utility companies, and local relationship with communities and other private projects (SER Colombia 2025). Potential investors face an average of up to 2,000 days navigating 247 necessary approvals (Colorado, 2025). At the same time, many communities feel that the process offers little assurance that their land, resources, and culture will be respected (Preciado Ochoa, 2025). Successive governments have been incapable of streamlining the approval process, in large part because it is a form of rent distribution in a clientelist system that requires a lengthy process of give and take. This results in high levels of distrust in communities who turn to social blockades as a strategy and only a handful of investors prepared to risk the time and resources necessary to pursue approval of plans (Murgas et al., 2023). These bureaucratic bottlenecks pose a serious threat to Colombia's energy security.

IV. Election of President Petro: Change in Challenging Circumstances

Gustavo Petro took office as Colombia's 35th president on August 7, 2022. The first centre-left candidate, and former combatant, to become president. He was elected on an agenda of radical change with the support of 14 parties and 13 citizen movements. His campaign emphasised the importance of social and structural change, the need to implement the peace agreements, and the legitimacy of social blockades as a form of protest in an unjust system. He describes his vision of the role of the state as: to guarantee the rights and dignified conditions of all its citizens; to redistribute power through structural reforms of taxation, land ownership, and control of natural resources; and last but not least to engage directly with the "*poder popular*" across this diverse country through assemblies, town halls, and a "multicolored democracy." (El Comercio, 2022).

The economic context, upon election, could hardly have been more challenging. The global pandemic had hit Colombia hard and, as in many countries, it was submerged in a cost of living crisis. Petro's predecessor, President Duque, had considered the recuperation of subsidies in the sector as politically unviable. As a result, in 2022, the debt owed by the government to energy companies was \$3 billion COP (Beleño Hernández and Casas Bautista, 2024).

Gustavo Petro's election illustrated the deep divisions apparent in Colombia. Though he won with a small margin (50.44% to 47.31%) as shown in Figure 2 (MOE, 2022), the electoral map illustrates that while he did not achieve a majority in urban centres (with the exception of Bogota and Valle de Cauca), he gained a significant majority in more isolated regions where the country's energy poor live — particularly along the Pacific coast and the Amazon, as well as with a sizeable but less significant majority in traditionally extractive economies such as those along the Atlantic coast. Colombia was divided along geographic lines.

Figure 2. Colombia's 2022 Elections: Geographical Divides

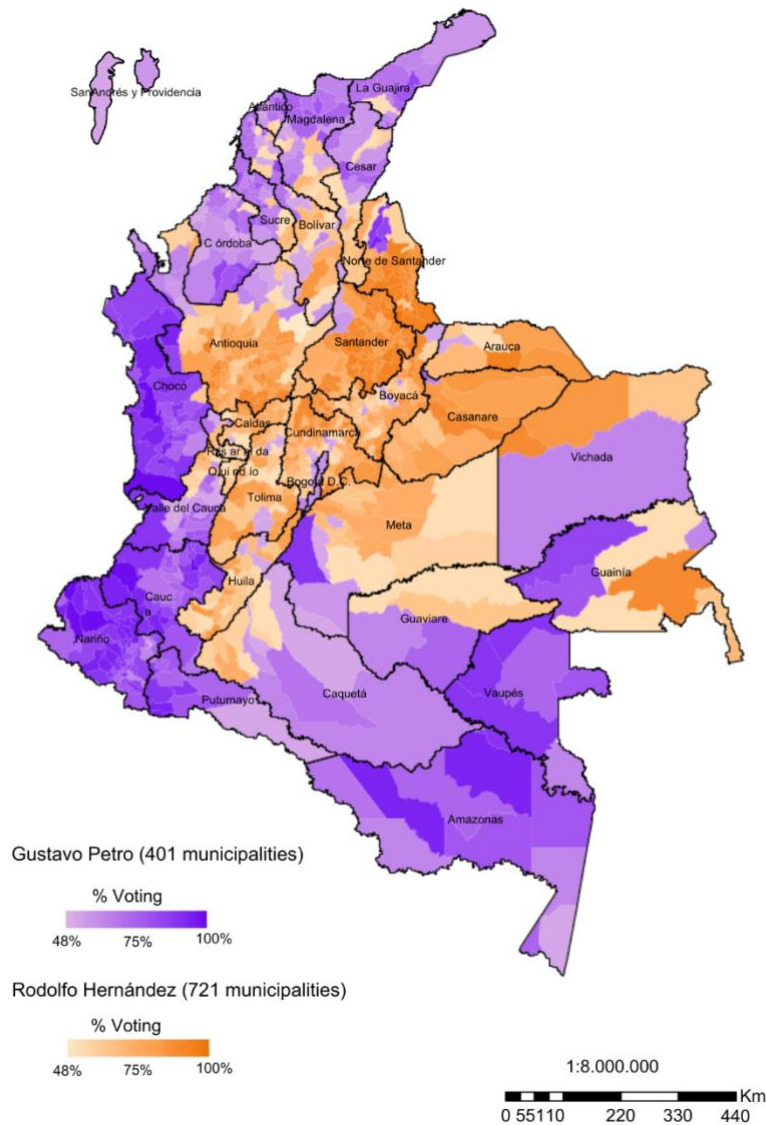


Figure 2: Distribution of votes in the 2022 presidential elections. Source: (MOE, 2022, p. 67)

Within this challenging context, Petro announced a “National Pact” and began to negotiate the space for his agenda of change among an array of supporters, many with competing interests. The lack of a majority in Congress would make the implementation of a change agenda challenging, but, running high on a historical election victory, Petro moved to establish a Cabinet that attempted to balance the interests of his campaign supporters as well as his manifesto commitment. During the first year, important reforms in the area of taxes, the national development plan, and “total peace” were achieved (see Box 2). But after a year in power, as often is the case in Colombia, the

Box 2. The Reform Agenda Under the Petro Administration (2022-2026)

During the administration, a collection of structural transformations aimed to redefine the Colombian development model. Under the broad coalition around a “National Pact,” the administration sought to advance its reforms early on. The coalition included a wide range of parties including liberals, conservatives, greens, ex-combatants and indigenous groups. This coalition shepherded the passing of important legislation on tax reform, the creation of a Ministry for Equity and Inclusion, the National Development Plan, and the “Total Peace” law enabling the government to start negotiations with guerrillas and other illegal groups.

After the first year in office, the coalition weakened and eventually imploded, due to internal differences as well as the incentive for parties to prepare for subnational elections by emphasising their differences with the administration.

In this challenging context, the administration has used executive orders to pass reforms such as: (i) measures to accelerate the resolution of land property issues, (ii) pension reform aimed at providing new subsidies to the elderly who do not meet the requirements for retirement pensions, and (iii) labor reform seeking to guarantee contractual stability, reduce outsourcing, strengthen collective bargaining, and fully recognise the rights of workers in historically precarious sectors, such as domestic and rural areas.

Passing these reforms has required the administration to engage in rent transactions with political parties and leaders. This has included a number of changes in the Cabinet to re-balance bureaucratic rents and also big corruption scandals such as the use of funds by the national disaster agency to pay legislators in opposition parties. However, not all efforts have been successful. Attempts at education and health reform, as well as a law to prohibit fracking in the country, have not moved forward.

disappointing results for Petro-aligned candidates in the local elections of 2023 led to a dissolution of the original coalition and a more difficult environment in which to pursue systemic change (Novoa 2025).

V. A Vision for Change in Energy Transition

Petro’s mandate in the energy sector was clear: improved justice and democracy. The focus was squarely on the 8.1 million Colombians suffering from energy poverty because they were not connected to the national grid, they could not afford to pay their bill, or they were unable to make a living due to unreliable energy (Patzy et al., 2022). The National Development Plan 2022-2026 laid out the Petro administration’s vision for change, depicting justice as the end goal and democracy as the process needed to achieve this (DNP, 2023). The plan underscored the need for an “inclusive and just” system that guarantees universal justice wherein the end user is an active participant in the system — shepherding common assets, like energy, to promote local productivity and dignity while protecting Mother Earth.

Energy Communities (ECs), the focus of this story, were featured as one of the five core areas of the Energy Roadmap initially produced by the administration in 2021 (Ministerio de Minas y Energia 2024d). ECs had become fashionable in

Box 3. Electropalmor: An Early Experience at an Energy Community

Electropalmor, founded in the 1990s in Palmor (Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta), is a pioneering community enterprise in Colombia that autonomously manages a small hydroelectric plant, providing electricity to more than 600 residents through a low-impact renewable energy generation model. Its roots lie in the town's founding in the 1960s when farmers displaced by bipartisan violence settled in the Sierra Nevada to organise around coffee farming. With a history spanning more than three decades, Electropalmor has amassed a combination of technical, business, and community knowledge, which has allowed it to generate, expand, and sustain its own energy with high levels of community ownership and no state subsidies.

The hydroelectric plant began operations in 1991 with a capacity of 125 KWs, and in 2016-2018 expanded to 275 KWs to meet growing demand. Today, it serves around 620 users relying solely on community payments for its maintenance.

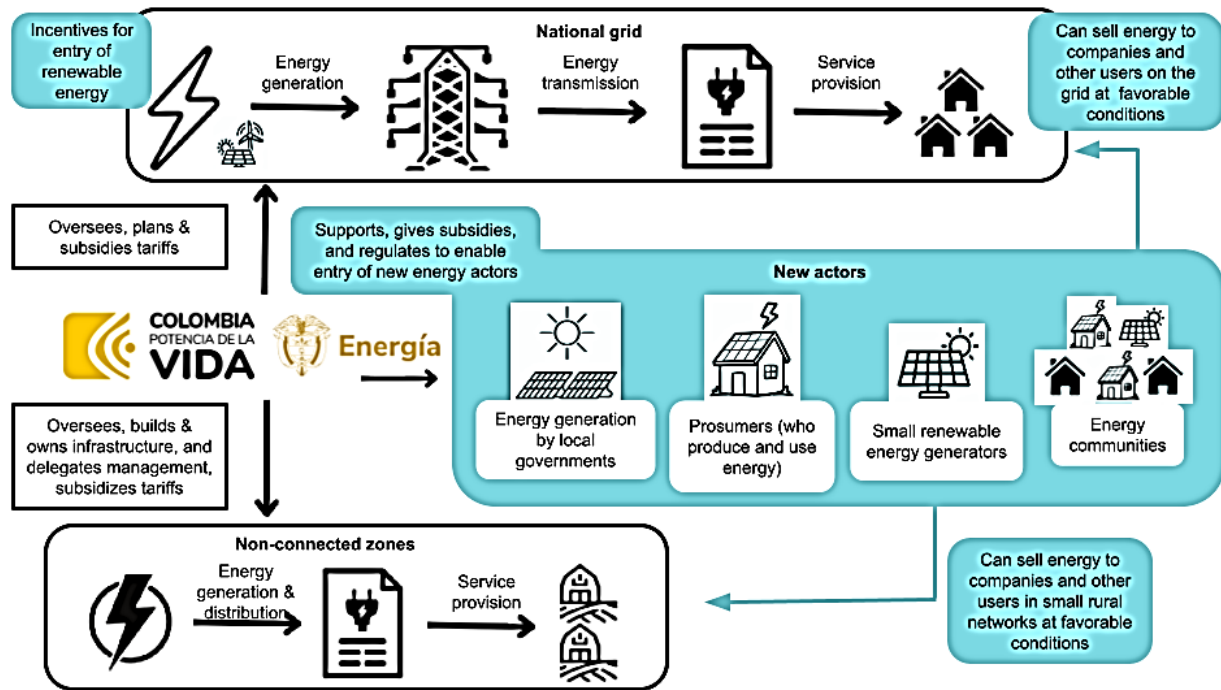
The governance model is based on collective ownership: users are simultaneously owners, make decisions in assemblies, and elect their representatives -- reinforcing the social legitimacy and sustainability of the project. Challenges have included underestimation of community needs, resulting in a second phase of expansion, as well as on-time bill payment by users and a plethora of external institutions attempting to recruit community organisations for economic or political gain.

Although Electropalmor welcomes the change in public narrative around the Just Energy Transition, they have yet to access any of the new changes issued by the CREG. The new subsidies and tariff scheme remain complex and require in-depth financial expertise for which Electropalmor is engaging external support.

some European countries, where a number of Petro's supporters had spent time in opposition. And closer to home, neighbouring Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay had experimented with the use of ECs (Lawrence Pedroza et al., 2022). In fact, although not branded as ECs, Colombia had its own experience in community-driven management of renewable energy sources, such as Electropalmor (see Box 3).

ECs represent a significant shift in the way that energy systems are managed -- decentralising power generation, integrating more renewable energy, and potentially promoting energy democracy as communities become stakeholders in the system. In doing so, they shift market power from large utilities to community groups and enable collaborative investment in local renewable assets. This can lead to improved coverage, lower energy bills, increased energy autonomy, and economic and social benefits for marginalised communities. Figure 3 illustrates how the actors and relationships were set up to change in Colombia.

Figure 3. Systemic Change in Colombia's Energy Sector



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

To-date, three Ministers of Mines and Energy have overseen the roll out of the JET vision in the Petro administration. All have had their own personal vision for the role of ECs:

- **Irene Velez Torres**, a philosopher and environmentalist, was Petro's first appointment for Minister. She served from August 2022 to July 2023. With a history in climate activism, her advocacy style, coupled with her scant technical knowledge of broader mining and energy issues, made her a controversial initial appointment and generated historic political reaction in the Senate where she was censured. Her vision, unsurprisingly, was immediate decarbonisation of the sector and focused on "tariff justice." Within this vision, she saw ECs as an important vehicle for energy self-sufficiency in non-connected areas.
- **Andres Camacho**, an electrical engineer by training and a student activist during the civil war, was appointed in July 2023. ECs quickly became a central part of his plan, and he expanded their potential by clarifying that not only could communities generate and operate new forms of infrastructure such as solar panels, but they could also sell any excess back to the network, allowing them to generate communal profit. Minister Camacho resigned in February 2025.
- **Edwin Palma**, a trade unionist who had served as Vice Minister of Labor, as well as the person appointed to liquidate the high profile private energy company Aire-E, became the third minister of the administration. Minister Palma has maintained ECs as a central part of the Ministry's focus, but eager to achieve more scale, has turned his attention to engaging public utilities to invest in renewable energy through ECs and other subnational projects.

VI. Impacts to Date: Important Institutional Changes but Slow Delivery of New Infrastructure

While the focus of these three ministers has differed, there is broad agreement that the capacity to shift the **public narrative around energy transition** has been the biggest impact of Petro's administration to date. The administration has been systematic about using paradigmatic ideas to shape new public narratives, holding up a mirror to the injustices in the system and suggesting clear solutions. By doing so, it has embedded across a broad cross-section of Colombian society a sense that the justice deficits in the system need to be addressed. The "J" has, it seems, been successfully inserted into the "ET" and seems likely to be sustained long after this administration is over.

With the acceptance of this repurposing of the country's efforts, **new voices** have emerged to shape the future of the sector, broadening the conversation beyond the usual handful of energy companies who support a transition of their own business models as a way of expanding their profit margins. As the Ministry of Mines and Energy (MME) along with allies from the international community have convened fora up and down the country, the visibility given to community-led efforts, such as those of Electropalmar, has diversified both the content and participants of public fora. Such fora have also provided a space for new relationships to emerge -- as communities, local governments, potential investors, and members of the international community have come together to experiment with new ways of working together.

An additional consequence of the shift in public narrative is the emergence of a new **ecosystem of actors** to support such an approach. The unexpected and sudden mushrooming of new sectors, courses, and degrees at many levels and across many geographies provides an interesting example of how transformative shifts can happen through smaller changes that sometimes converge and create something new and more powerful. There is an emerging new cadre of young people being trained in JET-related skills and returning to their communities to use them. Local governments are increasingly including JET as a component in local development plans, and in some cases hiring staff to support this. Such changes were not planned but have emerged and are likely to continue the support of systems change in unpredictable ways going forward.

Within the public sector, Minister Camacho notes that there has also been a **shift in mindset**. While it has taken some time and is still a work in progress, the strategy to "change brains" within the public sector is working. Public functionaries accustomed to dealing with coal and oil and gas companies as their main counterparts now view communities as their clients, re-instilling a sense of "public" into their work.

While new actors, relationships, and behaviors emerge under this shift in public narrative, so do **new organisational forms**. A new National Movement for the Democracy in a Just Energy Transition, driven largely by youth leaders, has emerged to "sustain a grassroots movement to fight

for fairer energy tariffs, a right to high quality and affordable energy, and communities as important producers of energy within the system” (Garzón, 2025). Also notable is the strengthened role of associations of renewable energy companies such as SER and Acosol. SER brings together 72 of the biggest companies in the renewable sector and has been a vocal proponent of resolving institutional blockages to investment in the sector (SER Colombia, 2026a). Acosol, in turn, is focused on bringing together implementers, providers, consultants, manufacturers, certifiers, and trainers in the sector to ensure that all actors along the supply chain work together (ACOSOL, 2026). While these organisations pre-date Petro’s government, they have consolidated as influential new voices to advance the entrance of renewable energies in the country.

Alongside this narrative change, the Government has implemented institutional changes aimed at shifting the system in sustainable directions. Some suggest these institutional changes could be transformational. The changes should also be viewed alongside other important structural changes achieved by the administration (see Box 3). A close advisor to Minister Camacho notes that the focus on institutional change was deliberate: they wanted to shift the system in new and sustainable directions. “We decided to have a clear conscience and to take the long, responsible road.” This, he notes, was no easy task in an environment where the pressure to deliver transactional change, with continually shifting priorities, was real. It required a focus on a long-term vision and a commitment to adaptive ways of working.

The institutional changes, largely through new laws and incentives, include the introduction of Energy Communities and their operating rules, including connection to the grid, fast tracking the entrance of renewable energy projects, and incentives for public and private investment in renewable energy projects in areas of high energy poverty. Most observers agree that the institutional changes are significant, providing more than a rebranding or semantic change in the trajectory of energy transition in Colombia. Such changes, some suggest, will frame the potential for new relationships and norms to emerge in the energy sector for years to come. Although whether these changes will attract sufficient, new private sector investment in non-connected zones remains an open question.

Box 4. Institutional Changes in Colombia for the Entry of Small Renewable Energy Projects

Building on previous regulatory changes that have encouraged the entry of renewable energy into the country, a number of new changes have been added under the Petro administration. The National Development Plan recognised ECs as official institutions within the electricity sector (DNP, 2023), and Decrees 2236 (Presidencia de la República, 2023) opened the opportunity for individuals to organise and be given legal status in order to generate, market, and provide public electricity services -- defining power limits (maximum 5 MW) and the remuneration of surpluses and the protection of users, within the national power grid (Sistema de Interconexión Nacional [SIN]) and in networks in Non-Interconnected Zones (ZNI) under Resolution 501 (UPME, 2024b) and Resolution 101 072 (CREG, 2025). In September 2025, the Colombia Solar program was created to connect the energy transition specifically to social policy and to strengthen the role of ECs in reducing energy poverty, Decree 0972 (Presidencia de la República, 2025).

Today, these legal definitions, which complement existing regulation, and clearer procedures for connection and remuneration reduce regulatory risks while providing opportunities for investors through the following incentives:

- Tax benefits that include a 50% deduction on investments in renewable energy projects for 15 years, accelerated depreciation of assets over a minimum period of 5 years, the acquisition of equipment, components, machinery, and services exempt from VAT, and tariff exemption on imported machinery, equipment, and inputs.
- Trade rules that ensure community energy surpluses are remunerated based on economic efficiency criteria -- generating additional income opportunities.
- A subsidy replacement scheme that allocates resources for consumer subsidies to finance solar self-generation -- facilitating a stable flow of financing for community projects.
- Co-financing opportunities with mayors' and governors' offices that can help mobilise private investment.
- Allows ethnic groups and low-income users to benefit from spending on physical infrastructure with public funds.
- Opportunities to access green financing, climate credits, and carbon credit programs, given the contribution of energy communities to energy transition and carbon neutrality goals.

Despite regulatory progress, gaps and challenges persist that could limit the consolidation of ECs in Colombia. These include the need for additional regulations on metering, billing, community governance mechanisms, operation of collective systems, and the integration of community projects into carbon credit and green financing markets.

At the **global and regional level**, Colombia's experience in JET also enables it to continue to **broaden the narrative in terms of participation and content at the global level**, such as at COP in Belém, Brazil and the 1st Conference Transitioning away from Fossil Fuels (Transition Away

Conference, 2026). Additionally, a strong network of activists and reformist governments from Latin America and the Caribbean are making an effort to put global climate discussions back on track in the aftermath of Baku 2024. The Baku COP was broadly viewed as no longer fit for purpose (Niranjan et al., 2024) and widely considered to be a failure, perhaps “the worst COP ever” (CESR, 2024), characterised by a weak climate finance deal, grossly insufficient funding, and no reference to human rights nor women’s rights despite the gendered nature of the climate crisis. Belem COP, was seen in a better light than the process in Baku, but it’s still assessed as a COP with mixed results (Waskow et al. 2025).

Reforming both the content and process of international fora is something the administration has repeatedly spoken out about. Democratizing such fora and rebalancing voices will be key, as Colombia’s first Minister of Environment, Susana Muhamad noted:

“The legitimacy of the COP process has been affected (...) the summit is closing more and more to democratic participation (...) and corporate interests are manifesting. The next COP in Brazil has a strong mandate to open democratically the COP process, so we regain legitimacy.” (cited in Goodman, 2024)

Finally, **Colombia’s portfolio of energy** is shifting in a notable way, and Colombia’s mix of green energy continues to grow. At the beginning of the administration, renewables made up about 2% of the overall energy portfolio with several investments on the way. In January 2026, it had grown to 15,6% (Minenergía 2026). While there are concerns about how these percentages are calculated and how much of the growth can be attributed to the Petro administration (Valora Analitik, 2024b) it has introduced important reforms to streamline bureaucratic processes and support renewable energy (ANLA 2025). SER Colombia (2026) estimates that by the end of 2026 Colombia will reach 4,2GW from renewable energy (excluding large-scale hydropower), about 2,9 MW of this is from medium and large plants and 1,3 MW from small plants and self-generation. Reaching this energy production will by 1.2 million metric tons of CO₂ per year, equivalent to the CO₂ produced by 265.000 cars in a year.

Much of the new non-conventional renewable energy (NCRE) potential is focused on the dry, windswept department of La Guajira that borders Venezuela and juts into the Caribbean. La Guajira has Colombia's greatest renewable power potential, including 21GWs of wind power potential. But delays to key transmission projects and community consultations have impeded its development. It is no small feat, then, that under this administration, the "Colectora" transmission line to bring this energy from La Guajira to the interior of the country has been finalised. This involved 285 consultations with communities to obtain the necessary permits to lay 72 km of line (Minenergía 2024). The line will deliver approximately 10% of the national demand and represents a long overdue commitment to the people of La Guajira (ANLA 2024).

VII. Institutional Bottlenecks, False Starts, and Missed Opportunities

While progress in advancing new institutional frameworks and narratives, as well in continuing to shift Colombia's own energy mix, is impressive, the delivery of transnational change through a significant number of ECs has not lived up to lofty ambitions. The administration's National Development Plan (2022-2026) presented an ambitious goal of 20,000 ECs with 6,000 scheduled for launch in 2023. As of November 2025, only 250 ECs had been installed, while 2,300 prioritized – out of 18,000 registered – are anxiously awaiting to know next steps (Ministerio de Minas y Energia, 2024a). The narrative emerging from different insiders is a mix of pride in the changes introduced combined with disappointment that the short-term impact on the energy poor was not more significant. The narrative-sharing conversations suggest the following bottlenecks:

1. Weak Preparation for the Task of Governing and Limited Institutional Knowledge

Many insiders candidly recognise that they were not as prepared to hit the ground running upon election. Despite being in opposition for many years, and notwithstanding the organisational experience of individual leaders like Andres Camacho, the administration had few organisational details prepared upon its inauguration. In addition, the vision of the state and its model of governance required them to consult directly with “el pueblo,” delaying the finalisation of operational details in the energy sector for almost two years. As one observer from the private sector noted, “they spent the better part of two decades in opposition, and they still arrived with no plan.”

An absence of operational details such as who will lead, what a potential portfolio of change might look like in practice, and how it might be contracted and delivered can prove costly in an electoral cycle of four years. A senior advisor to a minister noted with regret, “in reality you just get one and a half years to implement your agenda.” The budget for the first year is inherited, and the final year needs to be spent preparing for an election, leaving little time to implement change agendas. Short time frames are made even more challenging in Colombia by the electoral cycle of local governments, which does not align with the presidential cycle, causing a disconnect between central and local level efforts for the better part of two years.

2. Political Incentives Cause Frequent Leadership Turnover and Unrealistic Time Frames for Change

Within these short windows of opportunity, pressures from the political settlement to constantly balance alliances and interests by shuffling teams can also prove costly. Across the board, JET allies lamented what seemed to be a revolving door in the MME, which led to unrealistic time frames for getting anything done. Some point out that the first “year of grace” was lost under a

minister that had little technical preparation and seemed bent on battling powerful interests as well as potential allies in her attempts to implement a complete, abrupt systems change. The rotation of ministers, each with their own teams and individual agendas, has, in effect, made it difficult for potential allies from the private sector, the international community, and civil society to meaningfully support the implementation of the JET agenda. Priorities under each minister have shifted, and as one donor staff notes, “by the time you have presented a clear proposal to headquarters and waited for approval, the minister has changed, and they are on to a new priority.” Private sector observers also point to a “revolving door” as an obstacle to aligning new investments with the public-led vision. A former senior official in the MME acknowledged that agendas shift regularly: “All ministers have their own agenda and want to leave their own legacy. They are politicians.” In sum, political incentives led to frequent turnover and truncated time frames which have not served the steady implementation of a systems change vision well.

3. Political Incentives Make Inter-Institutional Collaboration Irrational

These same political incentives make it difficult to deliver on themes that require input from multiple agencies. Just as the various Ministers of Mining and Energy have been keen to define their own legacy through shifting priorities on JET, cabinet members have also been keen to ensure that progress is attributed to their own ministry and supports their own legacy. This has, as Minister Camacho notes, made collaborating around efforts such as the JET challenging. Ideally, Ministries of Transport, Education, and Health, for example, would work together to ensure that new investments in community-managed solar infrastructure lead to better education and health services as well as the opportunity to access new markets. Ultimately, Camacho notes, the solution was to forge ahead with investments for energy communities to serve schools and hospitals and notify the corresponding minister after the fact.

4. Defending Change is Time-Consuming, Can Distract from Long-Term Transformation, and Limits Critical Autonomy for Reform Teams

Within this ever-evolving context and a governing style from the presidency that quickly felt the need to play defense (first as it defended the outspoken Minister of Mines and Energy against historic motions of no confidence from the Senate and subsequently as the initial political coalition dissolved) the space given to ministers and their teams became much more limited. As issues like JET became politicised, the autonomy available to ministers was reduced and staff became engaged in firefighting and transactional tactics. As one senior advisor during that period notes, “too much time was spent firefighting (...) it was all absorbing and administratively exhausting.” In his own estimation, it wasn’t until the end of their second year that “we found ways to ignore the distractions” and focus on more strategic plans. But, by then, ministerial autonomy, as well as the time, resources, and political environment required to promote process change were limited.

Much has recently been written about the role that mission-driven bureaucrats can play in navigating change from within bureaucracies. The sense of mission that many ministers and their

team brought to public administration was palpable, and Minister Camacho is clear that shifting the culture of the public sector was a goal. It was the job of Directors to “change mindsets one person at a time,” he notes. But while this might have been his expectation, it is clear that neither the space nor strategy existed to focus explicitly on this, while the change in Ministers came with renovation of most of the staff in energy agencies. As the initial fight to unseat the first minister transitioned to a fight over who should serve in the regulatory commission, the working culture of the MME was not a priority, and senior staff found themselves waiting for key decisions to be made. The autonomy and empowerment required to enable mission-driven bureaucrats to be effective was gone.

5. Visions for Change Are Visions: Delivery Requires Navigating Public Bureaucracy with a Deep Appreciation of the Institutional Status Quo

Beyond the political incentives and worsening operating environment after the first year, the institutional reality that met the incoming administration was much harsher than internal reformers had hoped. Despite his experience, Camacho admits to being surprised by the depth of resistance from, as he describes them, “neoliberal institutions that were designed to defend elite interests.” Reflecting back, he suggests that these very institutions were designed to support transactional not transformational development. Planning processes discouraged qualitative change and collaboration, making it difficult to implement a vision of a state as a guarantor of rights that supports dignified, multi-dimensional development.

Perhaps the most publicised example of institutional backlash against proposed change was the attempt to establish a quorum in the Committee for Oversight and Regulation of the sector, the Energy and Gas Regulatory Commission (CREG). Upon assuming power, the Petro administration recognised that it had a clean slate to appoint the majority of commissioners early in the period. Eighteen months later, quorum had not yet been established as one candidate after another was rejected, leading Petro to attempt to take direct control of the GREG, though this was rejected as illegal by the judiciary. While accounts of why achieving quorum took so long vary, there seems to be a consensus that the CREG had not evolved in step with the country's energy transition plans, and, as a result, the selection criteria for commissioners were tailored to maintaining the existing system. In sum, there was an institutional mismatch with the vision at hand.

The delays in establishing quorum in the CREG led to significant delays in the ability of the administration to put forward new regulation and attract needed investment. President Petro reacted by proposing commissioners with temporary assignments, serving for 3 month periods instead of their usual period of 4 years (PGN 2024). The effect was twofold. On the one hand, potential commissioners shied away from serving, fearing they would have little autonomy or sufficient space to act. And, at the same time, prominent private sector representatives concluded that the administration was showing its interventionist intentions. This, along with what many observers saw as an unrealistic “dogmatic ideology” from the President suggesting that “energy should be free” and subsidies in non-connected zones given freely rather than targeted at the lower-

income households, stirred disquiet in business circles who viewed previous public governance of the sector (before the 1990s) as disastrous.

The challenge in achieving quorum in the CREG as well as the challenge in maintaining JET as a leading structural priority in the administration meant that potential investors were hesitant to consider new investments. They needed details on pricing as well as roles and responsibilities, and without this, investors watched and waited. Finally, in March 2025, the long-awaited regulation, clarifying the functioning of the ECs, was passed. The delay was costly, affecting the scale of investment, the time frame to deliver transactional change, and the appetite of the private sector to engage.

6. Attracting New Investment Is Challenging in the Absence of New Institutional Frameworks and Fiery Political Rhetoric

The delay in laying out the institutional building blocks for reform was costly. As one ministerial advisor early in the administration put it, “the institutional framework should have been the first thing we did.” In its absence, and with fiery response from the presidency, “powerful interests were put on alert.”

The frustration openly expressed by the presidency quickly alienated private sector actors, including potential allies. While Petro’s campaign had emphasised the importance of community-led small business known as “economía popular,” the reality was that to achieve 20,000 ECs and support generation beyond self-sufficiency, bigger investors would be needed. But blanket statements likening big energy companies to a mafia, saying that selling energy is more profitable than cocaine (Red+ Noticias, 2025), and the failure to identify specific issues to work on with allies in the private sector, an opportunity to achieve scale seems to have been missed. Insiders point out, of course, that elite interests, particularly big energy companies, were set on undermining the new vision from the outset. But there are enough anecdotes of new private sector actors seriously considering investment to confirm that real opportunities were missed. A strong perception among observers in the private sector is that “this government polarises.” Putting all private sector actors in the same bag, rather than seeking allies to invest in change may, in the end, have backfired.

While the fight to establish quorum in the CREG was perhaps the most public example of institutional reaction, it was not the only one. The administration also struggled to make headway in updating regulations for the implementation and connection of ECs through the National Council of Operations, a council made of the main energy production and commercialisation companies who had dominated the sector until now. But while specific interests fueled a significant part of the institutional resistance, lack of knowledge of public processes also hampered efforts. Procurement rules, for example, incentivised bids from big, traditional government contractors, both in connected and non-connected zones. Public service law prevented the “gifting” of solar panels to community organisations that were considered private and not able manage public assets,

communities also did not have the experience to be considered suitable to administer energy solutions, making the handover of energy communities to communities difficult. In sum, the vision of systems change did not fit well with established institutional processes, and the administration seemed to lack seasoned public servants in their ranks that could navigate this. Instead of using public processes to serve their vision, public processes became yet another hindrance.

7. Lack of Clarity About the Role and Agency of Local Governments

An additional disabling factor in implementing the change agenda seems to be the lack of clarity around the role that local governments are expected to play. This is surprising, given that the JET agenda is clearly targeted at, and rooted in, communities and remote locations outside Bogota. The decentralised footprint of the public energy sector is also limited. Thus, implementing the vision locally would require local allies. But, to a large extent, local governments have struggled to understand their role and find clear ways to collaborate.

An exception, perhaps, is the support provided to the community of Las Malvinas and Adelita de Char in Barranquilla, where the Institute of Planning of Electrical Services (IPSE) supported two new energy parks above a soccer field in an attempt to bring down the cost of consumption in four well-organised urban communities. In these communities, residents not only could not afford to pay their bills but were unable to question the charges, given the utilities' refusal to install meters. Coordination between national and local government for authorisations and other bureaucratic processes delayed the project over two years, but it is finally under construction.

In general, however, the lack of clarity across local governments in areas of high energy poverty has reconfirmed a sense that “all decisions are made in Bogota.” One local government official laments that “the National Development Plan is still a tool for implementing the central government's agenda” and “they only turn to us when they need to de-escalate social conflict.”

A number of local observers suggest that, rather than being an oversight, the lack of a strategy to engage local governments represents the vision of the role of the state talking directly to its people. This approach sought to avoid intermediaries, unless there were existing relationships with communities. But bypassing local governments has left many local officials bitter. The same local official notes that it has “generated friction: they don't deal with the local institutions, and they don't know our local culture and traditions.”

8. Lessons from Existing Pockets of Systems Change Do Not Translate Easily into Policy Practice

In many ways, the JET agenda was born at the community level (Naranjo, 2024), championed for many years by civil society organisations both in Colombia and beyond (Energía y Equidad, 2023). As noted above, the experience of organisations like Electropalmor (see Box 2) and La Estrecha (Naranjo, 2024) represent important existing “pockets of effectiveness” that have gained visibility because their agenda has become a national one. But their success is built on years of intense

community organising, resulting in well-run local organisations that oversee energy generation and distribution with transparency and efficiency. Investing in locally led, community-managed systems does not happen overnight, but it is critical to their success and sustainability.

In the absence of local allies on the ground and trust in intermediaries that do not directly represent community members, state institutions moved to provide social accompaniment directly. The IPSE quickly launched an impressive team of sociologists and social workers well trained in Freirean methodologies and popular education techniques to support local communities. They developed governance indices, training methodologies, and visited 89 communities to provide training. In the MME, the social and environment team, while slower to follow suit, attempted to assign 64 “duplas,” or pairs of young graduates in different locations who provide both social and technical support. But, in January 2025, the IPSE social team fell victim to budget cuts and was disbanded. It is unclear to what level the “duplas” were implemented and how much impact they had. The capacity of the state to provide the required level of social accompaniment in the available time frame has left many concerned that the ownership and capacity of communities to manage new infrastructure will not be sufficient (Orduz Salinas, 2024).

9. Potential Allies Not Proactively Engaged to Achieve Scale

The political coalition that the administration forged in its first year was critical to passing a number of structural reforms, as noted in Box 3. Yet, once this political coalition dissolved, there seems to have been little appetite for working in coalitions with other actors. Evidence on the ability of coalitions of diverse actors with common agendas to find politically feasible ways to navigate technical reforms has been well documented in recent years (The Asia Foundation, 2023). In addition, the official goal of 20,000 Energy Communities was ambitious, leaving many wondering who the state would partner with to achieve it. The lack of a strategy for building coalitions to achieve that goal is, for many, rooted in deeply held, and to some extent well-founded, distrust of intermediary organisations that don’t represent communities directly. At the same time, the existence of vast networks of capable civil society organisations in Colombia who were natural allies, and on standby for a large part of the administration, leaves a sense of missed opportunities to work with others to take the JET vision to scale.

10. International Allies Supportive of a Narrative Shift but without Scaled-Up Support for Systems Change in Colombia

As noted, Petro’s plain-spoken call to action on climate change has made him somewhat of a hero with climate groups, globally. However, this did not translate to the additional resources needed from the international community, either for large-scale transactional change or home-grown systems change. Some insiders suggest that responsibility lies with an international community that is not flexible and favors transactional projects that they can “put their country flags on” over efforts to change systems. But staff in donor agencies say that the frequent change in focus resulting from ministerial changes was compounded by a broader lack of knowledge of the goals

and instruments of donor agencies. Requests to reinvent the wheel through new studies or contribute to the purchasing of solar panels, for example, without thinking through sustainability plans was unlikely to sit well with donors. Overall, there is an impression that international support did not materialise at the scale needed, and opinions differ on whether that is due to lack of experience in engaging the donor community within the administration, structural flaws in how development is delivered, or both.

11. Breaking Clientelist Ties while Ensuring Meaningful Consent: Putting into Practice a Vision of an Activist State

Recently, there are signs that the Colombian state is willing to play a more active role in eliminating processing times for investments while ensuring due process is respected. The two month approval process for new investments in a political settlement where rent extraction feeds clientelist ties quickly becomes nine months in reality and is a main obstacle to investment. The delays leave companies unable to complete their planned investments (47% were unable to complete their planned investments in 2024), with regional entities taking twice as long to issue a permit than the legal limit (SER Colombia, 2025). This reality, as the President of SER notes, serves no one well and requires a state that is prepared to exercise its power “as an arbitrator and custodian of the rule of law.”

In September 2025, Minister Palma signed Decree 1033 (MADS, 2025) providing greater clarity in assessing the technical, social, and environmental viability of new investments, including non-conventional renewable energy sources. Specifying details such as location, design details, distance from population centres, wildlife protection measures, and mandatory social management strategies from the outset is expected to streamline approval processes while providing more meaningful information ahead of community consultations. While some NGOs cite streamlining as a concern, SER Colombia welcomes the change as a win-win, suggesting that approval times could be reduced by up to 70% and communities will have better information ahead of obligatory consultations.

12. People Matter, Especially in Difficult Institutional Contexts

As one takes stock of the progress as well as the disappointments, it is impossible to ignore the role of passion-driven individuals, many of them public servants and not political appointees who, often at considerable risk to themselves, worked tirelessly to shift the system. People like the Sub-Director of IPSE, who originally studied to become a veterinarian in rural communities and later trained as an electrical engineer after realising that communities without access to energy could never progress. Or the recent graduate, who rose to be a minister’s advisor in the hope that his own community’s approach to solving expensive energy on the outskirts of Medellin could be replicated at scale. Also, the team of dedicated social scientists in the IPSE who spent weeks on end on the road, introducing communities to new concepts and helping them to understand how new resources could be used to solve historical injustices. Through these examples, one is

reminded of the importance of individual human beings, mission-driven bureaucrats who work within the system in creative and patient ways to make a difference. And, as one of these reformers reminds us, “this team is young, and now we are also prepared!”

The Petro administration is not over yet. Many inside reformers say that they will be working to implement the vision of systems change until midnight on the 6th of August 2026. Institutional changes made to-date, a country-wide shift in public narrative, new organisational structures, and the ecosystem of local actors interested and trained in a plethora of JET-related issues suggest that Colombia is moving toward long-term systemic change, including changing its energy mix. How this shift will be affected by the forthcoming elections is still to be seen, but with the focus on long-term institutional change and narratives, it will be hard to reverse.

VIII. Some Emerging Thoughts About the Practice of Systems Change

Hindsight is 20/20. Learning from oversights, mistakes, and misjudgments is critical for those interested in solving system problems. The theory of systems change is fascinating. The practice of systems change is urgent. With this in mind, we offer, with the benefit of hindsight, some ideas for solving complex problems using the policy arena that teams might consider.

1. Context matters and can make governing for change tough

“Context matters” has become a buzz phrase that is so overused that it is almost devoid of meaning. However, the Colombia case shows that teams who want to lead change would do well to understand at the outset how political settlements, institutional processes, and specific events and realities will impact the task of governance and of getting change done. In Colombia, it would have been helpful to internalise the following.

- a. How to best use the “grace period” with the backing of a strong coalition in year one of the administration.
- b. How political incentives influence the initial team: who is hired, what their brief is, and how this adds up to a broader vision of change.
- c. How procurement rules enable, inhibit, or delay plans: Will they facilitate implementation of the vision in terms of attracting the right actors? What changes might be needed to attract new actors, test for different services and skills, and reward the right behaviors?
- d. How public service laws can support or limit your plans: When planning the delivery chain involved in different plans, what will create friction or pose bottlenecks when implementing? How do you navigate or go around these? Are institutional changes needed to avoid or break through these roadblocks?
- e. What reporting metrics are really essential in office: Will they incentivise multi-dimensional approaches and transformational change, or are they likely to lead to gaming the system and

a culture of control rather than trust? Metrics can kill good ideas. What is important is accountability for use of public resources, not just reporting upwards. Use metrics with care.

2. Your people are your best defense: prepare for the fight

Numerous insiders confessed that they wished they had used their time prior to entering government to assess the institutional landscape, identify potential bottlenecks, and craft politically savvy strategies to address them. Once in government, the task of governing, with all the firefighting that entails – especially when you are pursuing reform – makes it difficult to focus on long-term strategy. Campaign teams are concerned with winning elections, but preparing operational details -- that are tailored with a deep understanding of how institutions will react when asked to do something different -- is not a task that should be left for later. Preparation should include:

- a. **Get your leadership right, especially at the beginning, and seize grace periods.** Grace periods exist everywhere. And they always come to an end. Pick teams and leaders with a combination of technical expertise and political experience who can set the right tone AND get things done during the grace period. Waiting until the grace period is over to find this balance will lead to missed opportunities and shortened time frames that may not be conducive to implementing change.
- b. However, **change requires more than leadership: it requires system operators.** Systems are underpinned by processes and rules. Finding people at the outset that know how to use them to support a vision of change is key. Many processes and rules have been created with good intent but have become cumbersome, exclusive, or captured. Understanding how to reclaim them for a new purpose requires experienced bureaucrats who can quietly shift the system to serve a new agenda within institutional parameters and/or propose feasible changes.
- c. **Find, recruit, and promote mission-driven bureaucrats.** Individuals who are intrinsically motivated are relentless problem solvers. They care deeply about the mission (e.g., education, improving health, reducing poverty) and want to see results. They also value the autonomy to exercise judgment in complex or uncertain situations, rather than just following rigid procedures or ensuring compliance. Within the public sector, and together in a team, they can be an important force for change. Nurture them.
- d. **Take the time to invest in changing mindsets and removing obstacles for public servants to be able to serve.** Ultimately, you want your team to be true public servants: proudly serving the public. Most public servants do not go into public service with a bad attitude, but the system can quickly make them develop one. Most change teams need bureaucrats to get behind their agenda in order to achieve scale over pockets of effectiveness. Changing mindsets is possible, but it doesn't happen overnight. It requires time, resources, and re-enforcement from leadership. Watching public servants regain their faith in serving the public is a change that will bear fruit, regardless of who is in power.
- e. **Teams naturally work in silos: force collaboration.** However good the individuals in your team, most systems are designed to and used to working in a collection of small silos. These

silos are hard to break down because individuals are often motivated to claim successes as their own and rewarded by the system for individual achievements. Solving complex problems normally requires a multi-faceted approach with collaboration across agencies. Most problems worth solving in public service are complex, as livelihoods are complex. Leadership needs to signal zero tolerance for working in silos and to provide nimble tools, not cumbersome metrics or layers of delivery teams, to make it happen and also reward those that practice collaboration. Left to their own devices, most teams will fall back into working in a siloed system, because it is too hard to fight the system single-handedly.

- f. **Give autonomy to your teams, but have their backs when they need it.** Autonomy matters more than compliance in “high-discretion” tasks (Honig, 2024). When bureaucrats face uncertainty or complexity (like in service delivery), strict rules and top-down control limit their effectiveness. Giving your teams autonomy allows them to innovate, adapt, and respond to real conditions on the ground. Allowing teams the space, the resources, and the trust to do what they were hired to do, without checking back with and second guessing what the boss wants, is critical to getting results.

3. Implementation of change takes time: manage short-term political incentives while balancing longer-term transformation

Many political settlements and bureaucratic cultures incentivise quick turnover of decision makers, which can thwart realistic time frames to implement change. At the same time, political windows of opportunity are often short. The system will fight back at attempts to change it, often leading reform teams to feel like they spend most of their day firefighting: focused on short-term tactics rather than on transformational change and medium-term plans to achieve them. The risk of spending a whole administration playing defense is real, and lots of small gains do not add up to transformation. Recognising this at the outset, and being specific about it, might include:

- a. **Be ready to hit the ground running** and lay plans for institutional change early on. This will enable you to get the hard stuff done early, clarify the operating environment for allies, align the incentives needed to foster change, and turn attention to achieving it at scale.
- b. **Protect teams from short-termism.** Proactively manage the political storms that often affect appointed positions and ensure that strong technical teams are shielded from political disruptions. This helps maintain functional focus, avoiding a situation where everyone does everything but does nothing well and secures the time needed to pilot and implement changes at scale.
- c. **Ensure delivery, sooner rather than later,** on some transactional change in order to show progress, to test new ways of doing things before taking them to scale, and to build a supportive environment.

4. Actively forge coalitions to help navigate the turbulent waters of the policy arena and support change at scale.

The recent attempt to insert justice into Colombia's energy transition journey is state-centric and stems from the administration's vision of a strong, redistributive state. But history has shown that limitations in achieving transactional changes at scale may well have been reversed by a more proactive attempt to forge coalitions with other actors in the system who could, in turn, support the implementation of the new vision. More specifically, the following reflections are offered:

- a. **Build on the experience of existing actors** championing change within the system. Resist the urge to reinvent the wheel, and use existing examples of "positive deviance" within systems to learn and understand if and how they might be taken to scale.
- b. **Identify others with incentives to support change.** In the case of Colombia, the private sector is large and diverse, and while there are certainly interests that will resist change, it is also true that there is an increasing number of private sector actors that will support new opportunities. Unpacking specific sets of actors and individuals around action-oriented goals, building common visions, and then supporting relentless problem solving attempts to navigate change while discovering politically feasible pathways forward can bring powerful creativity to shepherding change that is rarely possible for a single actor (see [The Asia Foundation](#)). It is worth emphasising that members of coalitions are not necessarily political supporters and don't need to agree on everything. In fact, picking people who all think the same is a recipe for failure. And, do not expect coalitions to be life-long friends. They are problem solvers. Once they have achieved their shared goal, they move on.
- c. **Avoid dismissing whole sectors of actors and generating unnecessary enemies.** Potential allies -- individuals who are motivated and have both the incentive and capability to support change -- can be found in most sectors. Blanket statements that put large groups of people on the defensive can be counterproductive and lead to the unnecessary alienation of potential allies. Staying on message is tough, particularly in divided contexts and when under attack, but avoid the temptation to let off steam, which may bring short-term relief but will threaten to change plans in the long term. This does not mean that you cannot be candid or that you need to leave ideology at the door, but to implement a vision of change at scale, allies are required. Find them and leverage their experience and expertise. Governing is hard. Enemies of change are plentiful and often powerful. Try not to create more where you don't need to, and operate knowing that there are allies in the strangest of places waiting to be tapped.

5. Changing narratives and dreaming big is powerful in a world divided into information siloes.

The Petro administration has been relentless at shifting the public narrative to include a more justice-centred and human approach at home. The president is a powerful orator, and many in his team have proved to be credible messengers about a different approach where the state is a guarantor of rights for everyone and plays an activist role in ensuring that those who have not yet

accessed those rights are prioritised by public investment. Even the administration's critics agree that perhaps their biggest success has been the shift in public narrative. It is hard to overestimate the potential impact of this, particularly in a context where information silos often prevent the generation of new narratives of hope. Justice is now an integral part of the energy transition journey in public discourse in Colombia, and while it is hard to estimate the impact of this in concrete terms, the realm of what is possible and for whom has clearly shifted. With this changing narrative, there has been an explosion of new courses, organisations, and voices contributing to and shepherding in the next phase of the country's journey. This alone has had a democratising effect, broadening an agenda that had, until recently, largely been seen as a technical one to serve new business interests.

Colombia has continued to use its global influence to broaden the global narrative of what is needed to confront the climate crisis. During the UNGA 80th Climate Summit President Petro, along with President Lula, Prime Minister Sanchez, and other leaders used this platform to make impassioned pleas for ambitious global action, in keeping with the agreements made in Paris in 2015. In doing so, they have succeeded in isolating the attempts made by the U.S. President to write off energy transition as “a scam” and have kept alive the hope needed to bring action globally to combat climate change.

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Annex 1. Conceptual framework and Methodology

This story has been woven from a variety of Colombian voices and is framed by previous work across disciplines to understand change. We focus on one element of the country's Just Energy Transition (JET) — the Energy Communities — and make no attempt to evaluate impact. Rather, we draw on previous attempts to depict stories of change to understand the contextual, institutional, and bureaucratic factors that enable it, as well as the strategies used. As such, we attempt to provide further insights into how change happens, focusing on emerging lessons for other practitioners of change.

One resource we drew on was the Oxfam toolkit for Stories of Change (Green, 2019) which highlights, for example, the importance of context: institutions, agents, and events. Green's original model proposes that change involves four interconnected components operating in dynamic relationship with one another (see figure 1).

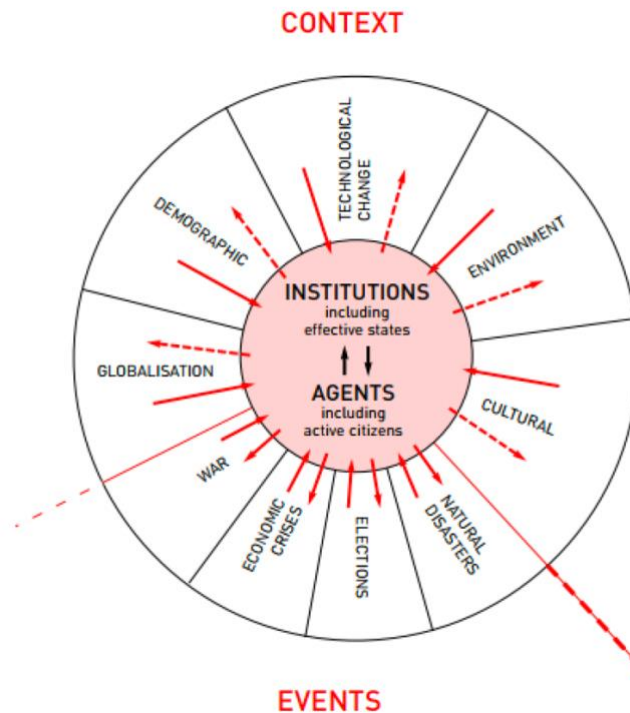
1. Context refers to the wider environmental factors shaping change — demographic shifts, globalisation, technological change, environmental pressures, and cultural dynamics.
2. Institutions are the organisations and rules — both formal (civil service, rule of law, democratic systems) and informal (social norms, family structures, public authority) — that establish the “rules of the game.”
3. Agents are the organisations and individuals actively involved in promoting or blocking change: social movements, political parties, elites, military, and faith groups, and
4. Events are one-off occurrences that trigger broader change — elections, wars, pandemics, natural disasters, and economic crises.

Green proposes a 4-step process which starts with the identification of these components of change, to then complement this with the development of a timeline of the change process, and a power analysis enabled by a stakeholder mapping. The process finalizes with an analysis of the dynamics of change considering cumulative and sequential change, accidents, critical junctures, and setbacks while being aware that change often coalesces around inspirational ideas and individuals, organizations can change the balance of power, and the relevance of demonstration effect (Green, 2019).

Expanding the toolkit for Stories of Change

We built on the components of change, power analysis, and dynamics of change (see figure 2) to make it properly suited for analysing change in considering political settlements and policy arenas, while considering the different viewpoints of protagonists of the JET in Colombia. We based this expansion of the model on literature on:

Figure A.1. How change happens – How to analyse change processes



Source: Green (2019) p. 2

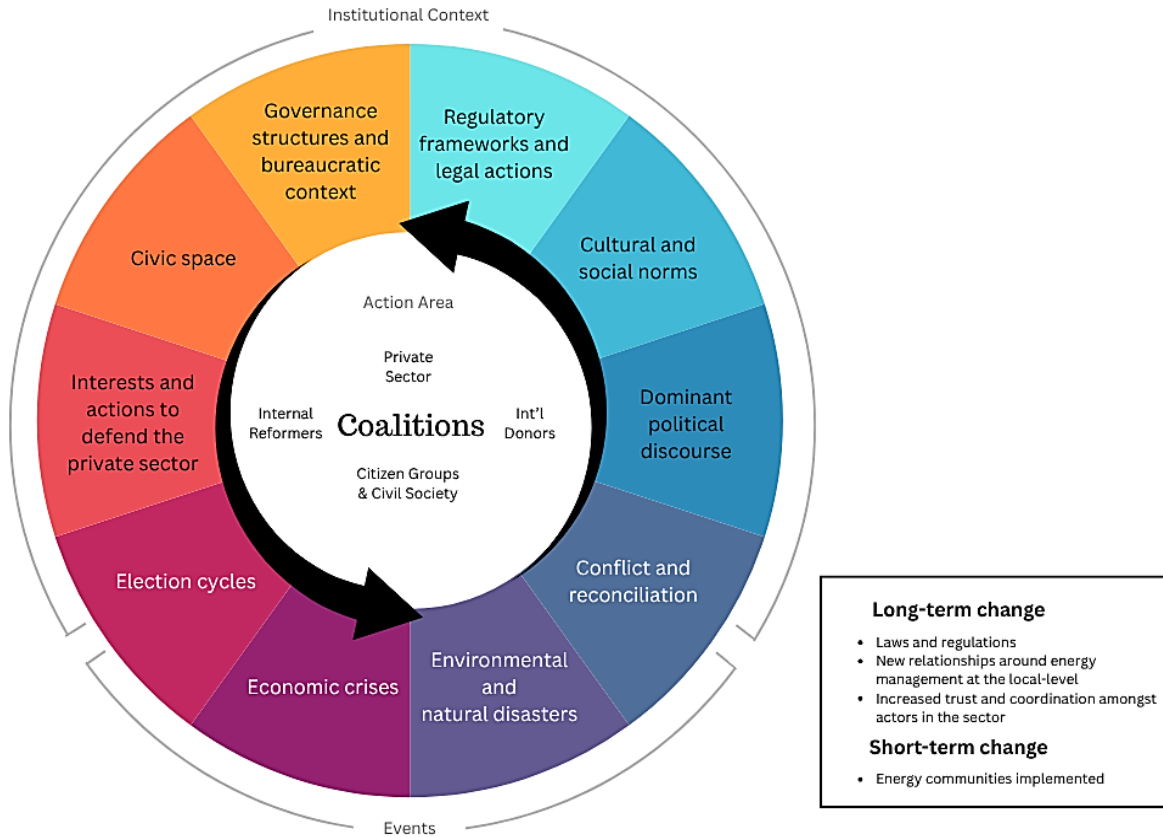
1. Political settlements are a particularly important part of the context story, and so we draw on Roy, Slota & Khan (2022) and Hudson et al. (2025) and our application of their methodology to Colombia and its energy sector (Bain & Florez, 2024).
2. We used literature of coalitions of change to explore how to navigate politically feasible reform paths (The Asia Foundation, 2023).
3. We have also endeavoured to unpack how the policy arena, framed by specific contexts and events, enable or block attempts at change. Within the policy arena, we sought to understand bureaucratic autonomy (Roll, 2023) and bureaucratic empowerment (Honig, 2024), as well as adaptive problem solving (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2013) and the use of paradigmatic ideas to shape public narratives (Hickey & Mohan, 2023).

Additionally, based on this literature and our experience working in Colombia, we also divide change emerging from the policy arena into two types:

1. Transactional/Short-Term changes — new services delivered that are quantifiable through numbers of roads, solar panels, or books delivered, for example
2. Transformational/Long-Term change — changes in laws, incentives and relationships that can have long-lasting impacts but which elude quantification

In the following pages we present the literature used to expand the Oxfam toolkit for Stories of Change framework and how we used it. After this section, we present briefly the method we used.

Figure A.2. Circle of Change Framework



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Political settlements are a particularly important part of the context story, and so we draw on Roy, Slota and Khan (2022) and Hudson et al. (2025) and our application of their methodology to Colombia (Bain and Florez, 2024). Political settlements are “a description of the distribution of power across organizations that are relevant for analysing a specific institutional or policy problem.” (Khan, 2021, p. 509). The SOAS-ACE framework was developed as an approach to anti-corruption. It is different from conventional anti-corruption approaches as it understands that in some developing contexts rule breaking is better explained because breaking the rules is in the best interest of powerful actors, and there are no clearly identified countervailing actors who have the power, interest, and capacity to advance change. We used this framework to understand the broader governance system and implementation gaps. 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. “We borrowed the concepts of 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, and Interests, the motivation of actors to invest their time and energy in sustaining change” (Bain and Florez, 2024, P. 9).

Inspired by the work by the Asia Foundation (2023) we place coalitions at the centre of the circle of change, based on the idea that real change depends on different powerful actors coming together to “find ways to overcome the lack of incentives for change at the heart of the political settlement” (The Asia Foundation, 2023, P. 10). Thus, in our framework change rarely, if ever, happens because of lone efforts, and for change to come about and be sustained over time coalitions are needed. Coalitions are “a tactical alliance of groups and individuals pursuing a tangible social or political change that they cannot achieve by working individually” (The Asia Foundation, 2023, P. 10). Thus, understanding, whether, and to what extent there are coalitions fostering change process is relevant to understand what type of change is achieved, how it can be sustained, and what types of power and resources might be needed to overcome existing barriers and shift system dynamics.

While the role of coalitions and how they navigate the political arena are key to understanding how change happens and how it can be achieved, it’s important not to forget about the internal reformers within the state, the challenges they face given the political settlement dynamics and bureaucratic hurdles. Thus, we explore whether these internal reformers have an enabling environment for becoming mission driven bureaucrats (Honig, 2024), or to what extent the relation of the institutions where they work with the surrounding political context inhibits the development and implementation of innovative and impactful practices (Roll, 2023) as well as how powerful shifts in paradigmatic ideas – such as the introduction of justice in the energy transition – can enable or inhibit change (Hickey and Mohan 2023).

Honig (2024) work on mission-driven bureaucrats argues that often strict compliance management, based on the achievement of targets and strict adherence to rules, tends to undermine the autonomy of public servants who often need to innovate and find delicate solutions to complex real world problems. The author argues that creating the condition for public servants to work toward the fulfilment of service – empowerment management – creates the space to solve problems, innovate, and the fulfilment of missions. Relatedly, informed by the work by Roll (2023) consider energy agencies In the political, fiscal, and regulatory context they are and how the political settlement shapes their possibilities to advance system wide change and build on existing pockets of effectiveness.

We also build on Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock (2013) to explore whether and to what extent reformers within and outside the government can use adaptive problem solving to play an effective part in advance the institutional reforms needed to bring about change and get the conditions in place to make the change sustainable over time. In other words, assessing how reformers have been able to bring about real reforms that go beyond isomorphic mimicry – or a change just in paper.

Finally, we introduce a clear distinction in the type of change that can be achieved. On the one hand, there can be transactional change, or change in the short term that prioritizes the achievement of institutional metrics (such as increased access to energy). This type of change can be good for demonstrating the potential of the change agenda and its alignment with political discourse, but if it is the only type of change that is pursued it will hinder the work of public servants, the sustainability of results in the mid-to-long term, and the shift in practices and relationships among actors. On the other hand, transformational change refers to long-term changes in laws, incentives, and ideas guiding the behaviour and relationships of actors in the system. These changes tend to have long lasting effects but pursuing them solely without showing results in the short term can reduce the credibility of the change agenda and reduce the reaping of political benefits. Reformers need to carefully balance these two types of changes to successfully achieve change.

Gathering the Story: Narrative and Method

Following Green (2019) we identified the main components of change according to our circle of change framework based on literature review and experiential engagement in work on energy communities in Colombia. Based on this we developed a timeline to understand the change process in context of the previous administrations and Colombia's path in the energy transition and distilled a set of initial hypothesis and guiding questions for narrative sharing sessions.

The initial hypothesis we developed were focused on bottlenecks that in our view hindered progress in the implementation of energy communities under the just energy transition work. These initial hypotheses that we shared in advance with participants and were grouped into six categories.

1. Bureaucratic inertia: the difficulties involved in transforming the norms and practices of public administration in order to implement reformist policies. This category of bottlenecks includes challenges such as limited experience in providing local and social accompaniment, as well as the legal and regulatory constraints that hinder the implementation of reforms.
2. Institutional design that favours the continuation of the status quo: the requirements and processes embedded in the state that raise the transaction costs of initiatives seeking to reform the system. This category includes challenges such as the difficulties in establishing a quorum of reform-minded experts within the CREG, and the competing regulatory priorities that pull institutional attention in different directions.
3. Weakness of decentralisation in the energy sector: the limited clarity around the roles and responsibilities of local and departmental public agencies within the energy system and in the implementation of energy projects. This bottleneck includes challenges such as the weak incentives for subnational governments to participate in and support energy initiatives.
4. Weak incentives for inter-institutional coordination: the obstacles associated with coordinating across government sectors for the implementation of the Energy Communities policy at the territorial level.

5. Weak and unclear incentives for mobilising investment and attracting new actors to the system: the difficulties associated with attracting investment to a sector in which the distribution of benefits is shifting as a result of redistributive and justice-focused reforms, compounded by the slow pace of regulatory approval for energy communities and the limited clarity around the investment incentives attached to them.
6. Limited prioritisation by the MME and difficulties in building a coalition around the JET, including challenges such as the fragmentation of agendas across civil society groups and academia, and donor portfolios that remain rigid and poorly suited to adapting to shifting priorities.

We also designed semi-structured interview guidelines covering personal and professional background; self-reflection on progress made; perspectives on the key bottlenecks; and views on the sustainability of the agenda. We conducted 20 interviews with a wide range of participants including public servants and politicians at the national and subnational level, as well as representatives from the private sector, donors, academics, civil society organizations.

In preparing for our narrative sharing sessions, we drew on the methodological guidance from both Successful Societies at Princeton University (Innovations for Successful Societies, 2011) as well as more recent guidance around Participatory Narrative Inquiry (Kurtz, 2016). These approaches guided us to understand the accounts of the people who lived the just energy transition and has actively engaged in shaping it. Our focus was to prioritize participant voices, not looking for consensus among participants but on capturing different perspectives to build a cohesive story of change.



RESULTS FOR DEVELOPMENT



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