Yale Environment 360

The Jepírachi wind farm on the Guajira Peninsula, Colombia. MANUEL SALINAS BUSTAMANTE, ARCHIVO INDEPAZ

In Colombia, Indigenous Lands Are Ground Zero for a Wind Energy Boom

The northernmost tip of South America, home to the Indigenous Wayúu people, is the epicenter of Colombia's nascent wind energy industry. But Wayúu leaders are concerned that the government and wind companies are not dealing fairly with the inhabitants of this long-neglected land.

BY MARÍA PAULA RUBIANO • MAY 3, 2021

It all started about four years ago, when SUVs and pickup trucks drove uninvited onto their lands, remembers Olimpia Palmar, a member of the Indigenous Wayúu peoples, who have historically occupied the La Guajira desert in northern Colombia and Venezuela. "We started seeing these *arijunas* [Wayuúunaiki for non-native peoples] wearing construction helmets and boots and vests, getting out of the cars, checking the desert, and then leaving," she recalls.

Word soon began circulating across the Guajira Peninsula, from the *rancherías* – the community's rural settlements – to the few urban centers: The *arijunas* were offering money to those who would let them plant tall, slim towers on their lands to measure the wind. On La Guajira's dusty earth, where few things grow, towers began to sprout. By 2019, at least 30 wind-measuring towers had risen on Wayúu land, according to a report by Indepaz, a nonprofit research center.

Today, four years after the first towers were built, their purpose has become clear: The Colombian government has designated La Guajira as the country's promised land for renewable wind energy. On this remote peninsula – the northernmost land in South America, where the winds of the Caribbean sweep unimpeded across the landscape – the government is launching a host of wind-energy projects. Sixteen

wind farms have been approved, with two of them already under construction, according to data from the Mines and Energy Ministry.

The government says the La Guajira Peninsula could generate 17 percent of Colombia's electricity by 2031.

Although the government hasn't made public how many wind farms will be built in total, Indepaz's study found that 57 wind-energy projects proposed by 19 companies are awaiting approval. Most of the companies are local affiliates of multinational companies, like Italy's Enel Green Power (building 10 wind farms) and Spain's EDP Renewables (building two wind parks). The government says that as many as 2,500 wind turbines on the La Guajira Peninsula could generate 17 percent of Colombia's electricity by 2031. "La Guajira will become the epicenter of Colombia's energy transition," Diego Mesa Puyo, minister for Mines and Energy, said earlier this year.

Ground zero for this ambitious renewable energy initiative is the ancestral lands of the Wayúus, who say they have so far been kept largely in the dark about the massive scope of the planned wind developments, and how much their people will be compensated for the disturbance of the lands they have inhabited for several thousand years.

In South America, Indigenous people have frequently had their lands taken from them, or seen their territories encroached upon, by mining ventures and oil and gas exploitation. But in recent years, renewable energy projects have become a growing source of conflict in the region, leading to allegations of forced displacement of Indigenous communities and harm to their livelihoods. In the last decade, according to the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (BHRRC), more than half of the environmental conflicts associated with renewable energy projects globally have taken place in Central and South America.

Traditionally a semi-nomadic people, the Wayúu – who number 400,000 today, organized in 30 matrilineal clans – are mostly goat and sheep herders, fishers, merchants, and, if there's enough rain, occasional farmers of beans, melons, pumpkins, and millet. The scarcity of water and plants forces herders to constantly move throughout their 4,200-square-mile reservation looking for water and plants, explains Joanna Barney, a researcher at the Institute for Development and Peace Studies (Indepaz). The arrival of wind energy projects will inevitably disrupt this way of living.

The late German Aguilar, traditional authority of the Ceuta tribe, and his family in 2019. MANUEL SALINAS BUSTAMANTE, ARCHIVO INDEPAZ

Barney and her colleagues have estimated that the wind farms – with their roads and infrastructure, including transmission lines connecting to the national grid – will significantly alter the landscape, affecting up to 40 percent of Wayúu lands. The disturbance goes beyond the physical loss of access to the land, explains Weildler Guerra Curvelo, an anthropologist at Los Andes University and a member of the Wayúus. "Land is like a book where they read their history; every hill, every bush, every rock has a meaning," he says. "Planting wind turbines is like taking an eraser or an inkblot and erasing that book."

The governor of La Guajira department, Nemesio Roys Garzón, has touted the arrival of wind-energy parks as "a historic opportunity" to leave behind the peninsula's dependence on coal and gas extraction, which represents almost 40 percent of the region's GDP. He also presents wind energy as a chance to "develop our communities, something that hasn't happened in previous economic booms," with the government promising the wind farms will create 11,000 new jobs.

Despite a string of extractive activities in La Guajira – starting with pearls during the Spanish colonization, followed by gas, oil, and coal mining in the last century – the Wayúu have seen little benefit. Poverty rates among Wayúus are as high as 94 percent in some rural settlements, 90 percent of adults rely on informal jobs, and child deaths from malnutrition are six times higher than the national average. Their situation is so dire that in 2017 Colombia's Constitutional Court – ruling in a human rights lawsuit against the Colombian state – found that Wayúus, especially children, face a severe violation of their basic rights.

> "Why can't [wind farms] also mean development for the ancestral owners of this land?" asks a Wayúu activist.

The Wayúus interviewed for this article said they are open to wind-energy development on their lands. “We know these projects will bring development for the country,” says José Silva Duarte, director of the humans rights advocacy group Nación Wayúu and a member of the Wayúu Pesuapa community. “But if that’s the case, then why can’t they also mean development for the ancestral owners of this land, the Wayúus? We just want to be active partners of the companies.”

In Colombia, projects on Indigenous lands need the informed consent of the affected communities. But according to activists, leaders, and researchers who work in the region, the consultations to approve the projects are being rushed and are not providing the information communities need to make decisions. Silva Duarte and Barney have found that in most cases, companies arrived in *rancherías* under the pretext of installing wind-measuring towers, explaining that a bigger project might follow. Silva Duarte says companies offer anything from food to school supplies to sewing materials (woven bags are an important income source for Wayúu women) in exchange for signatures that prove that people had been consulted.

Most of the time, Silva Duarte says, these consultations lack the cultural sensitivity required to avoid fracturing an already vulnerable group. Sometimes the arrival of companies offering gifts or substantial sums of money ends up creating or reviving old confrontations between members of different clans. The simmering violence has led several company representatives to ask the government to deploy the Colombian Army in Wayúu land, according to Barney.

“When you put all these things together, you realize that what’s at stake is the existence itself of the Wayúus,” Barney says.

A woman prepares a meal in a traditional Wayúu home. MANUEL SALINAS BUSTAMANTE, ARCHIVO INDEPAZ

Last August, a man from a nearby *ranchería* told the Palmar family that a company wanted to construct a wind-measuring antenna on their land. Like many Wayúus, most members of Palmar’s extended family live in houses made of dried mud and

woven jotojoro, a soft wood. Money is scarce, says Palmar, and the company representative was offering the family 20 million Colombian pesos – about $5,500 – if they let the company install a wind-measuring tower on their land.

The family was skeptical and requested a meeting with the company, which took place in the home of a company employee, according to Yaneidis Bonivento Palmar, Olimpia's cousin. Talking via computer, a company representative went through a PowerPoint presentation, but neither in that meeting nor a subsequent one did the representative mention that the tower was just the first step of a future wind-energy project, Bonivento Palmar says. Despite the insistence of some relatives to continue, the family decided to end the talks, and no wind-measuring tower has been built on their land.

Since August 2020, around 200 consultation meetings have taken place in La Guajira in roughly 100 Wayúu settlements that would be directly impacted by wind energy projects. Silva Duarte's Nación Wayúu has helped five communities reach an agreement with Energía Eólica La Vela, the Colombian affiliate of a Spanish company, Enerfín. The agreement includes a one-time payment of 500 million Colombian pesos ($137,000) and an annual payment of 200 million Colombian pesos ($55,000) for 30 years for each community, according to Silva Duarte. The money will be transferred to a fund handled by the companies and Wayúu representatives and will only be available to finance development projects such as repairing schools or building water wells. Other companies reached similar agreements, although for significantly smaller compensation, according to Indepaz's report. In total, eight of the wind farms have reached agreements with several communities, while still negotiating with others. These agreements have not been made public.

Anthropologist Guerra Curvelo says authorities have been behaving as "the press offices for the companies, serving them instead of the people." Last November, the governor of La Guajira said that the primary goal of the Secretariat of Indigenous Affairs was to "provide assistance for the different companies so that the prior consent consultations are not traumatic." The governor told Yale Environment 360 in an interview that the main goal of his cabinet is to ensure that "no one abuses the Indigenous communities, but that communities don't abuse their power either, scaring away international investment."

Rushed consultations with the communities could erupt later into confrontations among Wayúu clans.

Last September, as consultations on the peninsula dragged on because of the pandemic, Colombian President Iván Duque Marquez signed an executive order to expedite them. If agreements are not reached between the communities and the companies in three meetings, the Ministry of Interior would have to evaluate the impacts of the projects and define the compensations within three months – a provision that would almost certainly benefit the companies, indigenous rights experts say.

What's worrisome about the situation, says Guerra Curvelo, is that "what is poorly agreed erupts years later." The rushed consultations could foster clan confrontations that will simmer. Guerra Curvelo experienced this firsthand as governor of La Guajira in 2017 when an earlier pioneering wind energy project called Jepírachi had to stop operation for several months because of inter-clan disputes over control of ancestral lands. "Companies arrive with this western mindset, thinking that if someone occupies a place, they must be the owners," Guerra Curvelo says. "But it doesn't work like that in the Wayúu world."

What's happening now, Barney says, echoes what happened almost half a century ago, when oil companies arrived in the region. In the late 1970s, two clans violently disputed control over different portions of the land so they could negotiate with the newly arrived Texas Petroleum Company. The "gas wars," as the episode is known locally, ended in the exile of one of the families involved. Similar conflicts erupted when major coal companies entered the region to build El Cerrejón, the largest open-pit coal mine in Latin America.

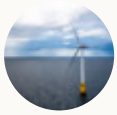
There are warning signs of "wind wars" brewing in La Guajira. Silva Duarte and Barney have documented three cases in which members of the same family have violently confronted each other over negotiating rights with wind energy companies, resulting in as many as seven deaths.

An aerial view of a traditional Wayúu cemetery. MANUEL SALINAS BUSTAMANTE, ARCHIVO INDEPAZ

The Ministry of Interior and the private nonprofit Ser Colombia, which represents more than 70 companies developing renewable energy projects, declined to comment for this article. However, in previous statements, Enerfín, Enel, and Celsia said that they were committed to bringing development to the communities and that they will comply with existing human rights legislation regarding prior consultations in Colombia.

Political scientist Luis Baquero, who has worked as a consultant for companies like El Cerrejón, says that two things are needed to ensure honest negotiations. First,

companies need to get over the "social responsibility" mindset during negotiations and treat Indigenous peoples as equals, not charity cases. Second, the government needs to provide access to education, health, electricity, and water so these fundamental rights do not end up being what Wayúus bargain with companies.



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Barney says that at heart this is an issue of equity. "If these lands belonged to Sarmiento Angulo [the richest man in Colombia], would companies be negotiating with him the same way they do with these communities?" she asks. "Would they be offering to fix the water well or the school's roof, or give a couple of canoes and solar panels as fair compensation?"

María Paula Rubiano is a freelance science journalist based in Colombia who writes about biodiversity, environmental justice, food, and climate change. She started her career reporting on Colombia's diverse ecosystems for El Espectador newspaper. Since graduating from New York University's masters program in Science, Health and Environmental Reporting, her work has appeared in Popular Science, Audubon, Gastro Obscura, The Open Notebook, Mutante.org, and more. MORE →