

The politics of place in energy transformations: Contesting green extractivism through indigenous governance in Unión Hidalgo, Mexico

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Abstract

Dominant discourses around global energy transitions often frame them as neutral, technical responses to climate change, yet in practice, these corporate-state projects reproduce extractive and colonial logics, particularly in the Global South. Rooted in growth-oriented and technocratic governance, normative transition narratives have continuously marginalised Indigenous knowledge and territorial worldviews, generating contestation and discontent. We argue that Indigenous resistance to green extractivism in the form of wind energy development is not merely oppositional but generative, producing alternative socio-technical and social-ecological imaginaries, as well as governance models through transformative strategies grounded in land-based autonomy. Engaging critically with social transformation theory, this article analyses how the Zapotec members of the agrarian assembly and land defenders of Unión Hidalgo in Oaxaca, Mexico, resist the Gunaa Sicarú wind project. Through legal mobilisation, autonomous institution-building and discursive strategies, the community challenges dominant energy imaginaries and articulates place-based autonomy within and against global energy politics. The case demonstrates how Indigenous communities become key agents in reimagining energy transformations by mobilising relational understandings of territory through evolving combinations of strategies that unsettle technocratic agendas and expose the colonial logics underpinning green extractivism.

Keywords

Energy transition, indigenous governance, Mexico, social transformation theory, socio-technical imaginaries

La política del lugar en las transformaciones energéticas: Confrontando el extractivismo verde a través de la gobernanza indígena en Unión Hidalgo, México

Resumen

Los discursos dominantes sobre las transiciones energéticas globales suelen presentarlas como respuestas neutrales y técnicas al cambio climático; sin embargo, en la práctica, estos proyectos corporativos-estatales reproducen lógicas extractivas y coloniales, especialmente en el Sur Global. Arraigadas en una gobernanza tecnocrática y orientada al crecimiento, las narrativas normativas de transición han marginado continuamente el conocimiento indígena y las cosmovisiones territoriales, generando conflicto y descontento. Sostenemos que la resistencia indígena al extractivismo verde, que toma la forma de desarrollo de energía eólica, no es meramente opositora, sino generativa, produciendo imaginarios sociotécnicos y socioecológicos alternativos, así como modelos de gobernanza a través de estrategias transformadoras basadas en la autonomía territorial. A

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través de un análisis crítico de la teoría de la transformación social, este artículo examina cómo los miembros zapotecas de la asamblea agraria y defensores de la tierra de Unión Hidalgo en Oaxaca, México, resisten el proyecto eólico Gunaa Sicarú. Mediante la movilización legal, la construcción de instituciones autónomas y estrategias discursivas, la comunidad desafía los imaginarios energéticos dominantes y articula una autonomía territorial dentro y frente a la política energética global. El caso demuestra cómo las comunidades indígenas se convierten en agentes clave para reimaginar las transformaciones energéticas, movilizand o entendimientos relacionales del territorio a través de combinaciones evolutivas de estrategias que desestabilizan las agendas tecnocráticas y exponen las lógicas coloniales que sustentan el extractivismo verde.

Palabras clave

transición energética, imaginarios sociotécnicos, gobernanza indígena, teoría de la transformación social, México

Introduction

Rather than neutral technical solutions, energy transitions reconfigure the political and geographic realities of governance, social dynamics, and landscapes (Lockwood et al., 2016; Newell et al., 2023). Critics argue that what is categorised as ‘green development’ frequently drives corporate capital accumulation, obscuring the socio-spatial inequalities built into its rollout (Riquito, 2023; Tornel and Dunlap, 2025). Because energy use is anchored in geopolitical hierarchies, a meaningful shift would demand a thorough transformation of social structures, labour organisations and consumer behaviours rather than superficial technological replacements (Newell, 2019; Tornel and Dunlap, 2025). Without this broader social-ecological transformation (Brand and Wissen, 2017), contemporary climate initiatives ultimately exacerbate extractivist practices, resource consumption and material throughput (Soto, 2025). This expansion does not occur in a vacuum; rather, geographical and socio-technical perspectives highlight that infrastructure, energy systems and policy interventions are embedded in place, producing uneven power dynamics and territorial effects (Bridge et al., 2013; Truffer et al., 2015). In this sense, these contested arenas are not merely technical adjustments, but profound sites of social transformation where community resistance actively reshapes future governance pathways (Haarstad, 2017; Batel, 2020; Devine-Wright, 2009).

These dynamics are particularly evident in the Global South, where energy transitions unfold through coloniality’s logics (e.g., in technocratic governance and green extractivism), reproducing racialised, territorial and epistemic hierarchies beyond formal colonial rule (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Tornel, 2024). In Latin America, energy megaprojects frequently intersect with Indigenous territories, generating disputes over land rights, communal governance, and free, prior, and informed consent (Dunlap, 2019; Soto, 2025). These processes involve not only material dispossession but also systemic, epistemic and ontological displacements (de la Cadena and Blaser, 2023) that fundamentally reconfigure how local communities define territory, sovereignty and collective life.

Against this backdrop, this article explores the case of Unión Hidalgo in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca,

Mexico, a region targeted for extensive wind energy development. The Gunaa Sicarú project, promoted as part of Mexico’s ‘green energy transition’, became a focal point of contestation. Over more than two decades, community members from the agrarian assembly have contested the French state-owned utility EDF’s wind project through legal mobilisation, transnational advocacy and the renewal of local autonomous institutions (Lucio, 2016; Dunlap and Correa-Arce, 2022). In doing so, the struggle links communal land governance to global debates on corporate accountability and human rights, illustrating how local and transnational strategies intertwine. The case therefore offers a unique lens through which to examine how place-based politics reshape the legal, cultural and territorial dimensions of energy transitions.

To analyse these dynamics, this article critically engages with Wright’s (2010, 2013) theory of social transformation, which distinguishes interstitial, symbiotic and ruptural strategies through which actors pursue change under constrained conditions. We argue that Indigenous actors and civil society mobilise hybrid strategies that repoliticise law, collective memory, and communal governance to defend territory and reshape energy transition pathways. Framed through the concept of socio-technical imaginaries as collectively held visions of desirable futures (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015), the analysis traces how global discourses of ‘green growth’ and energy modernisation encounter and are reworked through place-based governance and cultural values (Benner, 2024; Feola et al., 2023). Drawing on decolonial perspectives (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Escobar, 2018a), our reinterpretation of Wright’s framework foregrounds Indigenous epistemologies and territorial practices as direct struggles for autonomy against persistent colonial power structures (Figure 1).

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews literature on energy transitions, political ecology, and decolonial literature and how social transformation theory can help make sense of it. We explore how Wright’s typology can be productively expanded by incorporating place-based perspectives and reinterpreting its categories through territorial and Indigenous frameworks, grounding the analysis in the specific histories, governance practices and political aspirations that emerge within communities. The third section describes the

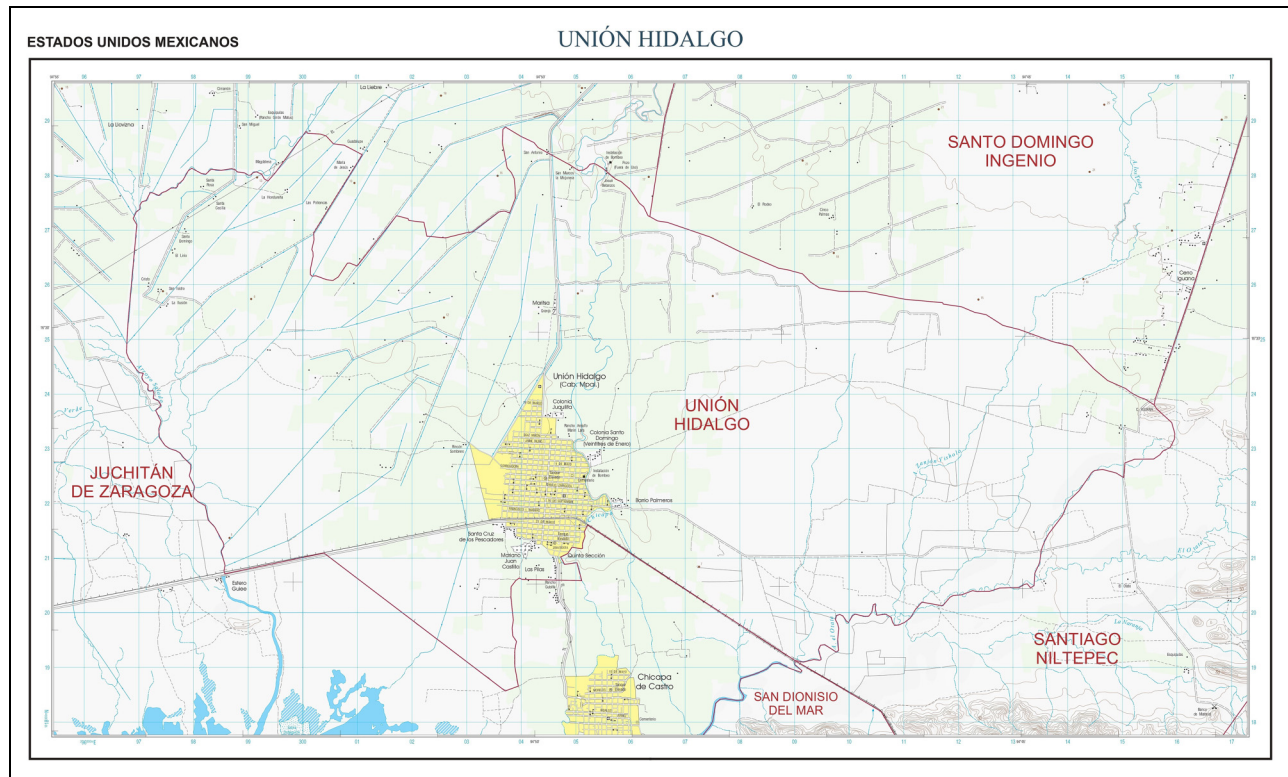


Figure 1. Topographical municipal map of Unión Hidalgo (source: vector data set of topographic information, INEGI, 2021).

case of Unión Hidalgo and the methodological approach. The fourth analyses the community's symbiotic and interstitial strategies, tracing how legal mobilisation and collective memory construct place-framings that sustain autonomy and hints at points in the process where ruptural strategies emerged. We conclude with implications for understanding contestations as transformative practice in transition scholarship and policy, advocating for frameworks that centres justice, autonomy and the recognition of multiple futures.

Literature review

Energy transitions as sites of extractivism

The narrative of an ongoing, transition to renewable energy has been widely contested. Critical scholarship demonstrates that such shifts are far from neutral, technical responses to climate change, but instead operate as deeply political and spatial processes that reconfigure governance, social relations and material landscapes (Lockwood et al., 2016; Batel and Rudolph, 2021). They often obscure the opaque material realities, intensive mining operations and polluting chemical industries upon which these low-carbon technologies fundamentally rely (Tornel and Dunlap, 2025; Lohmann, 2024). Transition processes reshape power relations embedded in place, linking infrastructure to territorial control and social meaning (Bridge and Gailing, 2020; Truffer et al., 2015),

with mainstream transition frameworks however often isolating technical change and global narratives from broader social-ecological transformations (Brand and Wissen, 2017; Hölscher et al., 2018). In doing so, they fail to account for the complex governance struggles, situated knowledges and local lived experiences (Gent and Tomei, 2017; Heras and Gupta, 2024).

A Global North bias also affects research on social acceptance, as it has often framed local contestation and resistance as obstruction rather than as legitimate political disagreement over development pathways (Batel, 2020) or as potentially generative for change (Devine-Wright, 2009). This bias carries over into dominant energy justice scholarship, that while foregrounding distributional and procedural concerns, remains technocratic and state centric. In contrast, critical and decolonial environmental justice perspectives centre structural power and coloniality (Tornel, 2024). For instance, political ecology scholarship repositions energy transitions as contested arenas of social transformation, where imaginaries of progress, justice and belonging are renegotiated (Haarstad, 2017; Arora and Stirling, 2023), situating energy conflicts within broader historical and territorial processes, particularly through analyses of environmental and ecological distribution conflicts (Avila-Calero, 2017; Martínez-Alier, 2017). This is exemplified on lithium extraction frontiers, where authors highlight how the Licknantay peoples' ancestral rules of reciprocity – which strictly prohibit extracting

more from the land than can be returned or thanked – directly clash with green extractivism (Soto, 2025).

These same ideological and physical battlegrounds manifest heavily in wind energy frontiers. A growing body of political ecology and energy geography scholarship has examined wind energy conflicts in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, highlighting struggles over free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), communal land governance and conflicts linked to ongoing energy development (Dunlap and Correa-Arce, 2022; Lucio, 2016; Dunlap, 2019). These wind and solar megaprojects form part of a broader national strategy to establish ‘energy enclaves’ in southern Mexico, aimed at intensifying energy transport and consumption networks while integrating the region into global markets (Colectivo Geocomunes, 2020). The Interoceanic Corridor illustrates this wider strategy, integrating wind energy into a broader framework of top-down territorial reconfigurations (Hofmann, 2022). Since 2019, its enforcement has triggered a sharp surge in regional homicides across municipalities like Salina Cruz and Santa María Mixtequilla. This insecurity is tied directly to land dispossession and the targeted assassinations of prominent land defenders who were killed for resisting predatory payouts, high energy tariffs and forced megaproject development (Crail et al., 2024). Such expansion often perpetuates green extractivism dynamics, commodifying climate solutions while reproducing colonial patterns of dependency (Dunlap and Jakobsen, 2020; Svampa and Viale, 2014). Green extractivism refers to the incorporation of resources such as wind, minerals, land and biodiversity into wider dynamics of state and corporate control that extend far beyond mere capital accumulation. Operating through processes of spatial appropriation, militarisation and dominant sustainability discourses, this mechanism drives green grabbing, land dispossession, and unequal ecological exchange (Bruna, 2022; Dunlap and Jakobsen, 2020). Following neoliberal reforms and the commodity consensus, Latin America has become a key site for producing ‘green’ raw materials and energy (Veltmeyer, 2016; Feliz and Melón, 2023). This shift has enabled new forms of enclosure and dispossession through a rebranded extractivism (Fairhead et al., 2012; Harvey, 2004). Rather than opposing an energy transition itself, communities across the continent are actively organising to resist these predatory corporate structures and processes that prevail as a threat to territories.

These processes have not only reconfigured territory but have reshaped socio-technical imaginaries, embedding colonial relations in new material and discursive forms, often reinforced through militarised and institutional mechanisms of control (Bridge and Gailing, 2020; Dunlap and Jakobsen, 2020). From a critical political economy perspective, dominant techno-managerial transition frameworks fail to address the colonial and patriarchal foundations of capitalism (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Scott and Smith, 2017). Rather than redistributing power, they tend to reinforce state and corporate control, undermining social-ecological justice (Bridge

et al., 2013; Newell et al., 2023). Lehmann and Alarcón (2023) trace the deep roots of these projects within historical patterns of territorial struggle and infrastructure expansion, challenging the developmental and global integration justifications (Dunlap, 2018; Hofmann, 2022). This dynamic directly intersects with systemic and ongoing resource exploitation inside Indigenous territories as structural injustices and localised forms of green colonialism (Sovacool, 2021; Gent and Tomei, 2017).

The development of energy megaprojects in the Isthmus has been described by scholars as part of processes of ‘world erasure’, whereby existing social, cultural and ecological relations are displaced to enable new infrastructures of circulation and extraction (Hofmann, 2024; Dunlap, 2019). Studies show how wind projects have produced conflicts over land, rents and territorial control, often reinforcing unequal power relations between corporations, the state, and local communities (Alonso Serna, 2024; Zárate et al., 2019). More broadly, these struggles unfold within processes of territorial occupation and commodification that generate new forms of dispossession, ultimately forcing communities to mobilise diverse legal, political and cultural strategies to defend their territories and ancestral ways of life.

From conflict to transformation

While political ecology and energy geography have extensively documented environmental conflicts and community resistance, less attention has been given to how Indigenous governance not only resists imposed projects but also actively redefines transition pathways through an interplay of different strategies throughout time (Rioux-Gobeil and Thomassin, 2024). Some of the work on the Isthmus has highlighted the micro-politics and frictions that emerge between community members, NGOs and other actors, noting that the contributions of legal teams have been appreciated by some members of the community (Dunlap and Correa-Arce, 2022). We suggest that closer attention to the diverse actions communities undertake to defend their territories can deepen our understanding of how these strategies contribute to articulating land defence struggles. This resonates with the diversification of defence strategies through alliances with different social actors, combining legal action with direct forms of resistance (Lucio, 2016). We therefore call for a shift in analytical focus from documenting conflict to examining the interplay of heterogeneous transformation strategies, including legal mobilisation, autonomous institution-building, and the ambivalent role of transnational advocacy, and how these evolve over time.

To this end, we critically engage with Wright’s social transformation framework, which advances emancipatory social science aimed at generating knowledge capable of challenging existing inequalities and power structures (Wright, 2010, p. 9). Wright identifies three core tasks: diagnosing and critically assessing the world as it exists, imagining and

elaborating viable alternatives, and exploring the obstacles, possibilities, and dilemmas of pursuing transformation. A fully developed theory of social transformation involves four interlinked components: a theory of social reproduction, a theory of the gaps and contradictions in reproduction, a theory of trajectories of unintended social change, and a theory of transformative strategies. These strategies operate through three logics: ruptural, interstitial and symbiotic. Interstitial strategies create autonomous spaces and institutions within or alongside existing structures. Symbiotic strategies advance social empowerment while addressing problems faced by dominant actors, thereby stabilising gains. Ruptural strategies involve sharp, disruptive interventions to challenge or overturn entrenched systems, though Wright emphasises that these are less common and carry greater long-term risks (Wright, 2010).

Wright emphasises that transformation is neither linear nor straightforward. While particular strategies may be more effective in specific contexts, a long-term ‘metamorphic’ trajectory depends on navigating the interplay of interstitial and symbiotic strategies, occasionally punctuated by ruptural moments. This perspective helps explain how communities pursue change even under constrained conditions, balancing immediate needs with broader, long-term transformative goals (Wright, 2013). It is also important to consider distinct pathways of change. Symbiotic strategies, for instance, have been identified as a key area for degrowth to further develop, complementing and supporting interstitial strategies rooted in autonomous grassroots action (D’Alisa, 2019). Building on this, D’Alisa and Kallis (2020) argue that it is precisely the interaction between interstitial and symbiotic strategies – rather than their isolation – that can, under specific conditions, create the preconditions for more profound, potentially ruptural transformations.

By applying this framework, we can move beyond the documentation of resistance or conflict in Indigenous territories in a narrow way. Instead, it allows us to examine how communities actively engage in a variety of strategies to further their claims for territory through legal, institutional and social arenas, combining multiple strategies to defend collective governance, negotiate power relations, and influence the pathways of energy transition in ways that reflect local priorities and knowledge systems.

Decolonising social transformation theory

Rather than adopting Wright’s framework uncritically, we acknowledge that it emerges from a Marxist tradition rooted in Euro-American debates, with limited engagement with coloniality and an implicit assumption that institutions can be reformed through a liberal-democratic ontology and that democracy can be deepened through such processes. We therefore reinterpret and expand this framework through decolonial scholarship attentive to territorial, epistemic and racialised power relations, seeking to ‘make visible, open

up and advance radically different perspectives that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence’ (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 7).

We consider decoloniality as the attempt to bring together local histories, knowledges and struggles against the double-sided coin of coloniality and modernity. Practically, decoloniality entails confronting the colonial hierarchies shaping knowledge production, from Anglo-American academic hegemony to the extraction of Southern knowledges and everyday racialised exclusions (Tuck and Yang, 2012; Noxolo, 2017), while foregrounding the diverse and often non-linear ways Indigenous communities organise and resist when it comes to energy. Crucially, decolonising does not negate Anglophone epistemologies but situates them alongside multiple coexisting ways of knowing, structured by historical and ongoing power relations, thereby opening rather than closing the geographies of thought through pluriversal perspective, and questioning some of universalising claims (Mignolo, 2000; Barreto, 2018; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Recent work extends this approach by situating transformation within plural epistemological and territorial politics, highlighting how Indigenous and local actors navigate, appropriate, and reshape these processes in practice, thus actively restructuring top-down frameworks to protect local autonomy (Mejía-Montero, 2025; Dunlap and Tornel, 2025). By moving beyond mere resistance, these communities assert their own lived realities and knowledge systems to redefine what meaningful development looks like on their own terms.

This reinterpretation enables two contributions. First, it conceptualises legal engagement not merely as reformist incorporation but as a symbiotic strategy in which Indigenous actors strategically appropriate state and international law to reshape governance structures and strengthen community organisation at, and against, the limits of the state. This provides a grounded account of how strategies coexist dynamically rather than linearly, producing hybrid pathways of change. This is particularly relevant when examining the relationship between communities and the state, which scholars recognise as non-monolithic and fraught with internal contradictions (Brand and Lang, 2024). Yet, the state remains a critical site for contestation and dialogue, a reality that Wright’s framework directly accounts for. This is true even if, as Dunlap and Tornel (2025) rightly argue, these state relationships often remain inherently volatile, politically contingent, tenuous and temporary.

Second, it frames autonomous communal institutions and the mobilisation of collective memory as interstitial practices that cultivate self-determination alongside and beyond the state. While acknowledging Wright’s identification of ruptural strategies as collective mobilisations that directly confront extractive and technocratic regimes as important elements within social transformation, we focus on symbiotic and interstitial strategies to illuminate often overlooked practices employed by local communities that remain largely absent from public debate. Examining how these strategies

are articulated shows how energy transitions in colonial contexts are embedded in broader struggles over sovereignty and development imaginaries.

Situating these dynamics within a wider critique of development highlights how discourses around energy transitions are shaped by competing imaginaries of desirable futures, which are often framed through notions of modernity and progress. This framing heavily influences how energy is understood and engaged with. Challenging this requires favouring a 'de-modernisation' approach that centres conviviality and decouples community initiatives from middle-class desires, focusing instead on autonomy (Tornel and Dunlap, 2025). To truly transform these systems, we must look to how Quijano (2000) conceptualises modernity and coloniality as mutually constitutive within a colonial matrix of power, making it necessary to challenge the 'fictions' of modernity (Trouillot, 2002). This logic often appears in the promotion of a singular vision of progress that seeks to address the climate crisis primarily through the deployment of technologies that are framed as green yet rely on processes that undermine their sustainability claims. Historically rooted in discourses of development and modernisation, and later reframed through globalisation, this model assumes a linear path to progress. Decoloniality, by contrast, emerges as a practice aimed at disrupting this matrix. Decolonial and Indigenous scholarship reconceptualises transformation as a pluriversal practice as the collective construction of a world in which many worlds fit (Escobar, 2018b). Grounded in local histories seeking to de-link from dominant frameworks, this perspective directly challenges a civilisational model that privileges a singular development pathway, thereby opening up space to imagine alternative ways of living.

This critique has been extended to human rights, law and related domains. Decolonial scholars argue that contextualising Western concepts, such as human rights, within their European historical and material genealogies challenges their claims to universality (Barreto, 2018). Following Chakrabarty's call to 'provincialise' Western thought (Chakrabarty, 2000), legal scholarship critiques frameworks that seek to interpret non-Western societies through Eurocentric categories. As Barrientos notes, 'unveiling the linkage to the site of emergence of knowledge weakens or destroys the legitimacy of claims to universality' (Barreto, 2018, p. 491). Attending to the situated origins of knowledge thus opens space for recognising alternative forms of social and political organisation grounded in local histories and practices.

Within this perspective, Martínez Luna (2010) emphasises that Indigenous normative systems and governance structures are not only valid in their own right but essential for rethinking democracy beyond its liberal-representative form. Rather than subordinate, these systems can complement and transform democratic practice by strengthening participatory and community-based governance. These perspectives view resistance not as negation but as the prefiguration of autonomous,

land-based futures (Dinerstein, 2015; Yates and de Moor, 2022). Indigenous worldviews challenge extractivist logics by understanding land as a living, relational entity embedded in affective and spiritual ties (Blaser, 2010; Escobar, 2008). Accordingly, Indigenous governance operates through relational ontologies of territory, emphasising reciprocity, care and collective stewardship (De la Cadena and Starn, 2007; Svampa, 2018). Such relational governance is not merely theoretical; it is prefigured in daily acts of communal care and material survival which can be exemplified in other parts of the Isthmus where Indigenous women have countered top-down, commercialised disaster aid by collectively rebuilding community kitchens (Torres Contreras and Flores Cruz, 2025). By channelling recovery resources into local maize production and its associated cultural practices, these women have done more than secure food; they have actively strengthened their food sovereignty, revitalising their territorial relationships through shared labour and solidarity.

These localised examples of prefiguration and broader movements across Latin America, from Zapatista¹ autonomy to Adecán 'Buen vivir', illustrate how communities pursue transformation both within and beyond dominant systems (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Anthias, 2018). These practices resonate with Wright's symbiotic and interstitial strategies, as communities simultaneously engage institutions (e.g., through legal mobilisation that can be used as a tool to create alternative futures that de-link governance practices) and cultivate autonomous forms of governance. Transformation, in this sense, is not only achieved through a sudden revolutionary rupture but through continuous negotiations of power and meaning across epistemic, spatial and institutional boundaries over time.

Place-framings as arenas of transformative resistance

The transformation of energy politics unfolds across inter-linked strategic arenas. The law operates as a symbiotic site where Indigenous and civil society actors appropriate legal mechanisms to contest dispossession and expand rights (de Sousa Santos, 2014). Collective memory functions as an interstitial practice, sustaining territorial identity and autonomy by linking past struggles to future aspirations (Hale, 2011). Public mobilisation embodies ruptural engagement through collective protest and direct action that confront extractive power (Dunlap and Correa-Arce, 2022). Together, these arenas co-produce what Feola et al. (2023) describe as place-framings – shared narratives that politicise space and re-embed governance in relational understandings of territory. Through the mobilisation of law and memory, Indigenous actors construct alternative socio-technical imaginaries that challenge extractivist regimes while prefiguring plural energy futures towards broader social-ecological transformation.

Territory, therefore, is not simply space, but a co-constructed epistemic and affective field. Relational place-

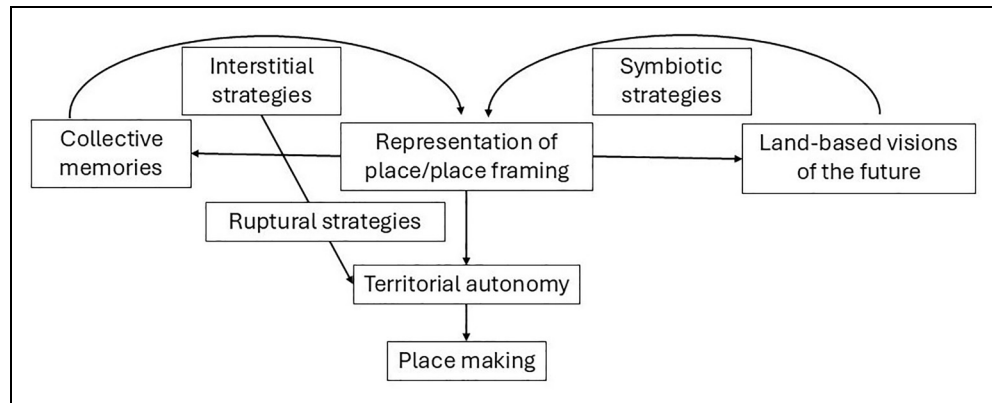


Figure 2. Use of transformation strategies in creating land-based visions of the future in Unión Hidalgo (source: author's own elaboration, adapted from Feola et al., 2023).

making frameworks recognise space as continuously produced through social and material interaction (Pierce et al., 2011; Massey, 2005). Place-framings then are more than rhetorical tools. They are political instruments in which collective memory functions as a strategic resource to legitimise or contest visions of the future (Szpunar and Szpunar, 2015; Feola et al., 2023). In contested energy landscapes, actors invoke pre-colonial or pre-industrial relations to assert territorial claims, re-asserting a different way to conceptualise progress. These affective and historical ties, grounded in long trajectories of dispossession, animate Indigenous and local resistance and embed struggles within relational understandings of space (Hale, 2011; Escobar, 2008). Such frictions between global transition agendas and local subjectivities produce spaces of negotiation rather than linear development (Tsing, 2005). Recognising these cultural-cognitive dimensions of transitions is essential to move beyond extractivist legacies towards place-based, justice-centred energy futures (Feola et al., 2023) (Figure 2).

Case study and methodology

Introducing the case of Unión Hidalgo, Mexico

Unión Hidalgo or Ranchu Gubiña is a Zapotec Indigenous community, whose members self-identify as Binnizá (from *binni*, meaning 'people', and *zá*, meaning 'cloud', thus 'people from the clouds'). It is located in the municipality of Juchitán, in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, and serves as the municipal seat (the administrative centre and seat of government of a municipality) just north of Laguna Superior, with an elevation of 20 meters above sea level. The Isthmus is divided into two sub-regions: the northern area, largely inhabited by Zapotec (Binnizá) communities, and the southern area, predominantly Ikoots (Huave) territory (Dunlap, 2017). These overlapping geographies are also home to other Indigenous groups, creating a highly diverse cultural and territorial landscape. However, Unión Hidalgo also faces

significant poverty and social deprivation, defined by the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL) as having an income insufficient to cover the basic basket of goods while also experiencing one or more social deprivations. In 2020, 12.3% of the population lived in extreme poverty, while 32.9% were classified as moderately poor. 38.5% of residents lacked access to essential services such as healthcare, social security and adequate food, while 2.35% were economically vulnerable due to low income (CONEVAL, 2022). These conditions reflect enduring structural inequalities and social exclusion that continue to affect the community.

Unión Hidalgo maintains a system of communal land tenure, in which ownership is collective and legally protected against privatisation. This structure is emblematic of the broader Isthmus of Tehuantepec, where Indigenous territory is held as collective 'social property'. Ultimate legal jurisdiction over land allocation rests within agrarian assemblies, where *comuneros* collectively adjudicate macro-management decisions despite individual family usufruct rights (Sánchez Contreras et al., 2026). Historically, this framework has reinforced political autonomy, positioning the assembly as the primary arena for resisting external development (Torres-Mazuera et al., 2021). Our analysis focuses specifically on community understood as these *comuneros*, the active assembly members and grassroots land defenders, who must be distinguished from local elites. While both share Zapotec identity, the grassroots *comuneros* defend the collective, non-commodified character of the territory. In contrast, elite factions and *caciques* act as corporate gatekeepers, weaponising their influence to secure private commissions on land leases; as Oceransky (2011) highlights, this directly translates green extractivism into sudden, visible wealth disparities that fracture the community from within.

This internal fracturing unfolds within a region under intense global pressure, as the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and the state of Oaxaca in particular, have become central to Mexico's wind energy development strategy. According to

Sánchez Contreras et al. (2026), the southern region of the Isthmus hosts 29 wind plants, which account for 39% of Mexico's entire wind power capacity. Its topographical and geographical conditions have attracted substantial foreign investment over the past two decades (Howe and Boyer, 2015), including through the French state-owned utility Électricité de France (EDF) initiating the Gunaa Sicarú project in Unión Hidalgo. This is part of a broader tendency of European companies controlling 96% of the installed capacity of wind energy production, with EDF being the company with the largest installed capacity in the region. This creates a stark disparity between the consumption, production and access to energy in the region, as evidenced by the fact that some of Mexico's highest energy-producing states still have a high percentage of households without energy access (Sánchez Contreras et al., 2026).

The rollout of such projects, however, has raised significant concerns among community members regarding land rights, environmental impacts and the absence of meaningful consultation. Indeed, scholars critique such consultation mechanisms as counter-insurrectionary devices that undermine Indigenous autonomy, a dynamic apparent in neighbouring Juchitán de Zaragoza, where the 2014 wind farm consultation reinforced severe political and economic asymmetries between the state, corporations and local communities (Dunlap, 2017). The scale of this systemic friction is underscored by Zarembek et al. (2018), who identified over 300 media-reported socio-environmental conflicts related to energy megaprojects, more than 75% of which disproportionately impacted Indigenous or peasant land governance.

Although the Mexican government promotes wind farm development to boost the economy and protect the environment, these initiatives often neglect the lived experiences, territorial relationships, and autonomy of Indigenous communities. While official energy strategies stress that investment in renewables must respect human rights and cultivate virtuous relationships with local communities (Presidencia de la República, 2025), Indigenous actors frequently highlight that, in practice, the state together with corporations has become a principal violator of rights (D.5). This tension forms the backdrop for the case of Unión Hidalgo, where policies that promise 'green development' clash with local place-framings rooted in autonomy and land-based governance.

The conflict in Unión Hidalgo began in 2015, when EDF sought to promote the Gunaa Sicarú wind farm. This project would include 96 wind turbines and have a capacity of 300MW intended to be built on communal lands in Juchitán and the agrarian nexus of Unión Hidalgo and La Ventonsa (Sánchez Contreras et al., 2026). While some residents initially signed individual lease agreements, tensions escalated as concerns grew over the long-term consequences of the project, particularly its effects on communally held land and collective governance. The case of Unión Hidalgo was selected as a paradigmatic case for examining sustained legal and

discursive resistance to energy megaprojects in Mexico. Its legal mobilisation under asymmetric power relations between Indigenous communities, the state, and transnational corporations presents a critical case for understanding grassroots responses to green extractivism in the Global South. Given that much of the documented legal mobilisation involved the NGO ProDESC, it is important to recognise that NGO-supported legal strategies have themselves been criticised within regional scholarship (Dunlap and Correa-Arce, 2022). Rather than assuming NGO mediation as inherently emancipatory, this article examines how such alliances are navigated and negotiated within communal governance structures.

Methods

The study draws on document analysis of written documents and audiovisual materials spanning 2013–2024 to systematically review various texts and visual materials like photographs and videos (Patton, 2015; Flick, 2018). The dataset comprised over 25 sources (see Appendix), including legal briefs, NGO reports and media outputs related to the case.

Documents were selected using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) and assessed against authenticity (Dunne et al., 2016), credibility (Flick, 2018), representativeness (Morgan, 2022) and meaning. Video materials were transcribed using YouTube's transcription function and verified by the first author. The rest of the materials were taken directly from different written sources. All materials were imported into NVivo to support systematic data management and familiarisation.

Search terms '*Unión Hidalgo*' and '*eólicas*' were identified in the video data analysis on the YouTube search engine, covering the past ten years (2014–2024). Thirteen publicly available videos were then selected that met the criteria outlined above, focusing specifically on interviews, community testimonies, press conferences, and statements from diverse official community and organisational channels. These videos provided longitudinal, situated accounts in which community members articulate their experiences, strategies and evolving interpretations of the defence of their territory. This allowed accessing emic framings of place, governance and legal mobilisation that would be obscured in externally mediated sources such as news reports.

The second source of data consisted of official reports and policy documents, which offer complementary insights into Unión Hidalgo's legal and advocacy processes. These included ProDESC's Annual Reports (2020–2024), which provide detailed updates on the case's progress and defence strategies; the ProDESC Institutional Memory and Community Security Report, which outlines the organisation's approach to community protection; and reports by the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), which document international collaboration and obligations under the duty of vigilance law. Focusing on

official documents is methodologically appropriate because they offer formal, verifiable records of claims, rights violations and legal mobilisation pathways, enabling an analysis of how social movements frame their struggles within institutional and legal arenas (Benford and Snow, 2000).

The analysis proceeded in three interconnected stages. In the first stage, an inductive approach was used to familiarise with the material. Using NVivo, open coding, word-frequency queries and memo-writing captured emerging ideas without imposing a predefined structure. This generated initial nodes of recurring patterns in the data. In the second stage, thematic nodes and categories explicitly linked to legal strategies were created, providing a structured coding frame for examining how Unión Hidalgo mobilised legal tools to resist wind energy projects. In the third stage, the analytic lens was broadened through abductive analysis, which involves iteratively moving between empirical data and existing theory to generate new theoretical insights (Tavory and Timmermans, 2012). Drawing on Wright's (2010) typology of social transformation, the original codes were revisited and new ones created to capture additional dimensions of resistance. This approach allowed the analysis to move beyond legal strategies, highlighting symbiotic and interstitial forms of resistance, and situating legal mobilisation within broader place-based and relational strategies of territorial and social transformation.

Ambiguities were resolved through iterative review and discussion within the research team, and where materials could be coded under multiple themes, the dominant empirical emphasis was prioritised. The research team's positionality is informed by complementary forms of engagement and reflexivity. The first author brings sustained academic and field experience with social-ecological conflicts in Oaxaca and Chiapas, including collaboration with Indigenous communities through a regional research centre, providing in-depth familiarity with local governance, territorial struggles and community dynamics. Although this fieldwork was separate to the empirical data analysed for the present study, it informed the broader political and historical contextualisation. The second author, more detached from the immediate field context, contributed conceptual guidance and critical distance, supporting reflexive analysis and situating the study within broader debates on social transformation and energy transitions. The team engaged in ongoing reflexive discussion of potential biases and recognised the interpretive role of the researcher through analysis and writing. While no primary interviews were conducted, triangulation across legal briefs, NGO reports and audiovisual materials strengthened the evidentiary basis. Robustness was further supported through a staged analytic process, including inductive and abductive coding, to balance empirical grounding with conceptual depth.

The reliance on secondary data entails limitations, as such sources may not capture internal community debates, informal decision-making, affective dimensions or strategically

withheld perspectives. Document-based analysis may also over-represent actors with greater access to legal, institutional or media platforms. However, the materials focus on community members actively engaged in the legal process over several years, providing a longitudinal account of how claims and strategies were articulated. While not a substitute for ethnographic immersion, this approach offers insight into the publicly expressed political positioning of the actors involved.

Navigating territorial transformation: Resistance, autonomy and rupture in Unión Hidalgo

Drawing on Wright's (2010) typology of emancipatory strategies this section examines how the community mobilises legal action, historical memory and embodied ties to place to challenge dominant energy regimes. The analysis identifies three interrelated emancipatory strategies: symbiotic strategies, engaging the state through legal and institutional means; interstitial strategies, building autonomous community governance and communication infrastructures; and ruptural strategies, confronting extractive power through collective mobilisation such as marches and blockades. Together, these strategies reveal how Unión Hidalgo's territorial defence operates as a form of world-making by linking resistance with the creation of decolonial and ecological futures.

Symbiosis strategies: Negotiating with a violent state

This section examines how the community employed symbiotic strategies to engage existing institutions and transform local conditions, in line with Wright (2010), while highlighting the difficulties of such engagement given institutional omissions and conflicting visions of progress. For Wright, strategies that partially align with dominant actors can be more stable, institutionalised, and resistant to reversal, whereas changes achieved through direct confrontation alone are often fragile (Wright, 2010). This tension is central to the community's experience, particularly where institutional participation is presented as the primary avenue for influence.

In 2018, Unión Hidalgo participated in a consultation led by the Secretaría de Energía (SENER) for the proposed Gunaa Sicarú wind farm. EDF Renewables reported ongoing engagement with the community between 2014 and 2018 through meetings and dialogue sessions (Proyecto Gunaa Sicarú, n.d.). Framed within the Right to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), the consultation addressed land leases, environmental impacts and local governance. However, it was marked by irregularities in transparency, representation and consent conditions, revealing gaps between formal inclusion and meaningful participation. In response, the community partnered with human rights organisations, notably ProDESC, to pursue legal action in Mexico and France, challenging the consultation's legitimacy under

national and international Indigenous rights frameworks. Over time, legal mobilisation became a central symbiotic strategy, enabling Unión Hidalgo to contest procedural violations while leveraging transnational accountability mechanisms.

EDF's early project approvals and community engagement initiatives preceded the formal consultation process, raising concerns about their compatibility with FPIC principles. In 2016, EDF initiated permit applications, conducted an environmental impact assessment, and negotiated land leases before the official consultation had begun (D.7). These actions reflect dynamics characteristic of extractivism in Latin America (Gudynas, 2009), here reproduced under the claims of green energy projects exploiting legal and procedural gaps. This dynamic aligns with a sustained pattern of corporate pacification documented in other regional wind parks (Dunlap, 2018, 2019) and tracked previously within this specific municipality (Dunlap and Correa-Arce, 2022), where developers strategically deployed corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to manufacture local consent. During this period, company representatives also undertook community initiatives, including painting schools and supporting local football clubs, which some community members perceived as attempts to build support for the wind farm later (D.7). Community members argued that, rather than enabling participation, the consultation process undermined collective governance and violated their rights to communal property and FPIC (I.3, D.5, D.1; First District Federal Court in the State of Oaxaca, 2018).

Opposition to the project was at times framed by state and corporate actors as obstructing 'progress', with dissenting community members labelled as 'anti-progress' (I.2). Such narratives reflect linear, modernist conceptions of development that, as Tornel (2024) argues, erode Indigenous well-being through displacement, exploitation and marginalisation of traditional knowledge and authority. As one community member observed, 'violence against human rights defenders is being linked and exacerbated by business activities' (D.6). Multinational corporate involvement was further associated with intimidation and violence, intensifying internal tensions and undermining local territorial visions (D.2). This reflects existing research in the region highlighting the difficulties of tracking the violence experienced by land defenders and community members, particularly regarding feminicides. The arrival of megaprojects introduces new actors into land disputes, including armed groups that deploy intimidation tactics and targeted killings against dissenting community members (Sánchez Contreras et al., 2026; Oceransky, 2011; Dunlap and Correa-Arce, 2022). Ultimately, this resulting violence operates as a direct extension of the extractive economy.

This reveals an entrenched pattern when contrasted with the regional trajectory outlined above. The structural violence and procedural flaws observed during the 2019 EDF Gunaa Sicarú consultation closely replicate those documented 5 years earlier during the Eólica del Sur consultation (2014–

2015), highlighting the systemic expansion of exclusionary energy enclaves (Dunlap, 2017, 2019; Sánchez Contreras et al., 2026). Ultimately, across this 5-year trajectory, these institutional mechanisms failed to protect community voices, instead reproducing the exclusion and violence they were intended to prevent. A decolonial perspective situates this outcome within Wright's framework by highlighting the structural conditions that complicate institutional engagement. It draws attention to how such institutions reproduce a vision of modernity rooted in colonial histories, shaping both the limits and contradictions of participation. This dynamic reflects the persistence of the coloniality of power, knowledge and being (Rodríguez, 2021), which structures how authority is exercised, whose knowledge is recognised, and which forms of life are valued.

These patterns of community fragmentation, specifically the friction between residents holding corporate contracts and those opposing the development, advance similar findings documented in the same area (Dunlap and Correa-Arce, 2022), where these dynamics manifested in community fragmentation, particularly between those benefitting from corporate contracts and those opposing the project (D.10). These divisions were actively reinforced by state and corporate actors framing the town as an opportunity for compliant land-owners while portraying opponents as 'criminals' (D.7). Violations of the FPIC further intensified this dynamic, contributing to the 'stigmatisation, criminalisation and violence against the intended beneficiaries of these protections' (Dunlap and Correa-Arce, 2022). Rather than enabling inclusive participation, institutional mechanisms thus became embedded in unequal power relations that deepened inequalities and conflict, illustrating the tensions and limits of pursuing transformative change through existing structures.

Symbiotic strategies are frequently undermined by the contradictory logics of the state, seen in omissions, inadequate FPIC procedures, and dominant visions of governance and participation. In Unión Hidalgo, compliance with state-led consultation frameworks exposed residents to threats, imprisonment, attempted bribery and misinformation. By 2020, 15 people had been killed in a nearby community amid disputes over competing economic interests, including wind energy projects (D.7, D.6, I.9). Despite legal frameworks promising protection, the territory itself became militarised and dangerous for defenders.

Civil society organisations supporting the legal claims, including the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights, Terre Solidaire and ProDESC, situated these dynamics within a broader regional pattern in which consultation processes construct 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' subjects of development, normalising exclusion and delegitimising resistance (D.6). This illustrates how green extractivism operates under the banner of sustainable energy, where participation mechanisms are emptied of substantive meaning, while corporate actors reframe Unión Hidalgo as a site of 'progress' and economic opportunity rather than a

territory grounded in communal governance. Charitable activities functioned as symbolic legitimisation, weakening democratic deliberation and eroding local authority.

Despite these constraints, legal mobilisation emerged as a key symbiotic strategy. Supported by ProDESC and the ECCHR, the community pursued legal action in Mexico and France, reframing their territory as collective and inalienable within existing institutional arenas. A 2018 Mexican court ruling recognised the absence of FPIC, and a 2019 French lawsuit under the Duty of Vigilance Law challenged EDF's failure to protect Indigenous rights. Although precautionary measures were later dismissed, the project was cancelled in 2022 after government agencies deemed it infeasible. These actions show how human rights and international law were strategically deployed to defend communal land and contest corporate energy projects.

Such engagement reflects attempts to redirect energy development towards more equitable outcomes. Community members explored whether institutional pathways could support agreements aligned with communal governance and land tenure practices, central to local land management. However, these efforts unfolded within a broader context of green extractivism, in which corporate priorities undermined communal authority. As one community member stated: 'For these projects to benefit the communities, a fundamental change in how they are carried out is needed. There must be real consultation and consent from the communities, fair and equitable contracts, and a genuine commitment to the environmental and social well-being of the region' (D.1.9). Ultimately, as Wright (2010) argues, symbiotic strategies falter when the state's contradictory role turns sites of protection into arenas of dispossession. In Unión Hidalgo, legal mobilisation represents this dual dynamic: participation in state mechanisms entailed significant risk, but these same frameworks could be strategically repurposed to defend communal land and assert collective futures.

Interstitial strategies: Building autonomy between the cracks

Unión Hidalgo also developed strategies that extended beyond formal institutional engagement, employing interstitial approaches that created autonomous spaces grounded in long-standing Indigenous governance. Wright (2010) defines interstitial strategies as practices emerging within the 'interstices' of dominant social structures – spaces where the systemic logics do not fully govern action – allowing relatively autonomous forms of organisation and social activity. Such practices need not directly confront the system, but operate alongside it, enabling alternative modes of coordination and development.

In Unión Hidalgo, such spaces were rooted in local self-organisation, including the Indigenous Council, and in broader Indigenous networks, including the National

Indigenous Congress (CNI). Practices of deliberation, autonomy and collective memory provided the foundation for these spaces. In Unión Hidalgo, this manifested directly through the reconstitution of the community assembly, a core strategy highlighted by Sánchez Contreras et al. (2026) to counter external territorial pressures. This was necessary due to their agrarian rights being highly vulnerable to violation, given that the specific agrarian community to which they belonged lacked power within the broader assembly and over communal property. Reconstituting the assembly has therefore been a vital pre-requisite for the community to engage in both legal disputes and mobilisations (Sánchez Contreras et al., 2026). Civil society actors, particularly ProDESC, supported and expanded them during the legal conflict over the Gunaa Sicarú wind project by linking local governance practices with legal strategies, transforming them into hybrid, symbiotic forms that combined collective memory, communication, and institutional engagement to reinforce and sustain autonomous spaces. Legal mobilisation extended beyond traditional litigation to strengthen community organisation, political awareness and collective identity (D.3, D.6). Activities such as participatory mapping of environmental damage, risk assessments for land defenders, and the creation of a 'glossary of dispossession' (D.6) embedded local knowledge in legal processes. As one member of the legal defence team explained, 'We don't just use the law to win cases, we use it to create awareness, to build political consciousness in the community' (I.6). In this way, the legal struggle became a space of world-making.

These strategies built on pre-existing Indigenous governance structures. The Indigenous Council and the CNI, established in 1996 as a national platform to coordinate Indigenous struggles, operate independently of municipal authorities as a space for the community to connect with other Indigenous struggles, for collective deliberation and decision-making, described by one member as 'our home ... where we meet, we talk, we tell each other what is happening, we analyse it' (I.8). Participation in the CNI further strengthened Unión Hidalgo's links to broader networks. The CNI describes itself as 'the space of the Indigenous people we are' (CNI, 2017), highlighting how Unión Hidalgo's local governance is embedded within wider Indigenous organising. Decisions within the CNI are made collectively during its General Assembly, where all participants can voice the struggles of their communities. Its seven guiding principles 'to serve, not to serve oneself; to build, not to destroy; to represent, not to replace; to persuade, not to impose; to obey, not to command; to go down, not to rise; to propose, not to impose' (CNI, 2017) emphasise participation and horizontal structures that reinforce autonomy. These principles echo Wright's (2010) conception of interstitial spaces as 'incubators of social empowerment'. These spaces are not only sites of resistance but also sites of world-making, where collective decision-making, memory and belonging are cultivated.

Building on these principles, Unión Hidalgo has employed memory-based and narrative strategies to anchor resistance in the territory. Through participatory mapping, documentation of dispossession and storytelling developed in collaboration with ProDESC, the community linked socio-technical imaginaries of the future to histories of resistance and relational understandings of territory, rather than corporate development models. As one community member reflected, ‘we do not want a project that kills us, that divides us, that deprives us of our future. We want to live with nature, with the plants, with the water, with the wind’ (D.7). These practices reinforced the social fabric of autonomy while articulating futures centred on coexistence rather than extraction. Workshops organised by ProDESC and groups such as Mujeres Indígenas en Defensa de la Vida (Indigenous Women in defense of Life) enabled women to document resource loss from their perspective, and contribute community-based evidence, strengthening both collective understandings of the land and legal and strategic claims in court (D.6; Istmo Press, 2018). This highlights the crucial role of women in territorial defence (Sánchez Contreras et al., 2026). Despite restrictions regarding their legal power under agrarian law, women have actively driven political organisation and the constitution of assemblies.

Media and communication practices constituted another key interstitial strategy, highlighting how local radio stations served as critical linguistic and communicative tools for community mobilisation (Sánchez Contreras et al., 2026). Community radio and alternative media became spaces for information-sharing, collective narration and the reinforcement of shared identity. As one member explained, ‘By communicating through the radio and the media, we reach people who can take concrete action’ (I.9). These channels challenged dominant narratives of clean energy and economic growth, while extending solidarity across networks and reinforcing communal imaginaries of sustainability. ProDESC also contributed through discursive strategies in internal and official documents that framed conflict in terms of neo-extractivism, colonialism, dispossession and capitalism (D.4, D.5, D.6), situating Unión Hidalgo’s struggle within broader anti-capitalist and decolonial imaginaries. This reframing positioned the territory as a living space of collective continuity rather than a resource, prioritising local organisational strength over courtroom victories, thus prefiguring alternative socio-technical imaginaries beyond corporate and state-led development.

Unión Hidalgo’s legal mobilisation created alternative spaces within the cracks of the existing legal system. Legal processes became tools for reinforcing the community as a collective political actor rooted in the land, rather than merely instruments for challenging corporate actions. These interstitial strategies responded to the failures of formal institutional mechanisms by creating autonomous spaces outside dominant systems. As Wright (2010) notes, interstitial strategies involve operating at the margins of established institutions to

construct alternative forms of governance and collective organisation. In Unión Hidalgo, they cultivated self-determined ways of organising political life, drawing on Indigenous governance, cultural practices and community media. By operating in these autonomous spaces, the community actively shaped place-framings and socio-technical imaginaries rooted in the land. This illustrates how Unión Hidalgo mobilised strategies that bridged Indigenous governance with collaboration from allies such as ProDESC, fostering autonomous spaces and practices deeply ingrained in local governance to resist externally imposed development.

Breaking the grid: Ruptural resistance

Ruptural strategies may emerge alongside interstitial and symbiotic approaches, contributing to processes of place-making and the pursuit of territorial autonomy. While Wright cautions against their capacity to transform entire social systems, he acknowledges their relevance in certain contexts requiring direct confrontation with dominant actors and the state. He therefore advocates a broader understanding of rupture beyond total systemic breaks, while maintaining that large-scale ruptural transformations are unlikely, on their own, to generate stable democratic and egalitarian outcomes.

Ruptural strategies directly challenge dominant systems through actions such as protests, marches and blockades. In the context of the Isthmus, these strategies are not merely reactions to wind turbines as a technology but are targeted resistance against corporate enclosure of communal land, the bypassing of Indigenous democratic consent and physical degradation of local ecosystems. In Unión Hidalgo, such strategies appear to be mentioned less frequently in the analysed sources, possibly reflecting limited media visibility of these actions, although one march against EDF organised by the communal assembly, the council of elders and other community groups was mentioned as a way of strengthening resistance in defence of land and community.

The community not only engaged in public marches (Manzo, 2017) but also performed road blockades, at times leading to arrests (I.8). These resistance strategies have been documented for indigenous Zapotec, Ikoot and Zoque peoples deploying ruptural strategies against mega-infrastructure and wind energy projects (Silva Ontiveros et al., 2018). These actions frequently escalate from public demonstrations to violent clashes, barricades and the creation of autonomous community policing systems to counter perceived injustices (Dunlap, 2018). This structural resistance has been manifested through targeted spatial disruptions, for example the strategic roadblocks established by fishing cooperatives at the Santa Teresa sandbar (Nahmad, 2011), alongside municipal office occupations and cultural camps designed to halt private energy enclosures (Altamirano-Jiménez, 2017).

These physical blockades serve as a vital tactical leverage tool, deliberately paralysing corporate operations to halt construction until developers honour commitments regarding

local environmental and property damages (Lucio, 2016). Ultimately, these coordinated practices of direct confrontation and territorial occupation demonstrate how communities utilise the physical closing of space to rupture corporate momentum, enforce institutional accountability and reclaim control over contested landscapes.

Entanglements, ambivalence and situated pathways to transformation

While Wright's framework provides a useful lens for understanding community resistance, land governance in Unión Hidalgo reveals a more complex terrain. In the context of wind energy projects, the state has often failed to safeguard democratic rights, positioning civil society as a key actor in defending territorial governance through legal frameworks. However, this approach is fraught with contradictions, particularly due to its reliance on the universalist framework of human rights (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Barreto, 2018; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). The ongoing capitalist expansion forces communities into varied political strategies that vary in their attempts to adapt to, reaccommodate, or resist invasive conditions, often reconfiguring their practices to survive or taking further initiative to subvert subordination (Pineda, 2022). Despite valid concerns about the limits of engaging with a violent state (Bakunin, 1990), communities' complex defensive strategies remain relevant. In many cases, these tactics are non-linear or evolving and frequently incorporate legal defence as a mechanism for defending territory (Pineda, 2022). Civil society organisations thus frequently confront the state through legal channels, while also operating beyond formal frameworks.

Figure 3 maps Unión Hidalgo's emancipatory strategies and their interaction with the state, distinguishing between iterative engagements that reinforce relationships over time, and more oppositional interventions. While human rights law provides tools to contest dispossession, its universalist assumptions risk marginalising Indigenous territorial perspectives (D.5). ProDESC and its allies navigate this tension by deploying human rights discourse strategically while critiquing its colonial underpinnings and supporting initiatives such as the glossary of dispossession and the strengthening of communal assemblies.

Operating between state institutions and community structures, these organisations mobilise both institutional and autonomous spaces to defend land. Legal action is pursued alongside efforts to reinforce communal governance, situating law within land-based practices. As one member explained, 'sometimes we go to the government because we need something... But we also know that they won't protect us. So, we create our own spaces. We fight in the courts, but we also organise ourselves as a people' (I.8). Far from displacing local decision-making, mobilising the legal system serves as a tactical space where the community organises on its own terms.

Indeed, the collective organising required to mount a legal challenge can actively consolidate Unión Hidalgo as a political actor. These plural, situated strategies illustrate how place-framings ground resistance in context-specific practices, aligning with Wright's emphasis on messy, locally embedded and non-linear pathways of transformation.

Unión Hidalgo's mobilisation demonstrates how place-based framings can influence global debates on corporate accountability. By invoking the Duty of Vigilance law in relation to an energy project, the community reframed the Gunaá Sicarú wind park from 'green development' to a form of dispossession. In doing so, they exposed corporate failures to safeguard local wellbeing and extended the struggle beyond Mexico into transnational legal arenas. This approach contributed to the project's cancellation and provided a model for holding companies accountable. Similar strategies are evident in the lawsuit against Total in Uganda, where the communities challenged the withholding of key information, including internal audits, Human Rights Steering Committee minutes, compensation calculations for displaced individuals and environmental impact studies (Mamlouk et al., 2025).

The case further shows how place-based conceptions of land as communal and relational can contest corporate-led energy transitions while articulating alternative socio-technical futures. These emphasise land-based relations, livelihood continuity, and more equitable and democratic development pathways. Unión Hidalgo's struggle illustrates how Indigenous communities mobilise diverse strategies and governance structures rooted in collective autonomy and local land relations to challenge extractive practices that bypass communal authority. Their efforts are reinforced by emerging approaches to legal tools that go beyond symbiotic transformations and are intended to secure more robust conditions for community participation and protection.

Discussion

This article examines how Unión Hidalgo constructs transformative place-framings to resist green extractivism and defend territorial autonomy. We argue that the mobilisation of law, combined with interstitial practices rooted in the collective memory of territory, shapes place-framings through which Indigenous governance defends land and reimagines energy futures as land-based, autonomous and resistant. While centring the community's autonomous strategies, this approach also recognises the pragmatic resources and strategic possibilities available for territorial defence. Thus, tactical engagement with the state emerges as one of the vital pathways through which communities safeguard their land. Building on regional literature on resistance to green extractivism, the analysis critically engages Wright's (2009, 2010) social transformation theory to show how transformation emerges through a hybrid interplay of legal engagement, autonomous governance, and direct action, contributing to debates on socio-technical imaginaries, relational governance, and

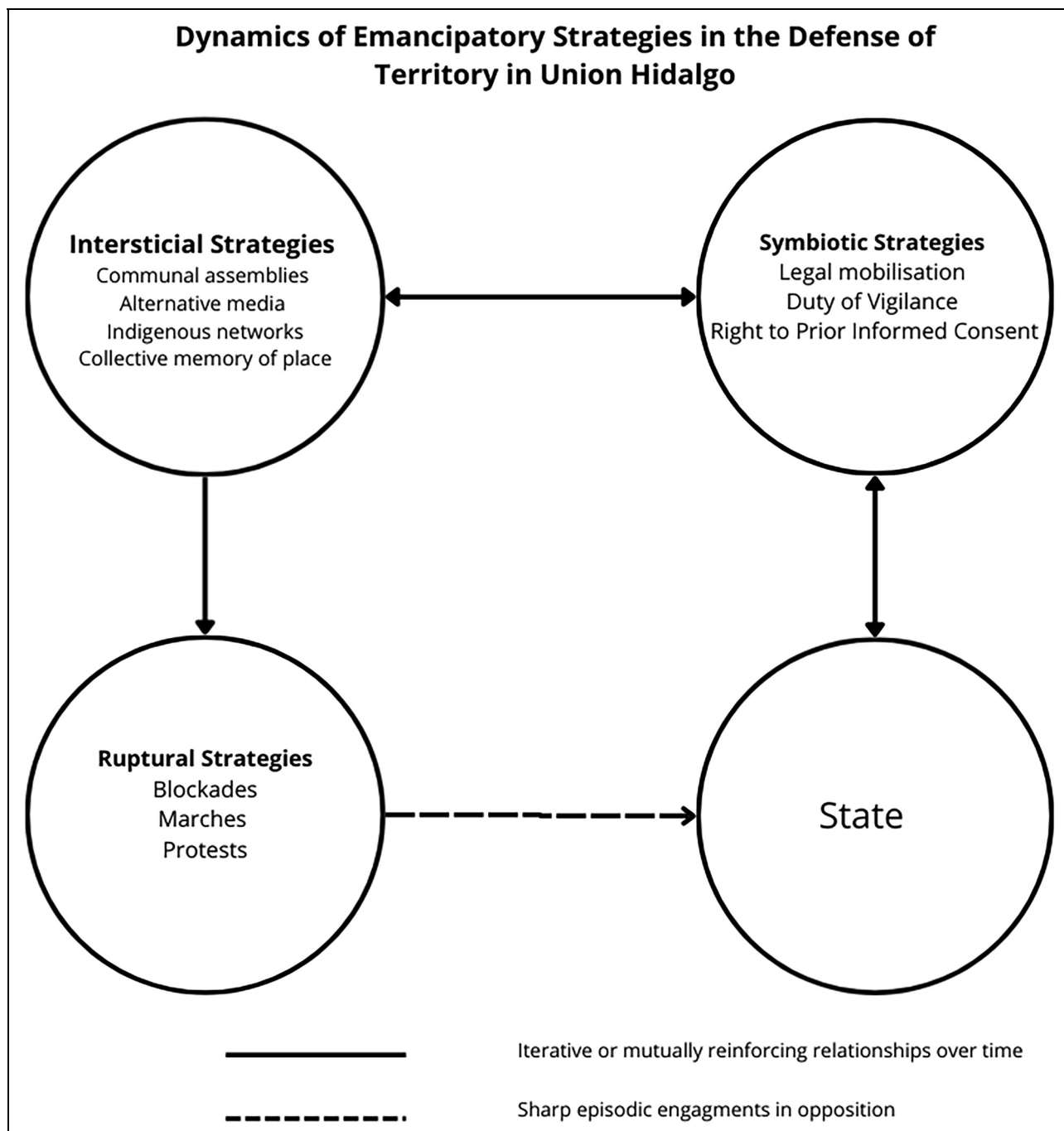


Figure 3. Dynamics of Unión Hidalgo's emancipatory strategies, showing how iterative and confrontational engagements with state institutions evolve over time.

energy transitions (Bridge et al., 2013; De la Cadena and Starn, 2007).

Symbiotic strategies are evident in legal mobilisation, including the invocation of FPIC, international human rights law and agrarian frameworks. While these engagements reflect a logic of institutional reform (Wright, 2010), they simultaneously expose the stark limits of legal approaches as corporations frequently bypass formal procedures or

deploy intimidation tactics. Crucially, as seen in neighbouring Juchitán, while the state-led FPIC process ultimately approved the Eólica del Sur project, the community successfully used the judiciary to secure a temporary injunction that halted construction. Extending Feola et al. (2023), this paradox demonstrates that the law functions not merely as a mechanism for passive rights recognition, but as a strategic arena where actors deploy collective memories of place to actively

contest and shape alternative territorial futures. This aligns with broader research on green extractivism, highlighting that institutional engagement must be complemented by autonomous and direct strategies that contest, discuss, and rethink dominant development paradigms.

Interstitial strategies centre on autonomous governance spaces, such as local assemblies and the Indigenous Council, which enable deliberation, risk assessment and territorial decision-making. These reflect governance grounded in care, stewardship and Indigenous knowledge, what De la Cadena and Starn (2007) describe as relational governance. Such practices highlight the importance of local governance in shaping energy transitions in the Global South. Activities such as participatory mapping, community radio and the 'glossary of dispossession' illustrate how interstitial strategies operate alongside legal mobilisation, linking collective memory and local knowledge to present and future energy debates while creating enduring spaces for territorial organisation and political awareness. This reinforces the view of energy transitions as territorially embedded and politically mediated processes (Bridge et al., 2013).

Ruptural strategies complement these approaches through direct action, including marches and road blockades against EDF to challenge extractive logics and assert territorial rights beyond civil society organisations (Manzo, 2017; Dunlap and Correa, 2022). Although less prominent in the analysed material, they contribute to politicising space, strengthening collective identity, and contesting imposed futures, consistent with Feola et al.'s (2023) notion of place-framings as arenas of struggle.

The case of Unión Hidalgo demonstrates how symbiotic, interstitial and ruptural strategies can intersect to produce hybrid pathways of resistance and transformation. While our analysis foregrounds the first two, given their empirical prominence, ruptural dynamics remain significant in the broader regional trajectory, including defence. Resistance thus emerges as plural and differentiated, with community actors engaging diverse strategies to defend territory. In this sense, legal engagement alone cannot safeguard land; autonomous spaces and direct action are essential for sustaining political identity, shaping future imaginaries and advancing place-based transformation. These findings resonate with Wright (2010) while capturing the contingent and non-linear character of transformation in practice.

The case also underscores the temporal dimension of these processes. Rather than a linear shift from protest to reform, strategies unfold cumulatively and unevenly, shaped by past struggles and ongoing conflicts. Legal mobilisation builds on earlier forms of communal defence while also anticipating future contestation within the context of green extractivism in southern Mexico. Transformation thus unfolds through iterative and sedimented practices rather than singular ruptures, reinforcing arguments on relational governance and the central role of Indigenous knowledge in reshaping socio-technical imaginaries (De la Cadena and Starn, 2007; Feola et al., 2023; Bridge, 2018).

More broadly, the case shows that energy transitions in the Global South are deeply political and territorial, generating resistance while shaping processes of world-making. Communities navigate these transitions within, at the margins of, and against the state, mobilising diverse local and transnational networks. Place-framings, hybrid strategies and relational governance are therefore central to resisting green extractivism and advancing territorial autonomy. Unión Hidalgo's struggle foregrounds alternative relations to land that challenge dominant metrics of development, such as efficiency neutrality, and equity (Sovacool, 2021; Lockwood et al., 2016). In other words, it underscores the importance of integrating Indigenous governance, local knowledge, and hybrid strategies that are also inherently messy and have contradictions due to the conflicting interests between actors that might have divergent ideas and priorities around land, progress into energy transition theory and practice, reinforcing a pluriversal understanding of social transformation.

Conclusions

Having examined the frictions between dominant energy transition agendas and the place-based visions of land defenders in Unión Hidalgo, this paper offers critical implications for governance and energy transformation debates in the Global South. It shows how Indigenous communities mobilise diverse reconstructive strategies to re-centre place in land governance debates. Focusing on their interaction with state institutions, civil society, and internal community dynamics, the analysis demonstrates how hybrid strategies emerge from both tensions and opportunities. For example, limitations in state-led participatory mechanisms prompted a reorientation of legal action through civil society actors, enabling the articulation of a communal vision of land that contrasted with corporate framings. By tracing this long-term process through secondary data, the paper contributes to literature on green extractivism, highlighting how land enclosure, internal divisions, human rights violations, and bribery attempts shape and constrained institutional engagement.

The analysis further shows how Indigenous actors operate simultaneously within and beyond formal institutions. They deploy legal tools to defend territory while creating autonomous spaces that reinforce governance practices and political objectives, including strengthening local institutions and fostering inter-community networks. By combining local traditions with international legal frameworks, these strategies reveal a hybrid and relational mode of transformation. Unión Hidalgo's struggle thus not only resisted dispossession but also reshaped the terms of engagement in both national and transnational arenas, offering grounded insights into grassroots transformation where global and local dynamics collide.

The findings underscore the need to centre Indigenous perspectives in land governance and energy transition debates, particularly regarding how communal land is defined and

rendered available for development by state and corporate actors. They also highlight how communities navigate these processes using a range of resources and strategies that may inform other social-ecological struggles across Latin America. Autonomous spaces and extra-institutional strategies emerge as critical, both for local governance and for contesting corporate accountability frameworks.

While this article foregrounds legal mobilisation within hybrid governance, ruptural strategies remain significant for place-making beyond dominant and colonial land-use logics and warrant closer attention. Likewise, divergent community perspectives, including support for wind energy projects or scepticism towards civil society agency should be further examined to capture the full range of experiences. Although grounded in Unión Hidalgo, the analysis reflects broader global processes in which communities strategically engage legal frameworks and reshape energy transition imaginaries. As Indigenous narratives and visions of place become increasingly relevant worldwide, often confronting hegemonic models of transition or participation, analysing how communities deploy transformation strategies becomes paramount for revealing both their transformative potential and the limitations of existing institutional mechanisms. In doing so, the paper contributes to research that addresses vested interests' underpinning 'green' development and the strategies through which communities expose and contest them.

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Ethical considerations

This research was conducted in accordance with Oxford University's policy on research involving human participants. The study received ethical approval from the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (SSH IDREC) under the CUREC 1A review process, ethics reference SOGE C1A 24 81.

Author contributions

AV: Conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, visualisation, funding acquisition.

AK: Conceptualisation, methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, visualisation, supervision.

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Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are publicly available and referenced throughout the article. Secondary data sources used in this research are detailed in the tables provided in the Appendix. As such, no original datasets are provided for sharing. For further details on the data used, please refer to the corresponding references and links listed in the Appendix.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT5.5 in order to improve readability and language flow. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Note

1. The Zapatistas (EZLN), an Indigenous-led movement that rose against the Mexican state on 1 January 1994, declared a ceasefire 12 days later and have since pursued non-violent, socio-political projects for autonomous self-governance through six major declarations directed at civil society.

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Appendix

Table 1. Video file material.

Code	Title	Year	Source	Link
I.1	The Unión Hidalgo Community in Oaxaca files an agrarian lawsuit against the wind power company DEMEX	2013	ProDESC	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVSeU20xkYandt=496s
I.2	Zapotec community rejects French company's wind farm in Oaxaca	2021	FRANCE 24 Español	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHfVpfPVUxcandt=1s
I.3	Mexico and renewable energy: impact on indigenous peoples	2018	DW Español	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LSTiDVWAKZYandt=1157s
I.4	Union Hidalgo Oaxaca Community – Tata Chávez Alonso Chair	2013	Koman Iiel Collective	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYnjKkLHilQandt=355s
I.5	Legal victory for Unión Hidalgo community members sets precedent for land defense	2022	ProDESC	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pofr_dRixAQandt=517s
I.6	Wind Resistance	2022	ProDESC	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H89qu4d_DtUandt=28s
I.7	Indigenous communities in Oaxaca will exercise their right to consultation on wind farms with the support of the UN	2017	Aristegui Noticias 7min	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLrr7ElzIFUandt=5s
I.8	Interview with Bettina Cruz	2018	Rojynegro	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kgiap5scpc0
I.9	ES/ Rfl – Do European investments in Latin America promote development?	2013	EU-LAT Network / Red EU-LAT 18min	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoKIOUj2CkQandt=648s
I.10	The community of Unión Hidalgo, Oaxaca files an agrarian lawsuit against the wind power company DEMEX	2013	ProDESC 50min	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVSeU20xkY https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpeHoQCXMO8 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVWnhURZLps https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Va-cBQPtbnU https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdeLAN7hyg4andt=31s https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrfxwqHxLc

Table 2. Policy documents.

Code	Type of material	Organisation	Name	Link
D.1	Report	ProDesc	Annual Report 2020	https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AJQZmSzU9z39qQZ9Gc4ZP-DNSIP6nEXb/view
D.2	Report	ProDesc	Annual Report 2021	https://prodesc.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/informe-actividades-2021-espanol-opt.pdf
D.3	Report	ProDesc	Annual Report 2022	https://prodesc.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/informe-2022-prodesc-defensa-derechos-humanos.pdf
D.4	Report	ProDesc	Annual Report 2023	https://prodesc.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Informe_2023_Espanol_prodesc.pdf
D.5	Institutional Memory	ProDesc	10 years constructing Social Justice	https://prodesc.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/memoria-prodesc_baja-comprimido.pdf
D.6	Report	ProDes	Community Security and territory	https://prodesc.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Book-PRODesc-2019-V_espan%CC%83ol_WEB_compressed.pdf
D.7	Report	ECCHR	From rights to reality	https://prodesc.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/prodesc-union-hidalgo-debida-diligencia-edf.pdf
D.8	Report	ECCHR	Vigilancia sin voltaje (2021)	https://prodesc.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/vigilancia-sin-voltaje_opt.pdf